Physical punishment in the home and at schools is widespread in South Africa. Whereas 57% of parents reported smacking their child in 2005, 89% of women and 94% of men reported physical punishment by their caregivers before the age of 10 years in a study of 1200 children in Cape Town. A further proportion of them—38% of males and 69% of females—reported beatings with a belt, stick or other hard object.4

Physical punishment also continues at high rates in schools across the country despite being prohibited by the South African Schools Act.5 Nationally, approximately 50% of school principals report physical punishment at school with the highest prevalence (74%) in KwaZulu-Natal.6

There has been much debate about the precise effects of physical punishment. Proponents argue that mild forms of physical punishment, such as spankings and smacking, are not harmful for children and are different from physical child abuse. Yet, a number of studies show that even ‘mild’ forms of physical punishment can have detrimental short- and long-term effects on children (see Figure 1).7

Figure 1: Associations between physical punishment and negative outcomes

- Moral internalization
- Quality of parent-child relationship
- Child mental health
- Child physical health
- Adult mental health
- Adult criminal and sexual behavior
- Risk of abuse of own child or spouse in adulthood

Increasing

Decreasing

Research further demonstrates that ‘mild’ physical punishment (e.g. spankings with an open hand) often overlaps with ‘severe’ forms of physical punishment (e.g. beatings that can cause injury).8 In high-income countries, 75% of physical abuse occurs in the context of physical punishment, and children who are smacked by their parents are seven times more likely to also be severely assaulted by their parents.9

In addition to physical punishment, physical child abuse is widespread in South Africa: between 33% and 59% of South African children experience some form of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse perpetuated by parents and primary caregivers, followed by teachers and relatives.10 In extreme cases, physical child abuse can be fatal. In South Africa, approximately 45% of women and 69% of men reported physical child abuse at school with the highest prevalence (74%) in KwaZulu-Natal.11

Physical punishment refers to “any punishment in which painful, or frightening, or degrading means are used to cause fear or pain of damage or discomfort, however light”.12 Physical punishment can thus take many forms and includes beatings with an open hand or with a law (e.g. canings, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, biting, pulling hair or bisecting ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding and forced ingestion.13 In South Africa physical punishment is widely used by parents, caregivers and teachers to discipline children.

Physical punishment is invariably degrading and is in conflict with children’s best interests and their rights—to dignity, to bodily and psychological integrity, and to be protected from maltreatment and degradation. These rights are protected under domestic and international law. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) require states to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence that can result in physical or psychological injury or constitute an affront to human dignity.1

The international committees overseeing the implementation of the UNCRC and the ACRWC have asked the South African government to prohibit all forms of physical punishment and to build the capacity of caregivers and teachers to increase children’s awareness of non-violent forms of discipline. While physical punishment has been prohibited in South African schools for over 12 years, the current law still allows interventions of physical punishment in the home until a recent judgment by the South Gauting High Court.14 This judgment struck down the common law defense of ‘reasonable and necessary restraint’, which previously allowed parents to use physical punishment. However, as illustrated by the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools, a legal ban alone will not curb the use of physical punishment.

2 Endnotes

Physical punishment is one of the most widespread forms of violence against children in South Africa. Research shows that physical punishment can have detrimental short- and long- term effects on children’s health and well-being. Interventions, policies and programmes targeting physical punishment are therefore urgently needed. This policy brief discusses the prevalence of physical punishment in South Africa, its effects on children and the links between physical punishment and intimate partner violence. The policy brief then presents findings from two school-based interventions that reduced physical punishment. Shikwati Supporting Success and the good schools tool. The policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for future research and interventions.

Endnotes

2 6 See Jewkes et al [n 32 above].
7 12 Gershoff ET (2002) Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviours and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical
Behaviour change interventions should be informed by changing individual attitudes and social norms. The relationship between physical punishment and intimate partner violence contributing to high levels of violence across society are complex with a multitude of intersecting factors. Physical violence have an increased risk of perpetrating towards an intimate partner often extends to the use of IPV and violence against children driving an intergenerational cycle of violence. While the pathways that lead from childhood trauma to IPV are not clear, attitudes and beliefs underpinning violence and social norms about children’s rights have been shown to be risk factors. Yet, it is clear that IPV and physical violence against children often co-occur and have a number of shared risk factors. The social and cultural context and the perpetuation of violence thus form the basis for further research into the use of physical punishment similarly fosters the use of IPV and violence against women’s violence towards others in the same way, men’s use of violence and controlling behaviour towards an intimate partner often co-occurs and have a number of shared risk factors. The detrimental effects of physical punishment on children and its links with more severe forms of child maltreatment and violence towards an intimate partner are complex with a multitude of intersecting factors. Evidence indicates that individuals’ experience of physical punishment in early childhood can contribute to the perpetuation of violence among family members and IPV perpetrator. The use of physical punishment in the home affects the development of social norms and attitudes towards IPV and children. The evidence indicates that IPV perpetuating social norms can perpetuate the use of physical punishment through a shared belief in the rationality of violence and that what is acceptable and normal is learned through social interaction. The shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions. The evidence indicates that the shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions. The shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions.

Teachers and parents who participated in Sikhokho Supporting Success reported having stopped physical punishment.

Sikhokho Supporting Success: An IPV and positive discipline intervention targeting learners, parents, and caregivers

Sikhokho Supporting Success seeks to strengthen: (1) the school’s capacity to implement its life orientation (LO) curriculum, which covers gender equality and the prevention of violence; (2) the teacher-parent relationship to prevent IPV among learners; (3) the school community’s capacity to address violence against learners and parents; and (4) link to the community in order to address violence against all learners and parents. The intervention is designed to empower teachers to manage learners’ behaviour more effectively in the classroom, and enabled them to manage their own emotions, a key factor contributing to the use of physical punishment. Teachers indicated that the intervention empowered them to manage learners’ behaviour more effectively in the classroom, and enabled them to manage their own emotions, a key factor contributing to the use of physical punishment. Teachers indicated that the intervention empowered them to manage learners’ behaviour more effectively in the classroom, and enabled them to manage their own emotions, a key factor contributing to the use of physical punishment. Teachers indicated that the intervention empowered them to manage learners’ behaviour more effectively in the classroom, and enabled them to manage their own emotions, a key factor contributing to the use of physical punishment.

South Africa is also faced with high levels of intimate partner violence.18 The underlying causes of violence are complex with a multitude of intersecting factors contributing to high levels of violence across society.19 Yet, it is clear that IPV and violence against children often co-occur and have a number of shared risk factors. The social and cultural context and the perpetuation of violence thus form the basis for further research into the use of physical punishment similarly fosters the use of IPV and violence against women’s violence towards others in the same way, men’s use of violence and controlling behaviour towards an intimate partner often co-occurs and have a number of shared risk factors. The detrimental effects of physical punishment on children and its links with more severe forms of child maltreatment and violence towards an intimate partner are complex with a multitude of intersecting factors. Evidence indicates that individuals’ experience of physical punishment in early childhood can contribute to the perpetuation of violence among family members and IPV perpetrator. The use of physical punishment in the home affects the development of social norms and attitudes towards IPV and children. The evidence indicates that IPV perpetuating social norms can perpetuate the use of physical punishment through a shared belief in the rationality of violence and that what is acceptable and normal is learned through social interaction. The shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions. The evidence indicates that the shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions.

The intervention also includes activities to facilitate the creation of a safe environment to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence.18 The intervention also includes activities to facilitate the creation of a safe environment to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence.18 The intervention also includes activities to facilitate the creation of a safe environment to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence.18 The intervention also includes activities to facilitate the creation of a safe environment to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence.18 The intervention also includes activities to facilitate the creation of a safe environment to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence.18

Recommendations

Physical punishment continues to be widely used by teachers and parents. At the same time, South Africa is faced with high levels of violence. Neither the use of physical punishment in the home nor at schools, the use of violence against children, nor the use of violence against women can be tolerated. The following recommendations are needed to explore how interventions can address both IPV and other forms of violence, such as physical punishment.

• Prohibit physical punishment in all settings. To ensure legal clarity, the Children’s Act should be amended to include a specific prohibition against the use of physical punishment.

• Institute a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning violence. This could include awareness raising of the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools and in the home.

• Build capacity for positive, non-violent discipline among parents, caregivers and teachers. Government should investigate to what extent the use of physical punishment is used by parents, other caregivers and teachers is driven by individual attitudes, social norms and other factors.

• Use schools as nodes of intervention. Emerging evidence from South Africa and Uganda suggests that school-based violence prevention interventions targeting school staff and/or parents and caregivers – have the potential to effectively reduce the use of physical punishment.

• Government must raise awareness of the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools and in the home.

• Investigate the relationship between physical punishment and intimate partner violence.

• Explore the role of individual attitudes and social norms on physical punishment, including teachers, parents, caregivers and children.

• Teachers and parents who participated in Sikhokho Supporting Success reported having stopped physical punishment.

South Africa. This evidence should then inform behaviour change interventions. In light of the widespread use of physical punishment in the home and at schools, interventions need to be able to take scale.

Figure 2: Framework for behaviour change

The framework for behaviour change identifies different levels at which interventions can interact to determine behaviour as illustrated in Figure 2. The shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions. The evidence indicates that the shift in attitudes towards violence perpetuated by social norms can be shifted through social change interventions.

The School Good Toolkit: reduced physical punishment by 42%

Evidence from Sikhokho Supporting Success and the good School Toolkit, as well as other programmes,27 indicates the potential for school-based violence prevention interventions to reduce physical punishment. School-based interventions should therefore be considered in addition to other interventions, particularly given their potential to be scaled up. The impact of school interventions on changing individual attitudes and social norms – which are needed to achieve sustained impact – should be further explored.

600 Ugandan schools have implemented the Good Schools Toolkit.

The intervention also reduced the number of students reporting emotional violence towards learners as well as peer violence. South Africa’s national violence against women and children policy was implemented in 2011.28 In order to target interventions effectively and create sustainable behavioural change, local researchers should investigate to what extent the use of physical punishment is used by parents, other caregivers and teachers is driven by individual attitudes, social norms and other factors.

The School Good Toolkit: reduced physical punishment by 42%