

# Editorial

A paradox surrounds the issue of violence against children. The most severe forms of violence are generally considered more reprehensible when perpetrated against children than against adults: sexually assaulting or causing serious physical harm to a child are typically seen as the most heinous of crimes.

Yet in most parts of the world, some less severe forms of violence – administered in the name of discipline – are not only considered more socially acceptable when perpetrated against children than against adults, they are seen as necessary or as the only solution to a problem. As Rose Odoyo, of ANPPCAN, explains, “[Teachers] still have the attitude of ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’, because they are overwhelmed. They often have class sizes exceeding 70, and they resort to the cane as their only way of coping.” (See pp 32–33).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child makes no allowance for any gradations of the current social acceptability of different kinds of violence against children. It unambiguously proscribes “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation”.

It is striking that, although the convention has been ratified by almost every nation state, a practice it clearly prohibits continues to be widely accepted and even viewed with approbation around the world. This forms the main topic of our interview with Jaap Doek (pp 6–9), chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which requested a study on violence against children from the UN General Assembly. The request was approved and this autumn a major report on this issue will be published with the findings of the study.

Corporal punishment is not the only example of a deeply rooted cultural practice which confers social acceptability on instances of violence against the child. Customs such as branding, scarring, female genital mutilation, infanticide and forced early

marriage also clearly fall under the convention’s scope, and yet are deeply ingrained in some cultures.

Nor is it the only difficult area when it comes to defining violence. The convention includes ‘mental’ violence, which will be subject to widely differing interpretations across different cultures: what appears to some people to be humiliating treatment will be regarded by others as a normal part of childrearing.

Clearly, poverty plays a major role in violence against children. Poverty often equals limited opportunities, stress, and social inequities that give rise to many forms of violence. In the slums of Rio de Janeiro, for example, poverty contributes to the existence of armed drug trafficking groups, who often recruit children from the slums, placing great stress on parents (See the article by Promundo, Brazil, pp 10–15).

Related to the children and violence debate are terminological issues about the relationship between ‘violence’, ‘abuse’ and ‘neglect’. The concept of child abuse is interpreted so differently in different cultures – in particular, with regard to the issues of child labour and what constitutes emotional neglect – that violence is increasingly adopted as apparently a more concrete term.

There is a consequent risk that too much weight can be placed on the word: describing such problems as lack of access to healthcare and education as a kind of ‘societal violence’, as some activists do, carries a danger of diluting the word’s immediacy and impact.

Leaving aside these grey areas, there is no doubt that corporal punishment is the greatest source of controversy when it comes to discussing the issue of violence against children. It is likely to cause some cognitive dissonance among a significant part of the global public to cite a teacher’s cane and a parent’s smack alongside other instances of violence against children such as:



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- sexual abuse, whether by family members, teachers or other trusted adults, or in the context of trafficking, pornography or sex tourism. Our story on the Oak Foundation (pp 21–25) discusses some of its projects on child abuse and its attempt to mainstream a concern for sexual abuse into existing agencies’ activities.
- violent and humiliating treatment in institutions such as orphanages and care homes – a widespread problem, often hidden from public view;
- violence against children living on the streets, whether by rival gangs, vigilantes or private security guards;
- violence by law enforcement officers against children who are in conflict with the law – still legal in a significant minority of countries;
- child-on-child violence, i.e., bullying.

Elsewhere in this edition of ECM are other articles which cover some of these subjects. The Human

Dignity Initiative talks about violence in schools in Israel, and there are further contributions from El Salvador, Colombia, and Jamaica.

(It is worth noting that while war is undoubtedly a context in which much violence is perpetrated against children, it has so many distinguishing characteristics that it is usually treated as a separate subject in its own right.)

In many countries, laws explicitly permit ‘moderate’ or ‘reasonable’ physical punishment of children. This makes it the difficult task of social workers and judges to decide what is the point at which an approved form of parenting suddenly morphs into the most reprehensible of crimes.

The awkwardness posed by identifying this rather stark transition, and therefore defining what ‘violence against children’ includes, perhaps explains the relative lack of reliable statistical information

on the subject. Surveys in most parts of the world do, however, tend to find a clear majority of people reporting both that they were hit as children and that they regard hitting as an acceptable part of parenting.

A notable exception is Sweden, which in 1979 became the first country to ban all forms of violence against children. Parents are almost never taken to court under this law, but the public education effect has been dramatic: opinion polls show that only around one in 10 Swedes now regard hitting children in the name of discipline as acceptable, compared to well over half before the law was passed.

Much of the rest of the world has a long way to go to catch up. But there is now growing visibility and international momentum around the issue of violence against children, which will be enhanced by the publication of the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children later in 2006.

Why should we care about violence towards children? The answers from a child development perspective and a child’s rights perspective differ in emphasis. From a developmental perspective, there is ample research demonstrating the negative effects of physical and humiliating punishment on children:

notably, a stunting of their creativity and capacity for initiative, loss of self-esteem and respect for authority figures, reduced capacity to communicate and form emotional bonds, and internalising the lesson that violence is an acceptable way for the powerful to solve their problems – with clear implications for society when they grow up.

From a child’s rights perspective, the response is simpler: stopping violence against children is not only a means to an end, it is an end in itself.

Editors: *Teresa Moreno and Jan van Dongen*  
Contributing writer: *Andrew Wright*

This issue of ECM is dedicated to the memory of **Dries van Dantzig**, chair of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees from 1972 to 1985 and a high-profile campaigner on child abuse. A psychiatrist and World War II concentration camp survivor, Van Dantzig strongly advocated a mental health care system that is as easily and widely accessible as physical public health care. Van Dantzig was particularly appalled by injustice and violence when perpetrated against children, and he argued that it is the responsibility of all of society to fight child abuse.