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Hitting back

Despite losing the argument with decision-makers over the proper limits on child discipline, the pro-smacking lobby continues to use hysteria and selective facts to drag the country back to a place which belongs in the past. As desperate as these campaigners are to claim otherwise, the sky has not fallen in since the passing six months ago of the Crimes Act amendment which ruled out hitting children as a disciplinary option. But instead of recognising that it is time to accept the change and move on, the smacking advocates are doing their utmost to confuse the situation and sow unnecessary doubts in parents' minds. It is a cynical, mischievous approach which reinforces the inherent weakness of the original campaign to defend the use of physical discipline against children.

Inevitably, the smacking coalition seized on a test case of the new law, the successful prosecution of a Masterton father who grabbed his son, pulled him on to a bed, then flipped him on to his knee and smacked him on the backside. The boy was left with a bruised shoulder. Incredibly, the Family First group responded to the case by claiming it to be "the first of what's going to be many cases of the law targeting good parents". That seemed to ignore

such details as the report that a concerned relative alerted police to the episode, the father's own admission that he lost his temper and over-reacted, and that he admitted the subsequent assault charge. His behaviour sounds to be a long way from the "loving discipline" which Family First and its allies have been so keen to portray their "right" to smack as being about.

Nevertheless, most things about their campaign are shameless, including the central tactic of attempting to force a citizens-initiated referendum on the question of smacking, in the hope of pushing the issue on to the agenda of next year's election. It is a predictable ploy, but one which flies in the face of the broad political consensus that emerged over the law change.

The key to the change, it clearly needs to be restated, was absolutely sound: Parliament determined that children need the same protection against assault as adults. It was a necessary step in the national effort to solve the country's child abuse shame. It is dismaying that the law change's opponents continue to try to represent it as something else. They are doing a disservice to their own credibility and, more important, to the parents and children of New Zealand.