



DISCIPLINE DILEMMA

PREVIEW

Authoritarian old-school discipline is being replaced by a gentler approach. So does the new way work, or is it creating a generation who has no respect for authority?

WORDS Leigh Robshaw

In days gone by, when children misbehaved, they were smacked. There was no debating how it would affect their self-esteem and no one looked at parents disapprovingly if they slapped their kids in the supermarket aisle.

But somewhere between gen X and gen Y, we decided it was not acceptable to smack kids anymore, leaving many parents at a loss as to how to effectively discipline their children.

Sweden banned smacking in 1979, New Zealand banned it in 2007, along with 33 other nations. Smacking is not illegal in Australia, as long as it is considered 'reasonable chastisement' or 'reasonable correction'. Corporal punishment is still legal in Queensland schools, though it's no longer part of school policy, so don't worry about your kids copping six of the best if they muck up at school.

In Australia today, the subject of how to best discipline children – particularly when it comes to smacking – is a guaranteed barbecue stopper.

When time out, confiscating toys and counting backwards from 10 fail to produce results, it's easy to take our frustrations out on our kids and give them a good whack. But the big question is, does it cause long-term psychological or emotional damage? According to a new study published in the journal *Parenting: Science*

and *Practice*, not necessarily.

The study was conducted among a group of Mexican-American adolescents by Dr Miguelina Germán of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. She found that the painful effects of harsh discipline were mitigated if the child had a loving mother, or if the perception of maternal warmth was present.

When a child felt loved by his or her mother, harsh discipline was found to have no correlation with antisocial behaviour. The theory is that the underlying belief that their parents love them, protect children from feeling rejected, even when harshly disciplined.

Germán noted that strict discipline was common in Latino culture and that the study showed it was not likely to lead children to become antisocial teenagers if they believed their parents' behaviour came from "a good place".

Sunshine Coast mother Karen* has two children aged six and two. She was smacked as a child and smacks her own children, though she's learning new ways to deal with conflict. Recently separated, one of the conflicts in her relationship with her children's father was discipline.

"We hadn't talked about it when we had kids and then it was like, OK, we've both been smacked so maybe that's the best way of doing it," she says. "Then I started reading different websites and books and

<from previous page

Mutual respect between parents and children is something local mum Cecilie Shiotz knows well. Raised by Danish parents who never used punishment, she is now raising her sons, aged four and 11, as a single mother without ever having punished them, saying smacking is unheard of in Denmark.

"I just use talking and honestly, discipline is not something that's even come up," she says. "My four year-old does have tantrums and I talk about what's going on, and he expresses what's going on for him, and we just talk it through.

"I think that maybe some parents use smacking or punishment out of fear. For example, if a child is having a tantrum, although it can be uncomfortable for me during the tantrum, it doesn't freak me out, so I don't react in fear. I'm aware that the child is expressing something so I listen to that. People comment that they're easy kids, but I do think it's a result of me always talking to them. I don't think they've come from an easy situation, particularly being on



Cecilie Shiotz

my own, but the communication has always been consistent."

Having lived between Australia and Denmark, Shiotz says the Danish have evolved past the kinds of parenting struggles and schooling issues we have here.

"I do observe the difference, more in young people over there – their confidence is amazingly different, especially with young people leaving school and entering the workforce. I think that comes from the difference of upbringing and schooling. Discipline is not really a concept over there. It's just

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about mutual respect. It was hard for me going through school here, knowing it didn't have to be like that and it's hard for me sending my kids to school knowing it doesn't have to be like that."

Shiotz was allowed to eat whatever she wanted as a child, and affords her own children the same privilege. She says if they want to eat chocolate for breakfast they can, but because they have that freedom, they naturally choose healthy foods.

Many parents would no doubt feel incredulous reading about children who are not disciplined

and can eat whatever they want. Doesn't it create spoilt brats who lack respect for authority? Not according to Jacobs.

"I think the myth of the spoilt brat is one of those things that perpetuates traditional parenting no matter how dysfunctional it is," he says. "We have a myth that if children aren't controlled and whipped into shape, something bad is going to happen. They're heading in a bad direction and it's our job not to let that happen. My belief is contrary to that; I believe children are perfect.

"I think our society really believes if you give someone an inch they'll take a mile. I believe if you give someone an inch, they'll give you back an inch; or they might give you five inches. If we believe in the goodness and perfection of our children, they'll believe it too. Parenting is the way we change the world. We get a whole lot of people who believe in themselves and their goodness and we see a whole lot of things change."

**name changed to protect privacy*

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opening my eyes up to different ways of disciplining kids, rather than physically. But if we tried time out and it didn't work the first or second time, then we'd just go back to smacking.

"I don't think the kids have been affected by the smacking," she says. "They're not aggressive and they're pretty good kids. I would never say at any stage we've belted them. It has been a slap on the bottom and that's it."

Karen's parents look after her kids one or two days a week and she has asked that they don't smack her children, preferring if they reason with them or try distraction.

"Dad was definitely a disciplinarian and mum's favourite line was, 'wait until your father gets home'." Karen says. "Mum and Dad disciplined us how they'd been disciplined. They didn't have books and websites. They were just told you smack your child and that's the end of it. They look back on it now and mum often says she regrets she did use smacking. When she's looking after her grandchildren, she says 'I can't believe I smacked you when you were young'. They didn't know any other way."

Sunshine Coast clinical psychologist Dr Bob Jacobs runs The Parenting Centre in Maroochydore and Maleny, and is author of the book *Perfect Parents, Perfect Children*. After 30 years of working with children and parents, he believes punishment is not an inevitable part of parenting and that smacking can indeed create long-term problems for children.

"Children learn from what their parents do, and if we use smacking, what we are teaching our children is that a way to solve problems is by physically hurting someone who's smaller than you," he says. "To me, as a children's advocate, I think there's a children's rights issue. This has been recognised by the (UNICEF) Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory.



Dr Bob Jacobs

"If you watch children being smacked, their teeth or fists will be clenched, or their body will tense up, which is what happens when an older person is inflicting pain on you and you can't do anything about it," say Jacobs. "It leads to feelings of helplessness, which can lead to anxiety and depression.

"If children are loved, they believe they deserve to be loved; if they're ignored, they believe they deserve to be ignored; if they're hit and hurt, they believe they deserve to be hit and hurt. To me the self-esteem ramifications are huge."

Jacobs stresses that most parents today were raised traditionally and are generally doing the best they can. He says they shouldn't feel bad or guilty, but should endeavour to find more effective ways of achieving parenting success, which involves changing their attitude towards their children.

"Children are separate human beings," he says. "We don't own them; their journey is separate from

parenting is aimed at developing children who are joyful, secure and have strong, healthy self-esteem and who feel happy with the world just the way it is. They don't always feel that sense of anxiety that things need to be different.

"Children who are parented differently might be a little more out there, more likely to question authority, a little more messy, a little louder, a little bit more wild, and I think that's a beautiful thing because

it's part of the essence of who we are as human beings and I think it gets stifled. We look at children and see their spontaneity and joy – we don't see that in adults. Why? We get it conditioned out of us by traditional parenting."

Jacobs says parents today feel easily

disrespected by their children because they were brought up in a way where they weren't respected as children, and subsequently grow up with huge ego needs.

"We try to make our children behave in a way that makes us feel respected and powerful," says Jacobs. "If we love our children, they will love and respect us. If our children are afraid of us, they're afraid of us. If we have ego needs, if we don't feel respected or loved enough, we need to get that from other adults, we can't try to get that from our children."

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us. They're not our property. Our job is first of all to love and secondly to provide support and guidance. There's no place for punishment in that. The idea is to be a loving, supportive resource who your children can talk to. If your child makes a mistake, you want them to know you're the person who is there to help them.

"We feel pressure in our society where we rate parents based on how well their children behave, how quiet and obedient their children are, and we equate that with good parenting. Alternative



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