



**CHANGING ATTITUDES TO  
PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT  
OF CHILDREN IN  
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**



Save the Children



43%

OF NEW ZEALANDERS  
DISAGREE WITH THE  
PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT  
OF CHILDREN

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Key messages

1. Public tolerance of physical punishment of children continues to decline.
2. Support for the 2007 law change is increasing.
3. 50% of parents completely disagree that there is ever a reason to physically punish children.

This report presents survey findings about adult attitudes to physical punishment of children and the 2007 law change that amended section 59 Crimes Act 1961 to make all forms of assaults on children illegal. The survey questions were included as part of a recent UMR Research nation-wide omnibus survey of a representative sample of adults<sup>1</sup> in New Zealand (July 2018) and repeats a survey undertaken in 2008, and again in 2013.

Over the last 11 years attitudes toward the physical punishment of children have changed with fewer and fewer parents believing that physical punishment<sup>2</sup> is acceptable. This report found that 43% of New Zealand adults believe children should never be subjected to physical punishment. This is an increase of 23% on 2008 survey results. Opposition to the law is also declining; 39% of adults fully support the law, an increase of 4% on 2013 survey results.

Those findings show that New Zealand is moving toward a future of violence free parenting, affirming the work of the politicians, academics, advocates and others who have supported law reform and public information about non-violent parenting over the years. However, the findings also show that a significant number of people continue to support or are uncertain about whether physical punishment of children is acceptable. This suggests a continued need to inform and support parents to raise their children without violence.

## BACKGROUND

In 2007 Section 59 of the Crimes Act 1961 was amended in New Zealand to protect children from assault in any context. The repeal of the law supported children's rights to dignity, bodily integrity, safety and equal protection with adults under the law<sup>3</sup>.

Advocacy for repeal of the then section 59 Crimes Act 1961 began in the 1960s. Physical punishment in New Zealand schools was prohibited in 1989<sup>4</sup>, parent education campaigns were developed in the mid-1990s, successive Children's Commissioners advocated for a change to section 59 Crimes Act 1961, and in 2005 MP Sue Bradford's Private Members Bill was drawn from the Parliamentary ballot. Organised community action and political support enabled the Bill to gain traction.

The law was passed following fierce political and public debate. During the long campaign to have the law changed media attention was sometimes sensational and polarising<sup>5</sup>. Despite some vocal opposition, it would appear the legislators and much of the public considered the potential benefits of the law change to children outweighed opposition arguments. At the time New Zealand was one of 18 countries and the first English-speaking country to protect children from all forms of corporal punishment<sup>6</sup>.

Decades of research has consistently linked physical punishment with risks of harm and poor developmental and behavioural outcomes for children<sup>7</sup>. *'The research linking physical punishment with harm to children is, with only a few exceptions, consistent and unidirectional, and it has been replicated across a range of study designs and methods, thereby increasing the validity of causal inference.'*<sup>8</sup> Parental use of physical punishment has been associated with poor outcomes for children such as, *'... low moral internalisation, aggression, antisocial behaviour, externalising behaviour problems, internalising behaviour problems, mental health problems, negative parent-child relationships, impaired cognitive ability, low self-esteem, and risk of physical abuse from parents.'*<sup>9</sup> Many parents remain unaware of this research as since the law changed, there has not been a public campaign to promote support for the law or inform parents on why choosing not to hit children is good for their parenting as well as their children.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

UMR Research conducted a nation-wide telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of New Zealanders 18 years of age and over from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2018. The sample size was n=604 with the margin of error for a 50% figure at the 95% confidence level being  $\pm 4.0\%$ . For the purposes of this study, those who had at least one dependent child under the age of 18 were considered as parents or carers.



### THE SURVEY ASKED TWO QUESTIONS RELATED TO PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AND SUPPORT OF THE LAW CHANGE:

1. Using a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 means strongly disagree and 10 means strongly agree, to what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement? There are certain circumstances when it is alright for parents to use physical punishment with a child.
2. As you may be aware, the law about physical punishment of children was changed in 2007. Using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly oppose and 10 means strongly support, to what extent do you oppose or support the 2007 law about physical punishment of children?

The two questions and the methodology were consistent with questions asked in the 2008 survey commissioned by the Children's Commissioner and repeated in 2013 by the charitable trust End Physical Punishment of Children (EPOCH)<sup>10</sup>. The three surveys, including the most recent 2018 survey, are beginning to provide valuable time-trend data on changes in attitudes to physical punishment in New Zealand.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Public tolerance of physical punishment of children continues to decline.

Support for violence free parenting has more than doubled since 2008, with 43% of New Zealanders disagreeing that it is okay to physically punish children, up from just 20% in 2008. Parents disagree with the statement at an even higher rate with 50% completely disagreeing with physical punishment, 30% being unsure, and just 19% continuing to support the use of physical punishment (see figure 1).

Participants who identified as Pasifika most strongly disagreed with physical punishment of children (67%; see figure 2), followed by the under 30 age group (49%), women (49%), Maori (44%), and men (37%). Of the over 60s, 37% agreed with physical punishment, 33% were unsure, and 30% disagreed.

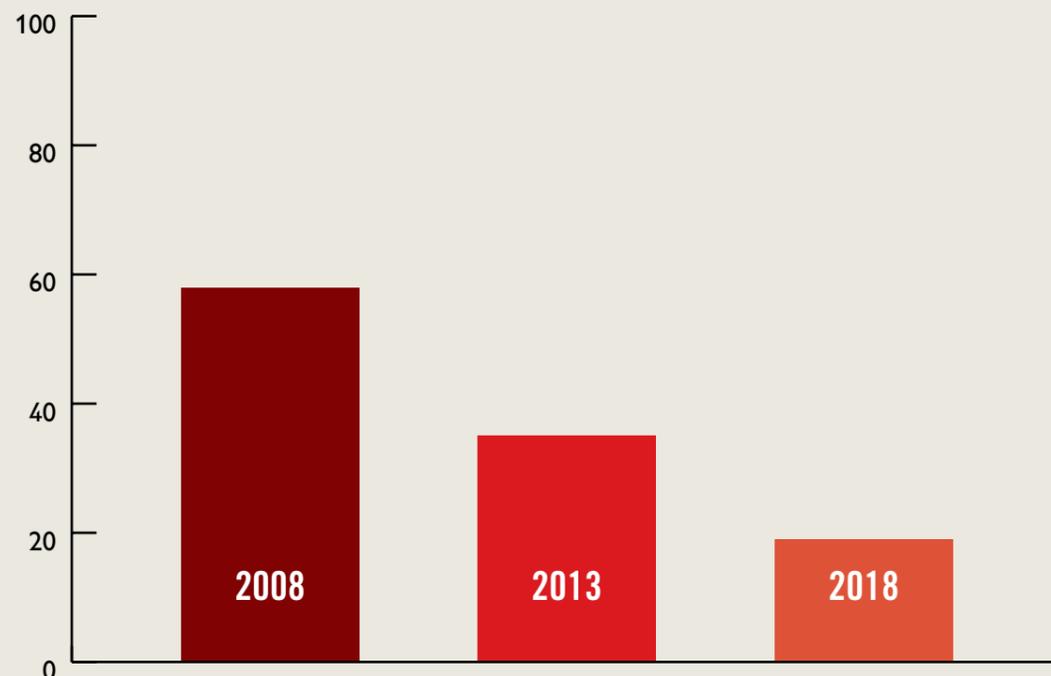
More people were supportive than unsupportive of the law change; 35% were in support, 24% did not support, 26% were unsure, and 10% had not heard

of the law. Support from parents was slightly higher at 44%. There was very strong support for the law by Maori at 49%, compared to 20% who were unsupportive.

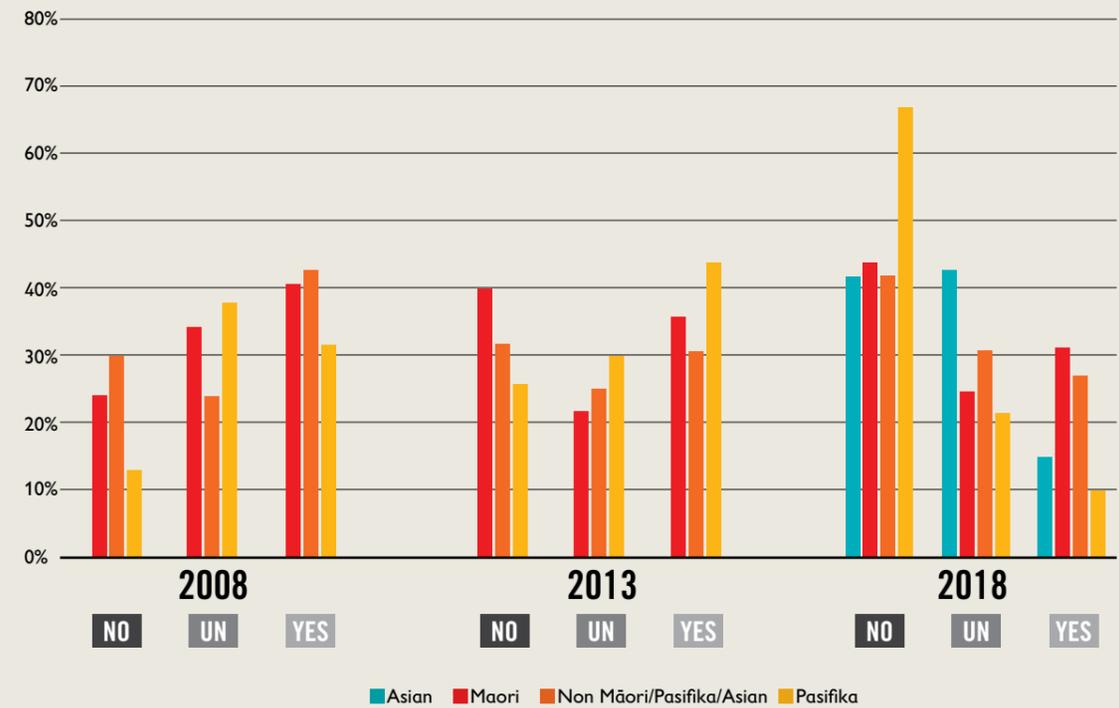
Eleven years after the law change support for violence free parenting is now significantly higher. Evidence from international research into the benefits of violence free parenting continues to grow<sup>11</sup>, therefore these changes in attitude are encouraging and positively support healthy child development and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Despite the rise in positive attitudes, some New Zealanders remain uncertain on whether physical punishment is an acceptable practice when disciplining children, and some parents (19%) continue to be in favour of physically punishing children. A significant predictor of parents using physical punishment is their attitudes toward physical punishment<sup>12</sup>.

**FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF PARENTS THAT THINK IT IS EVER OK TO USE PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT.**



**FIGURE 2: 'IS PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN EVER OK?' RESPONSE BY ETHNICITY.'**



NB: Ethnicity results for Asian not available for 2008 and 2013, all other ethnicities are included in 'Non-Maori/Pacific/Asian'



**OF PARENTS DISAGREE THAT THERE IS EVER A REASON TO PHYSICALLY PUNISH CHILDREN.**

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AND CHILD ABUSE

Physical punishment is a risk factor for child abuse. Extensive research confirms that physical punishment can lead to physical abuse<sup>13 14</sup>. The prohibition of physical punishment in itself is unlikely to eradicate child abuse, however alignment between policy and practice is vital for effective violence prevention<sup>15</sup>.

Other factors that contribute to abuse include, socio-economic pressures, substance abuse, poor parenting skills reinforced by lack of information and lack of support, family violence or intimate partner violence within the home, poor uptake or access to child health and quality early childhood education and care, adequate welfare and financial supports<sup>16</sup>. For sustained change to happen, it is important that these factors are recognised and continue to be addressed through policies, resources and programmes. Fostering cultural norms that enhance the nurturing of children and uphold their needs, rights and wellbeing are an important part of this change.



**OF NEW ZEALANDERS ARE IN SUPPORT OF THE 2007 LAW CHANGE**

## MOVING TOWARD A VIOLENCE FREE FUTURE

New Zealand has met international human rights recommendations to protect children from physical punishment but could do more to promote attitude and behaviour change through paying more attention to social and educational measures. Non-violent parenting appears to be moving toward becoming a social norm. Information and support measures exist in a number of forms. Not all parents are equipped with the knowledge they need. Many parents (30%) remain uncertain as to whether physical punishment is ever acceptable. To support parents in their decision to commit to non-physical alternative discipline methods, it is important they are made aware of the significant body of research that has consistently found that the impact of physical punishment is harmful to children<sup>17</sup>.

Interventions to inform parents about the dangers of physical punishment need not be intensive to be successful. A macro analysis of studies found that new mothers who received information on alternatives to physical punishment were more likely to use non-violent parenting methods<sup>18</sup>. Supporting parents and caregivers with the information they need to ensure the use of positive parenting is essential in bringing about improved outcomes for children<sup>19</sup>. These messages need not be restricted to physical punishment practices but could incorporate age and stage developmental information. Fathers should be included to acknowledge the importance of their role in parenting.

Consideration of the vast research that clearly links physical punishment with harmful outcomes for children, and unwavering political commitment to protecting children in law from all forms of violence, should underpin initiatives to fully effect violence free parenting. Giving full effect to violence free parenting strongly aligns with our current focus on improving the wellbeing of children<sup>20</sup> and ensuring that New Zealand is the best place in the world to be a child. Being protected from all forms of violence including physical punishment in the home, is inherent to wellbeing and aspirations for our children in Aotearoa New Zealand.



The perceived competition between parental authority and children's rights<sup>21</sup> is a distraction that has hindered the public from understanding the proven benefits of not smacking or hitting children. Ending physical punishment has been framed as a debate between anti and pro smacking and parental control versus bad child behaviour. It is time to put the debate behind us. Effort would be best spent informing the public of the facts that encourage non-violent parenting, equipping parents with knowledge and alternative strategies to enhance the societal shift that is happening so that non-violent parenting becomes the cultural norm in New Zealand.

The 2018 UMR research results show support for the current law continues to rise; only 24% of adults surveyed do not support the law. The law sends a message that is consistent with efforts focused on protecting New Zealand children from violence - Oranga Tamariki<sup>22</sup>, and supporting families to raise

children in positive and nurturing environments; the Families Package<sup>23</sup>, the Child Wellbeing Strategy and Child Poverty Reduction Bill<sup>24</sup>, and NGO or community initiatives such as Incredible Years<sup>25</sup>, Family Start<sup>26</sup>, SKIP<sup>27</sup>, and Te Korowai Mokopuna<sup>28</sup>.

The law reform and subsequent change in attitudes in New Zealand sends a positive message to countries who are campaigning for, but yet to address, laws that permit the physical punishment of children.

In summary we urge that the law change is embedded politically and culturally and there is never again defensible assault of children allowed in New Zealand. To realise the full benefits of the law, we recommend further discussion on how we can ensure all parents are equipped with the knowledge they need to support positive and violence-free parenting practices.



**PUBLIC TOLERANCE OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN CONTINUES TO DECLINE.**

## ENDNOTES

- 1 People aged over 18 years old living in New Zealand.
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- 28 <https://everychildcounts.org.nz/te+korowai+mokopuna+project+launched+at+barnardos+agm>



## FURTHER INFORMATION

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