

Reconceptualising child rights

Guest author series



Reconceptualising 'discipline' through a child rights lens

by Dr Justin Coulson

Our children have a fundamental human right to be raised in an environment free of violence. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has called (again) for Australia to abolish the legal right of parents to smack their children. The Committee argues that legislation will make children safer.

The central (and well-intentioned) reason most adults smack their children is that they are trying to teach them that a particular behaviour is not acceptable or appropriate. While teaching good ways to act is the purpose of discipline, smacking is an ineffective tool for achieving this goal. Physical violence – even in the form of a ‘little smack’ – may, in fact, be the least effective strategy a parent can utilise to improve a child’s behaviour. It is often counter-productive.

What is the research evidence?

The research in this area is conclusive. Over 50 years of evidence highlights that:

1. Smacking teaches children to be aggressive. Research indicates that adults are role modelling a ‘might is right’ mentality, and there is evidence to show a strong correlation between what adults do and what children do when it comes to hitting and other power-assertive behaviour.
2. Research has highlighted that children who are hit by their parents show significantly greater rates of ‘externalising’ behaviour – that is, acting out, being aggressive, and being oppositional – and internalising behaviour (such as anxiety, OCD, stress, and depression). Furthermore, the younger they are when hit, the more profound the outcomes.
3. Ironically, children who are smacked show more challenging behaviours than those who are not smacked, as described in this research.
4. Multiple studies demonstrate that smacking children literally reduces children’s opportunity to develop their IQ, and their academic outcomes. This finding is still controversial, and not all studies show this outcome. However it stands to reason that a child who is scared or anxious will be less likely to be open to learning, being curious, and exploring their world. Thus, school learning and IQ can be affected.
5. Research shows one of the most concerning aspects of spanking: mild smacking by a parent in the first year of a study predicted harsher physical discipline the following year. In other words, compared with parents who did not hit, those who did so were 50% more likely to be even more physical the following year. And Canadian researchers found that children who were smacked were at seven times the risk of physical assault (punching/kicking) from their parents compared with children who were not smacked.
6. Smacking does not teach effectively. Children do not learn lessons from being hit, and the values do not get internalised. In fact, moral internalisation is lower in children who are smacked than in children who are not.
7. Smacking children reduces wellbeing, psychologically, socially, emotionally, cognitively... you name it. It ruptures relationships and pushes our children away from us when they need us most.

An alternative to smacking that incorporates child rights

The research demonstrates that punishment does not change a child's behaviour. Using a child rights approach, the adults in children's lives take a supportive and encouraging approach to discipline that helps a child to learn what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour. Discipline is seen as a process that teaches children acceptable ways to act by developing empathy, character, and morality; by empowering the child. This approach also views learning how to behave as an ongoing process throughout a child's life, not a series of one-off events.

There are several ways that adults can support children to learn how to behave in a way that not only supports their rights but enhances their ability to make good choices for themselves as they grow. Some examples are:

- 1. Be a role model (Article 5):** The example that adults set models appropriate behaviour we want to see in children. When we are impatient, angry, critical, or disrespectful, children watch and follow. Moreover, when adults are kind, compassionate, helpful, and loving, children learn these traits as well. Many behavioural traits are taught through an example: adults teach gratitude by being grateful, compassion by being compassionate, and service by serving. In short, if adults wish to teach children anything, our example is primary.
- 2. Explain what is expected (Article 17):** Adults can assist children to be successful by explaining what behavioural expectations are. They ensure that instructions are clear, relevant, and understood. When teaching children the right ways to act, adults should spend more time helping them recognise what they are best off doing, rather than emphasising what not to do. This approach can be as simple as saying 'walk' rather than 'Don't run'. Providing a clear rationale for behavioural requests makes this approach even more effective. To extend the above example, we might say 'walk please. There is water on the floor, lots of children around, and people carrying glasses. We want to keep everyone safe.'
- 3. Encourage discussion (Article 12):** When everyone is calm, questions can encourage children to think more deeply about what behaviour is appropriate. Rather than berating them for getting it wrong and demanding they do it this way, adults can ask questions like, "What would be a better idea?", or "How could you have said that more nicely?" As we promote conversations with children, they are more likely to come up with their reasons and answers for ideal behaviour and will internalise these ideas at a much deeper level.
- 4. Practise and have fun (Article 31):** In some circumstances it can be useful to help children learn by giving them a chance to practise their ideas in games or in other activities that are in a supportive whole family environment.
- 5. Care (Article 3):** All of us make mistakes, and even more so if we are tired, hungry, lonely or upset. Sometimes behaviours can be averted by a hug, even if it seems it is the last thing the child needs or 'deserves'.
- 6. Proactive and positive approaches (Article 14):** When adults use a child rights lens that supports behaviour change through proactive and positive approaches rather than through punishment, children are far more likely to learn and grow.
- 7. Celebrate (Article 29):** The ultimate goal is of course, that children learn to manage their behaviour, and of course, when that happens we can celebrate. When children have a misstep, adults can take a deep breath, and then guide them back to the path.

As we consider the future thirty years of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, wouldn't it be amazing to see Australia's scorecard for Article 19 changed, just as 58 other countries globally have done?



Short video

Watch Justin discussing a child rights approach to discipline, that links to Article 19 from the Convention.



Dr Justin Coulson

Justin has a psychology degree from the University of Queensland and his PhD in psychology from the University of Wollongong.

Justin has written multiple peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly book chapters, as well as several books and ebooks about parenting, including the 21 Days to a Happier Family (Harper Collins, 2016) and 9 Ways to a Resilient Child (Harper Collins, 2017).

Justin is an Honorary Fellow at the Centre for Positive Psychology in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. He is a consultant to the Federal Government's Office of the Children's e-Safety Commissioner, and has acted (and continues to act) in an advisory capacity to well-known organisations including Beyond Blue, the Raising Children Network, Life Education, Intel Security, and the Alannah and Madeline Foundation.

In this short video, Justin explains why the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 19 is the article he wants all Australians to consider as we celebrate the 30th anniversary of Australia's signing of the Convention on December 17, 2020.

Further readings

[Happy Families website](#)

