

National bans on slapping children linked to less youth violence

In countries with full bans at home and school, rates of physical fighting are 42%-69% lower

National bans on parents slapping or spanking their children to punish them for bad behaviour are linked to lower rates of youth violence, reveals an international study published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

Countries that prohibit corporal punishment at home and at school have rates of physical fighting among young men and women that are 42 to 69 per cent lower than in countries without any such bans in place, the findings show.

Slapping is still considered an acceptable way of disciplining a child in many parts of the world. But a growing body of evidence suggests that it may be detrimental to a child's health and wellbeing and perpetuate a cycle of violence through successive generations.

To find out if national bans might affect rates of youth violence around the globe, the researchers drew on data from longstanding surveys of teen behaviour for 88 countries—the World Health Organization Health Behaviour in School Aged Children (HBSC) study and the Global School Based Health Survey (GSHS).

The surveys included a question on whether, and how often, the respondent had been involved in a physical fight over the past 12 months. At the time of the analysis, the 88 countries were home to around 46 per cent of the world's teens.

Thirty countries had implemented a full ban on corporal punishment at school and at home; 38 had a partial ban (schools only); and 20 had no bans in place.

Analysis of the survey responses showed that frequent physical fighting was more than three times as common among young men as it was among young women. And it varied widely by country, ranging from less than 1 per cent among Costa Rican young women to nearly 35 per cent among young men from Samoa.

In countries where full bans were in force, the prevalence of physical fighting was 69 per cent lower among young men and 42 per cent lower among young women than it was in countries without any ban.

In countries operating a partial ban, which include the UK, the USA, and Canada, the prevalence of physical violence was lower only among young women (56%).

These associations held true even after taking account of other potentially influential factors, such as national wealth, the murder rate, and social programmes aiming to curb teens' exposure to violence at home and at school.

This is an observational study, and as such, cannot establish cause. And the study authors acknowledge certain limitations to their findings, including differences in the timing of legislation and the surveys, and the lack of information on the use of corporal punishment by the teens' parents and teachers.

It's not clear whether these bans prompt changes in the way in which children are disciplined or whether they reflect a culture that inhibits youth violence, say the researchers. But either way, the findings add to the growing body of evidence on the links between corporal punishment and teen health and safety, they add.

"These results support the hypothesis that societies that prohibit the use of corporal punishment are less violent for youth to grow up in than societies that have not," they conclude.