



Physical Chastisement Practice Tool

Physical Chastisement

As well as smacking, physical punishment can include, but is not limited to, slapping, pinching, pulling, hitting with an object, making someone eat substances or endure stressful positions for long periods.

There is a lot of research into physical chastisement, but it is generally agreed that:

- Children's views towards parental physical punishment are generally negative.
- It impacts negatively on the parent/child relationship.
- There is strong evidence that severe physical punishment and child abuse are harmful to a child's development.
- Physical punishment is no more effective at changing short term behaviour than other forms of non-physical discipline.
- Increases the risk of the child experiencing mental health challenges including anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

Research also suggests physical punishment is more strongly linked to aggressive and anti-social behaviour with increased age.

Physical chastisement - if there is an injury see [SET Protocol - Management of Suspicious Unexplained Injuries Bruising in Children](#).



The Law

UK law protects every child up to the age of 18 years from cruel and abusive treatment by their parents and carers.

- It is against the law for a parent to use physical punishment on their child that causes marks.
- It is illegal to use an implement to hit a child.
- Parents/family members who cause deliberate harm to their child could face criminal prosecution.
- It is against the law for anyone who is not the child's parent to use ANY form of physical punishment.

A common law defence is available to a parent or person acting in loco parentis where the smack amounts to “reasonable punishment”. The legislation states however, **Section 58 of the Children's Act 2004** states: “battery of a child cannot be justified on the ground that it constituted reasonable punishment”.

A review of Section 58 of the Children's Act 2004

Contains information from a child survey and the below is an extract from this:

“Children felt that methods such as restricting access to television, toys and so forth were more effective than smacking as they were longer lasting, inconvenienced them more, and gave them time to reflect. Smacking was often associated with parents being out of control, not setting a good example, and not supporting communication between parent and child. Some children felt smacking sent a message which conflicted with messages about tolerance and respect in society. Some thought smacking had been banned.”

For more information - [Review of Section 58 of the Children Act 2004](#)

NSPCC have a campaign to end Physical Chastisement:

[Physical punishment should never be part of any childhood — it's harmful to children and does not improve children's behaviour.](#)

Why is a practice tool needed?

NSPCC article: “Our records show that last year, 40% of all referrals to local services like the police and children’s social care from our Helpline were for children aged 5 and under. The second biggest concern was physical abuse. Our records mention children being smacked, hit, punched, kicked, physically punished, and having non-accidental injuries. This abuse resulted in 2,344 referrals for children aged 5 and under last year.”

[Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex](#)

Things to consider when working with families about Physical Chastisement

- **Self awareness:** As professionals, we bring elements of ourselves to the work we do. This can include our experiences, both professionally and personally, as well as who we are as individuals. Therefore, it is helpful to consider how our identity as individuals influences how we engage with families.
- **Parental childhood experiences:** Past trauma/mental health/neglect in own childhood and how this may impact or shape parental responses.
- **Cultural influences in child upbringing:** Practitioners should develop an understanding of the cultural contexts of the families they work with. This includes being aware of cultural norms, values, and practices that may influence family dynamics and child-rearing practices.
- **Children under 5:** Government data shows that children aged 5 and under are particularly vulnerable to serious cases of abuse and neglect. In the past year, almost 200 children aged 5 and under died or were seriously harmed in England, representing almost half (48%) of all serious cases.

How to use this practice tool

The practice tool is a list of questions/prompts aimed to support curious conversations with parents/care givers to consider the child's lived experience. It aids the identification of both protective factors and potential risks, and to consider how possible risks might be mitigated.

The practice tool should support planning for children and families within organisations and networks.

Building positive parenting strategies

We know that children and young people need love, warmth and positive praise and to be listened to providing guidance and understanding.

Children can behave in negative ways and need to be given consistent limits, boundaries and consequences.

If this happens frequently, or you are concerned, seek advice and support from the resources below or your GP/ 0-19 practitioner, early years settings, schools, other childcare providers or other professional working with your family.



Links to resources

- [Directory of services](#)
- [Non-Violent Resistance approach](#)
- [Afruca Safeguarding Children](#) work in UK Black and Ethnic communities to protect and safeguard children from abuse, modern slavery and exploitation. They tackle cultural and religious practices that harm children.
- [African Families in the UK](#) - AFiUK was formed to support African diaspora families in the UK to get the best outcomes for their children through training and information.
- [Barnardos Managing Tantrums and supporting positive behaviour](#)
- [Barnardos Support for parents and carers of 10-12 year olds](#)
- [Barnardos Support for parents and carers of 13-19-years](#)
- [NSPCC encouraging positive behaviour](#)

Setting the scene, having conversations about physical chastisement:

Consider the timing of your conversation, try to avoid times of high stress. If you are unsure speak to you safeguarding lead.

- Try to stay calm, kind, and factual.
- Focus on the child's wellbeing, not the adult's intent.
- Use “we” and “our” to avoid sounding accusatory (e.g., “We now understand...”).
- Tailor your approach depending on the context (e.g., healthcare, school, social work, safeguarding).
- Where possible prepare for the conversation by gaining some knowledge about the cultural needs of the family.

Have open and non-judgemental conversations with parents, seek to understand the reason and explore alternatives.



Names and DOB (include everyone living at the family address)	
	Considerations
Ages of the children	If child is under 5 years or parent under 30 years, there is more likelihood of using physical chastisement. When working with younger children, consider other ways to communicate with them including toys/ drawings/pictures.
Special Educational Needs of the children / adults	Are the children's/parents needs understood, what support are the parents accessing. What adjustments need to be made to meet the children's/parents needs?
Traumatic events	Child/children's experience.
Parental childhood experience	Past trauma/mental health/neglect in own childhood and how this may impact or shape parental responses.
What is important to the family	Culture/religion/race/beliefs/lived experience. Ask the child to describe themselves and their family members to you. Do the parents have different cultural experience/values which could cause conflict or add value. How does this impact the child/children?
How do the family function/communicate	What language/languages is/are spoken in the home. Is an interpreter required? Care should be taken if using family members. Consult your agency policy around use of interpreters. Quality time/positive reinforcement/boundaries/do the children have a quiet place to go when needed.
What is the family's support network	Extended family/friends any services supporting the family. Often adults are referred to as Aunt/Uncle without a biological link. In some families discipline is shared between several adults so conversations may be needed with more than just the parents.

	Considerations	
View of Physical Chastisement	<p>Were parents physically chastised as a child, or did they witness this of others? How has that shaped their views about it?</p> <p>Do the family believe physical chastisement is effective? What does the child think about physical chastisement, how does it make them feel - include the child's voice. What have parents already tried that is effective.</p> <p>Do they understand why this might not be appropriate? Do they want support to find an alternative.</p> <p>Cultural background that they perceive approves of the use of physical punishment.</p> <p>It is important to also consider the impact of threatening physical chastisement if this is repeated by the child.</p>	
Additional/multiple stressors	<p>(For example financial hardship, isolation, relationship conflict, adverse mental health symptoms, immigration status, overcrowding, housing, parents work challenges, inexperienced parents or low emotional wellbeing).</p> <p>Include practical strategies for parents under stress (e.g. morning routine tips, scripts for de-escalating).</p> <p>Have any family member experienced discrimination or racism?</p>	
Physical chastisement	<p>Has physical chastisement been used and when did this happen? Are there situations/signs when this point is being reached and an alternative plan could be put in place.</p>	
Frequency and timing of use of Physical Chastisement Signposting	<p>How long has this been an issue? When did it start?</p> <p>How often does this happen?</p> <p>What else is happening?</p> <p>Is this with all children in the home?</p> <p>Have they witnessed physical chastisement?</p> <p>Are there situations that increase this are you able to talk about alternatives?</p> <p>If signposting or providing support, for example classes, consideration should be given as to whether they are accessible by anybody for example due to language barriers reading/writing.</p>	
Family boundaries	<p>What are the family expectations about mobile phones/bedtimes/dinner time/routines.</p> <p>Do the children live in more than one home - are expectations the same? What is the co-parenting like?</p>	
Date:		