



Executive Summary

Children have an important part to play in understanding and developing appropriate family disciplinary practices. Adult views and opinions have dominated debates on family discipline. In this study, children's experiences of family discipline, especially the role of physical punishment, challenge many adult assumptions. Children report that many parents not only use physical punishment with frequency, many use levels of severity that could significantly harm children, and these events are happening in ordinary families.

Children report that physical punishment does not contribute positively to children's learning, and is often delivered by parents who are angry. It is difficult to be reasonable when you are angry. Physical punishment is often applied heavily and is clearly a risk factor for injury of children. This method of disciplining children needs to be prohibited. Removal of the legal defence for physical punishment (section 59, Crimes Act 1961) will be an important component of changing attitudes

about the use of physical punishment. This needs to be in conjunction with public education.

While societal approval of physical punishment remains strong it will be difficult to reduce its incidence. As children's ages increased in this study, so did their acceptance of the use of physical punishment. Boys were more likely to endorse the use of physical punishment, while male members of households were more likely to use physical punishment than females. Children learn



about relationships and behaviour from the people they live with, and parents are the most significant people in most children's lives. Messages about how to manage conflict in relationships are taught by adults.

Ritchie and Ritchie (1993) point out that we know that patterns of violent behaviour are learnt and that they can therefore be replaced by other behaviours, or never learnt in the first place. As agents of children's socialisation, parents and the wider community must consider what values and morals we want our children to acquire.

Research conducted for a Master of Arts in Childhood and Youth Studies forms the basis of this report. The research was supervised by the Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago. Eighty children aged between 5 and 14 years, living in five different geographical locations throughout New Zealand were questioned, in focus groups, about their experiences and understanding of family discipline and their views of the effects of various disciplinary techniques.

Findings indicate that children have a good understanding of which behaviours are considered unacceptable within the family. The children interviewed believed that family rules and expectations were not clearly communicated by parents. They reported that parental disciplinary messages were often not understood, were delivered in an inconsistent manner and without implicit instruction to children. Fairness featured highly among desired parental behaviours.

The strong focus on the children's experiences of physical punishment and their views on it arose in part from children's spontaneous reporting on the use of this

form of discipline and in part from the author's specific focus on this topic in the second part of her research. The findings indicate that physical punishment is the disciplinary technique most often used in most families; only four children in the study never having experienced it. Many children reported experiences of physical punishment that can be described as harsh and/or dangerous.

Commonly, the children viewed physical discipline as a negative and ineffective experience engendering resentment and fear. They had very clear suggestions to make about alternative, effective responses to their transgressions. The main focus of these were effective communication achieved through a reduction in parental anger and a concerted effort to listen before responding to children's behaviour.

Significantly, the study demonstrated that all the children, irrespective of age or gender, had considerable understanding and insight into their own and other people's behaviour and feelings when family discipline occurred. The findings from this study have clear implications for parenting education and for public policy.