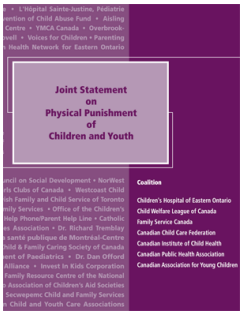
Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth



Executive summary

Background

The Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth was developed by a national partnership of organizations concerned with the well-being of children and their families. It has been formally endorsed by many Canadian organizations and individuals involved in a broad range of issues related to children and youth.

Purpose and audience

Based on extensive research evidence, the statement provides an overview of the developmental outcomes associated with the use of physical punishment on children and youth. Scenarios depicting disciplinary situations ground the document in the realities well known to parents and caregivers. The statement will also be of interest to professionals, policy and program planners, members of the public, and children and youth themselves. Resources are identified for those interested in learning more about effective discipline and parenting.

Highlights of findings

The research evidence now available permits us to move beyond the debate about whether physical punishment is harmful to children and youth or is even effective as discipline.

- There is no clear evidence of any benefit from the use of physical punishment on children.
- There is strong evidence that physical punishment places children at risk for physical injury, poorer mental health, impaired relationships with parents, weaker internalization of moral values, antisocial behaviour, poorer adult adjustment and tolerance of violence in adulthood.
- Few parents believe that physical punishment is effective, most believe it is unnecessary and harmful, and a majority think the most common outcome is parental guilt or regret.
- Parents are more likely to use physical punishment if they approve of it, experienced it themselves as children, feel anger in response to their children's behaviour, are subject to depression, or are burdened by particular forms of stress.

Conclusion and implications

On the basis of the clear and compelling evidence—that the physical punishment of children and youth plays no useful role in their upbringing and poses only risks to their development—parents should be strongly encouraged to develop alternative and positive approaches to discipline. The implications of this evidence and this goal are examined in relation to Canadian law, human rights and actions taken by other countries.

Recommendations

Recommendations for action in Canada include: (1) delivery of public awareness messages to inform all Canadians that physical punishment is harmful to children's development and is ineffective as discipline; (2) development of universal parenting education; and (3) provision of the same protection of children from physical assault as is given to Canadian adults and to children in a growing number of countries. Responsibility for action lies within the jurisdiction of national, provincial and territorial and local levels of government, the mandates of organizations, and the expertise of professionals who serve children and youth. The statement as a whole may be considered an urge to action by parents and caregivers—within and beyond their families.