

March 2020

How to address corporal punishment

A guide for teachers, parents and schools



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Corporal Punishment

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006)

“Any punishment in which physical force is used & intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting (smacking, slapping, spanking) children with the hand or with an implement— whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc.

But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, burning, scalding, or forced ingestion (for example, washing children’s mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices).

In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment which are also cruel & degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child.”

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What is corporal punishment?

It includes forms of punishment that are both physical and non-physical that aim to cause pain, discomfort, humiliation, or fear through physical force or the use of words.

Common examples of physical forms

Slapping/hitting with the hand or an object (ruler, stick, belt etc)

Shaking, pushing or throwing a child

Pinching or twisting a body part (e.g., ear, hand etc.)

Burning a body part

Forced ingestion of edible or inedible material such as chalk, spices, soap, etc.

Common examples of non-physical forms

Humiliating and belittling a child (abusing, calling a name, shouting, criticizing a weakness etc)

Isolating a child

Public humiliation (e.g., parading a child with a painted face)



How common is corporal punishment?

The statistics about attitudes and practices related to corporal punishment in Pakistan are extremely worrying.

It has been shown that 89% of private & public schools use physical punishment, and it has often resulted in injury, even death.

Plan International (2012)

Studies show both widespread acceptance and normalization of this abuse amongst teachers, parents, and the wider society.

In one study, 75% of teachers and 84% of parents felt that teachers were *justified* in beating students who were rude or disobedient.

For children who violate school rules, 65% of teachers thought they “deserved” to be beaten.

For children who stole, 85% of parents thought they “deserved” physical punishment.

Over half of all teachers agreed that frequent “small doses” of physical punishment had no harmful effect on a child.

Is corporal punishment legal?

Section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code 1860 (Act XLV of 1860) sanctions the use of corporal punishment by allowing parents, guardians, and teachers to use corporal punishment in "good faith" to discipline the children.

In February 2020, this section has been suspended by the Islamabad High Court with a ban on any form of corporal punishment (for children aged up to 12 years).

Anyone found violating this ban can now face a year's imprisonment, a fine of up to Rs. 50000, or both.



Why do teachers use corporal punishment?

- a) To make clear right from wrong ,
but children do not learn about their mistakes through violence.
- b) To establish hierarchy or instill respect,
but children learn to fear the teacher, not respect them.
- c) To make children pay attention to class work, *but* children lose interest further and develop a dislike for class work.
- d) To instill discipline,
but children learn to comply only to avoid punishment, and not develop discipline.

Corporal punishment impacts a child's brain in ways similar to severe physical and sexual abuse



Why is corporal punishment harmful for children?

Corporal punishment is extremely harmful for children's health, emotional development and academic growth. It can:

- a) Result in physical injuries
- b) Damage self-confidence and sense of dignity
- c) Reduce children's trust in adults, teachers and authority figures
- d) Cause children to become anxious, depressed or angry
- e) Impair children's ability to learn and to be open to new ideas
- f) Induce fear leading to missing school & finally dropping out
- g) Teach children that the use of physical and emotional violence is an acceptable way to treat others, inculcating bullying



Children might be small, but their sense of dignity is not

Why is corporal punishment harmful for society?

1. Children who experience corporal punishment are more likely to learn to react aggressively. An ill-treated child often grows up to be an abusive parent or teacher, contributing to a cycle of violence in a society.
2. The impact of a threatening environment reduces academic achievement, interest in education and increases dropout rates. This in turn negatively affects socio-economic outcomes, thus contributing to a cycle of poverty.
3. As children's emotional health suffers, they have a high risk of developing mental illness.



If we want to live in a peaceful, safe, and healthy society,

we need to make our schools peaceful, safe, and healthy.

Are some teachers more likely to use corporal punishment?

Yes. Some teachers are more likely to use corporal punishment because of:

1. Gaps in training

Teachers who have not been adequately trained in the use of positive discipline techniques and managing stress are more likely to resort to corporal punishment.

School administrations should ensure that all teachers are provided with adequate training.

2. Overwork

A teacher who is grossly overworked and overburdened may feel frustrated, lose their patience and act aggressively.

School administrations should review workloads and teacher capacities to ensure a realistic work schedule.

3. Poor mental health

Teachers suffering from poor mental health and who have trouble managing emotions like anxiety, sadness, or anger, are more likely to use violence when they get impatient or feel overwhelmed. Emotional difficulties may also stem from high stress levels e.g., stressful family situations such as spousal violence or financial pressures.

Teachers suffering from a common mental illness and may need treatment and should be offered psycho-social support by a counselor, or referred to a mental healthcare facility.

To prevent corporal punishment, it is important to review and monitor teacher skills, workloads and emotional health.

Are some children more likely to receive corporal punishment?

Yes. Some children are more likely than others to be victims of corporal punishment because of:

1. Sensory deficits

Children who have weak eyesight, are hard of hearing, or hypersensitive to light or noise have reduced performance capabilities at school.

Teachers should be trained to identify deficits and inform the school administration and parents.

2. Poor physical health

Some children may suffer from poor physical health such as iron deficiency, vitamin A deficiency, hyper- or hypo-thyroidism, and other physical health issues that reduce their capability to perform adequately in school. Such children are more likely to frustrate teachers and consequently suffer violence.

Parents need to be taken on-board to ensure regular physical health check ups.

3. Developmental issues

Children with arrested development, reduced intellectual ability, reduced social interaction skills, difficulties in verbal or numerical skills, and hyperactivity or attention issues are more challenging for teachers to manage. Such children are more likely to be victims of violence.

Teachers need to suspect and recognize these common challenges and inform the school administration and parents so that these children can get professional help.



Are some children more likely to receive corporal punishment?

4. Children from disturbed family environments

Children who experience uncertainty, deprivation, stress, violence, and abuse at home are more likely to act out in school or become withdrawn. Teachers may exacerbate these situations by resorting to corporal punishment when academic output declines.

Teachers need to be mindful of signs of abuse such as sudden emotional changes, and physical signs such as bruises, changes in weight or appetite.



5. Children with mental health issues

Children may suffer from common mental disorders such as depression or anxiety, or more severe mental disorders.

Signs of common mental health disorders, extreme emotional states, social withdrawal, erratic behaviour and extreme fatigue need to be taken seriously.

Teachers should be trained to identify such disorders and inform school administrations that in turn can inform and help parents to ensure their children get necessary professional help.

Teachers are custodians of children's hopes and aspirations. Only you can be the change needed to help them thrive.

How do we manage problem behaviour then?

Schools should have clear policies in place to address behavioural problems. These should be explained to all parents and students upon admission/enrollment.

1. Label a behaviour as difficult, not the child

Behavioural problems are common; that doesn't mean a child is 'bad'.

2. Communicate clearly

Teachers should use clear, simple sentences to explain undesirable behaviour and give specific instructions. Commands should be issued one at a time.

Teachers should tell the child *what* to do rather than what *not* to do. For example, it is better to say "Please be in school before 9 a.m." instead of saying, "Don't be late".

3. Be firm, but calm

Teachers must not lose their temper. If adults lose their temper, it becomes difficult for children to learn how to deal with their own anger in a different way.

4. Be consistent

It takes time to modify behaviour, and inculcating change requires adults to be consistent. Once rules are set, all concerned adults should follow these rules. Do not make occasional allowances for unacceptable behaviour.

5. Reinforce positive behaviour

Teachers must focus on identifying and reinforcing positive behaviour. Appreciation and attention are effective rewards that can help bolster desirable behaviour.

How do we manage problem behaviour then?

6. Identify undesirable behaviour

An undesirable behavior should be clearly identified. Claiming that a child “misbehaves” is vague and does not help work towards remedial measures. It is important to explain to the child why a particular behaviour is not acceptable, by spelling out its consequences. Sometimes, it helps to check if the child understands by asking them to explain why a particular behaviour is undesirable.

7. Check to see if an undesirable behaviour is being reinforced

When a teacher interrupts classroom lessons to reprimand or tell a student off, they unwittingly pay attention and reinforce that behaviour. Sometimes, a child only gets attention when he or she acts out, reinforcing that behaviour.

8. Employ specific disciplinary techniques

Discipline should immediately follow an undesirable behaviour, and the reason for an undesirable behaviour’s unacceptability needs to be clearly spelt out, e.g. “Taking someone else’s things without their permission makes them feel bad”.



Specific disciplinary techniques

For minor day-to-day occurrences, it is important to teach why something is wrong, and firmly but positively illustrate what should be done instead sans humiliation:

a) Issue a verbal warning

Talk to the student and tell them what they did, and *why* it was “wrong”.

b) Impose time-out

Ask the child to sit in a quiet place for 10 minutes to think about what they did wrong, and what they will do to avoid such behaviour in the future. Children should then be able to re-join the class after sharing their response at the end of the time-out.

c) Ask the child to write a letter

Ask the child to write a letter detailing what they did wrong, why, and how they plan to avoid a repeat in the future.

d) Solicit an oral apology

Ask the child to apologise to the wronged person (e.g. a classmate) and ask for forgiveness.



Specific disciplinary techniques

For recurring offences, children need to learn that there are consequences for behaviour, while reflecting on them as well.

a) Meet parents

Both parents should be seen at school to discuss recurring problem and further plans.

b) Deny privileges

Taking away an activity that the child enjoys (e.g. participation in a game or class activity) provided this doesn't harm their well-being (e.g. food or bathroom visits) can help establish consequences for undesirable behaviour.

c) Give them tasks

Minor "improvement tasks" such as cleaning the board, collecting plastic waste from the ground, can be used to establish consequences for undesirable behaviour. Care must be taken to ensure that these chores are not too strenuous for the child's age or disposition.

d) Disciplinary talk

Set aside time to formally talk to the student to discuss their behaviour and set a course for its correction.

e) Public apology

If the child has caused damage to a third party, they should be asked to apologise publicly in class or in the assembly and take responsibility for their behaviour.

'Time out' and denying privileges are known to be the most effective ways of disciplining children; punishment and abuse are the least effective ways.

