

Every Smack is a Humiliation-- A Manifesto by Alice Miller

Few insights gained in the last 20 years are so securely established as the realization that what we do to children when they are small, good things and bad things, will later form a part of their behavioral repertoire. Battered children will batter others, punished children act punitively, children lied to become liars themselves.

In the short term, corporal punishment may produce obedience. But it is a fact documented by research that in the long term the results are inability to learn, violence and rage, bullying, cruelty, inability to feel another's pain, especially that of one's own children, even drug addiction and suicide, unless there are enlightened or at least helping witnesses on hand to prevent that development.

When laws prohibiting corporal punishment were launched in 1977 in Sweden, 70% of the citizens were against it. In the latest survey, 20 years later the figure has dropped to 10%, most of them fundamentalists. These statistics show that the mentality of the Swedish population has changed radically in the course of a mere 20 years. A destructive tradition, upheld and acted upon for thousands of years, has been done away with thanks to this legislation. Where is the rest of the world?

The claim that mild punishments (slaps or smacks) have no detrimental effect is still widespread because we got this message very early from our parents who had taken it over from their own parents. Unfortunately, the main damage it causes is precisely the broad dissemination of this conviction. The result of which is that each successive generation is subjected to the tragic effects of so called physical "correction."

Fundamentalists propagate beating children because they disavow their own painful experiences and are unaware of the fact that they are using children as scapegoats. It is imperative for us to launch this kind of preventive legislation in the major countries of Europe and the USA before the fundamentalists gain any further control of the political arena. It is designed to have a protective and informative function for parents. It does not set out to incriminate anyone.

Sanctions deriving from it could take the form of parents being obligated to internalize information on the consequences of corporal punishment, in

much the same way as drivers of motor vehicles are required by state law to be familiar with the highway code. In the case of our children, the point at issue is not only the welfare of individual families-- the vital interests of society as a whole are at stake.

Physical cruelty and emotional humiliation not only leave their marks on children, they also inflict a disastrous imprint of the future of our society. Information on the effects of the "well-meant smack" should therefore be part and parcel of courses for expectant mothers and of counseling for parents.

Hitler, Stalin, Mao and other dictators were exposed to severe physical mistreatment in childhood and refused to face up to the fact later. Instead of seeing and feeling what had happened to them, they avenged themselves vicariously by killing millions of people. And millions of others helped them to do so. If the legislation we are advocating had existed the time, those millions would simply have refused to perpetrate acts of cruelty at the command of crazed political leaders.

(This text can be distributed and published by everybody to disseminate the information as widely as possible. Alice Miller)