

## **Smack Addicts or Children Should Be Seen and Not Hurt**

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Last November, a young English boy protested to the highest court in the land that his stepfather had no right to cane him. During his trial, it was noted that the beatings had been frequent and "hurt a lot, particularly when he was beaten on the legs". He was severely bruised and had several linear scars. He was repeatedly beaten between the ages of five and eight. As expected, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg this week found in his favour.

The problem for British parents is what happens next? One of the most perplexed appears to be Paul Boateng, father of four and Parliamentary under-secretary to the Ministry of Health. He gave an undertaking last March that the Government would adopt the European Court ruling as final. He promised that our domestic law would be brought into line with the general trend where at least eight other European countries, including Austria and most of Scandinavia, have already outlawed the corporal punishment of children. Since July, such punishment has also been banned in British schools by the School Standards and Framework Act.

You might think that today Mr Boateng would proudly be announcing the death by law of ALL violent parental chastisement in Britain. A recent pamphlet from Boateng's own Department had said: "It's never OK to shake or smack a baby". And of course you'd be wrong. With William Hague and the Tories screaming about Euro interference, what you actually find is Mr Boateng's Department defending a parent's right to smack to their heart's content just so long as they don't use an "implement". We are told that "smacking has a place within parental discipline and our law will not be changed to outlaw smacking".

This is totally confusing for the rest of us, both parents and children alike. It was hoped that the ruling would mark a change in the culture of British childcare which at present, by the Government's own research, results in a fifth of children under 16 being hit with implements and three quarters of babies being smacked in the first year of life. What Mr Boateng has now done is the equivalent of introducing a drink-drive law which says it's all right to drive a car so long as you're only two thirds tipsy. On the one hand, Mr Boateng is telling parents that you may smack as hard as you want. On the other, he's saying that if like the father of Dennis the Menace you take a slipper to your son's backside, you may be prosecuted for assault.

This seems such a sorry concession to the "hang 'em and flog 'em" brigade because British parents, after the Louise Woodward case, were beginning to realise that violence towards children is not an undiluted virtue. I understand that frustrated parents should sometimes lose their rag. I've done it. My teachers did the same. But we know that hitting children only causes resentment and inculcates a philosophy that 'might is right'. It certainly never taught me that I wanted to go to church or to give up smoking! In fact, hitting your child is only justifiable on the basis that it was a mistake in the first place and that you make amends afterwards! You try to learn from your mistakes. Yet here's the government giving the oxygen of approval to our very worst instincts.

This is all the more serious because a concerted family values campaign already exists to promote parental violence which may become abusive. Perhaps you're prepared to

overlook the odd smacking of a ten-year-old by frustrated parents. It gets more difficult when you see the colour photographs of the bruises and broken skin. But what should the Government do about those who advocate the systematic beating of babies?

Earlier this month, self-styled parenting gurus Gary and Anne-Marie Ezzo flew into Britain from California to preach their gospel of childcare. Since the mid-1990s, they claim they've "educated" more than a million and a half parents worldwide. In America, they run a profitable business called "Growing Families International". They present a radio show and peddle a 17-cassette audio-pack. But here's what their special message for parents boils down to. They want you to beat your kids, even babies as young as 14 months and children up to 40 months, with a ritual rod or "implement".

Like Jesuits, the Ezzos favour early propaganda. They believe that "hitting em while still young" is the only way to instil "lifetime obedience". Parents are even told they can expect "first time compliance" to their orders. This means if you command your two-year-old to stop playing in the cupboard and he says "I haven't finished yet" you march him upstairs for a beating.

Gary and Anne-Marie explain that smacking by hand is unsuccessful because it lacks sufficient "sting". You have to use an "instrument", and they spend a lot of time describing their ideal corrective tool. "Don't use a wooden spoon. It doesn't have enough 'flex'. You need an instrument that has 'flex'. The goal is to produce a high sting. The tissue must absorb the impact. Only this produces the type of pain that re-directs the child's attention". Then the loving personal touch: "In our household, we use a piece of vinyl leather 10-12 inches long, an inch and a half wide and a quarter-inch thick. This produces a sting but doesn't cause damage".

Avoiding damage is a high priority for Gary and Anne-Marie. "If the instrument is too heavy it will leave marks; if it's too light it will be meaningless". In case of doubt, they say, "anything that cuts the skin is too heavy". They make a light-hearted reference to the fact that nobody wants the social services getting involved, do they.

In classic cases of abuse, the violator always seeks to isolate the victim. The idea is to rule out witnesses. By an insidious parallel, this is exactly what the Ezzos do. While claiming to be protectors they advise: "Don't beat in front of other adults. Don't beat in front of other children. If Gran and Grandma come over, don't do it in front of them. Rarely do it in front of other siblings. And don't do it on bare skin". But what if it's a baby? "With a toddler in a diaper you may have to pull off the diaper and hit just below the diaper line". Or if it's a well-covered girl? "Suppose there's a corduroy skirt that you can't get through, then you may have to drop that down a little bit too".

Anne-Marie even describes her favourite method of pinning down a child (a difficult phrase in Britain after the Beck scandal) while delivering chastisement. Her lilting American voice could be advertising a medicated shampoo: "To keep your kids still, cross your ankles then put their little legs between your legs and that way you won't miss. Then take their little hands and hold them out here - I'm talking one, two three-year-olds - then their little bottoms are right there and you won't miss".

You don't have to be Freud to see that these people are seriously deluded. When they claim that beating a child for them is an "act of love" you wonder what they mean. Self-righteous relish drips from their spanking descriptions. In classic abuse, the truth does a

headstand. Confront a paedophile and he'll say "kids like being touched up". How bizarre to find the Ezzo's using a similar construction. Perhaps the most depressing delusion in a long catalogue is their conviction that children beg to be spanked. They quote a tragic little girl saying: "Mummy my heart hurts - I need a good spanking" .

The dangers are clear-cut. We do not live in a society where parents are always right. We live in a society where children need to think for themselves. We need to live in a society where children are free to grow without emotional and physical abuse - not to mention the risk of being turned into adults who will probably take sexual pleasure from pain. There is research showing that spanking by parents causes anti-social behaviour in children. It's not enough that Mr Boateng sits on the fence to defend the old brutal culture. He has an opportunity to think again and improve the culture. With the new ruling from Strasbourg, the Home Office should not only prosecute abusive parents but deport their vile mentors.

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