Faith-based support for prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment of children – a global overview

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The importance of faith-based support for prohibition of corporal punishment

Faith-based support is an integral part of the global movement for prohibition of all corporal punishment of children. Growing numbers of religious communities and organisations regard ending legalised violence against children as both a moral and a religious imperative. For many communities this involves changing an often deeply entrenched culture of acceptance of physical punishment and challenging those who use their sacred texts and teachings to justify it.

Universal and religious values of compassion, justice, equality and non-violence transcend theological and denominational differences and form a basis for multi-religious cooperation towards eliminating violence against children. There are also many examples of religious communities working in solidarity with secular organisations, bound by a shared respect for human dignity and a strong commitment to human rights. This briefing provides examples of faith-based support across the world. We welcome information from all faith communities on actions taken to support prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment of children: email info@churchesfornon-violence.org.

Worldwide progress towards prohibition of all corporal punishment of children

- 46 states have reformed their laws to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings, including the home; governments in a further 51 states are committed to doing so
- in 131 states, corporal punishment is fully prohibited in one or more settings outside the home
- in 21 states, corporal punishment is not fully prohibited in any setting

“Progress towards abolishing corporal punishment is being made, but millions of the world’s children still suffer from humiliating acts of violence and these violations of their rights as human beings can have serious lifelong effects. Violence begets violence and we shall reap a whirlwind. Children can be disciplined without violence that instils fear and misery.... If we really want a peaceful and compassionate world, we need to build communities of trust where children are respected, where home and school are safe places to be and where discipline is taught by example.”

(Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, 2006)
Multi-religious support for prohibition of corporal punishment

Kyoto Declaration

The Kyoto Declaration – A Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children – was developed in response to the UN Study on Violence against Children at a consultation of religious leaders of all faiths in Toledo, Spain, in 2006. The Declaration was endorsed in the same year at the 8th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Kyoto, Japan.

“We call upon our governments to adopt legislation to prohibit all forms of violence against children, including corporal punishment, and to ensure the full rights of children, consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international and regional agreements. We urge them to establish appropriate mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of these laws and to ensure that religious communities participate fully in these mechanisms. Our religious communities are ready to serve as monitors of implementation, making use of national and international bodies to maintain accountability.”

(Kyoto Declaration (2006), Article 6)

Declaration on the Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in Confronting Corporal Punishment of Children

In 2011, 100 influential leaders from various faiths met at a conference in Qom, Iran, supported by UNICEF in collaboration with the Iranian Judiciary and Centre for Human Rights Studies at Mofid University, Qom. A key outcome was a declaration which commits the religious leaders to address corporal punishment.

“We invite: (1) All religious leaders and their followers to make efforts, based on religious teachings, to: Utilise their capabilities to build the culture of respecting children’s dignity and the principle of the best interests of the child, and to confront violence against children, particularly violence in the form of corporal punishment in the home and educational settings ...”

(Declaration on the Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in Confronting Corporal Punishment of Children, para. 1)

Religious support for the Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth, Canada

The statement was developed by a national coalition of organisations facilitated by the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario. It summarises the developmental outcomes associated with physical punishment and concludes that it plays no useful role in the upbringing of children; rather it poses a risk to their development. The statement has been endorsed by religious organisations of a number of faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, Quakers and Islam.

“Children in Canada must be given the same protection from physical assault as that given to Canadian adults and to children in a growing number of countries. Our children’s rights to physical integrity and dignity must be recognised in our law.”

(Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth, CHEO, Canada)
Specific faith-based support for prohibition

**Baha’i Faith**

“The relationship within the family should reflect what is regarded as the norm for relationships in the Baha’i community which is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank, loving consultation ... each person in the family must be respected as an individual and must be given both the love and the space to develop and grow.... Violence towards, vilification or humiliation of husband, wife or children is not an acceptable part of family life. Abdu’l-Baha disapproved of the corporal punishment of children.”

(Do Moojan Momen, Iran, The Family in Baha’i Faith)

**Buddhism**

Buddhism is concerned with the welfare of all human beings. The many schools of Buddhism all spring from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama and reject the infliction of pain and harm on others. Non-violence is an essential tenet of Buddhism and Sigâlovâda Sutta makes the point that if everyone develops compassion, mutual respect, courtesy and loving kindness children will not be ill-treated. This Sutta has been described as the “Buddhist code of discipline”. The Buddha’s advice to parents is clearly to support children to become generous, compassionate and responsible.

**Christianity**

There is increasing Christian support for prohibition at national and regional levels. For example, in New Zealand, South Africa and the UK, Christian leaders have actively supported law reform to prohibit all corporal punishment, including in the home. In the USA, the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church have adopted policies supporting the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment in childrearing and education. In the Caribbean in 2012, Christian leaders from Aruba, the Cayman Islands, Guyana and Jamaica issued a joint statement supporting law reform to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings, emphasising that physical punishment is incompatible with core religious values, and stating that attempting to justify corporal punishment with reference to religious texts is inappropriate (see box on page 5).

“There is nothing in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which supports the right of parents to use corporal punishment.”

(Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2013)

Christians believe all human beings are created in the likeness and image of God, and they look to the example of Jesus to live their lives. Jesus always treated the vulnerable with love and compassion. The way of Jesus was non-violence. Reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus’ teachings provides a guide for Christians’ lives and relationships with others.

All the recorded encounters between Jesus and children were kind, gentle and respectful. Children were central to the new order Jesus initiated. By blessing and laying his hands on children, Jesus received children as people in their own right; he gave them status, respect and dignity (Mark 10:16).
Hinduism

“There is no greater good than a child. Children are entrusted to their parents to be loved, guided and protected.... Beating, spanking, pinching, slapping children and inflicting upon their astral bodies the vibration of angry words are all sinfully destructive to their spiritual unfoldment and their future.”

(Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, “Spare the Rod and Save the Child”)

Islam

A growing number of Muslim leaders have spoken out about the misuse of Islamic texts which appear to promote violence. Eminent Muslims have argued that the Quran teaches tolerance and moderation and that there is no instance in the Quran of Muhammad striking a child. Respected scholars and leaders highlight in their teaching the strong requirement in Islam to show love and mercy towards children and to preserve their human dignity. The Cairo Declaration on the Convention (CRC) and Islamic Jurisprudence, adopted in 2009, calls for prohibition of corporal punishment in member states of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation.

“Participants to the Conference recommend that OIC Member States prohibit all corporal punishment and other cruel and degrading forms of punishment or treatment of children, in all settings including within schools and within the family, linking law reform with the promotion of positive, non-violent forms of discipline.”

(Cairo Declaration on the Convention (CRC) and Islamic Jurisprudence)

Jainism

Jainism religion and culture have deep-rooted relevance to the development of humankind and to the moral, spiritual and philosophical aspects of life. The Lord Mahavir has preached that equanimity is the Dharma:

“Know that violence is the cause of all miseries in the world. Violence is in fact the knot of bondage. Do not injure any living thing.”

Judaism

Chesed (kindness), compassion and justice are the classic Jewish values, and the nourishing and protecting of human life is of prime importance in Jewish law.

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

(Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat, 31a; Tobit 4:15)

“No law of the Jewish Religion decrees physical punishment of children. It stands to reason that modern Jews repudiate all degrading treatment of children.”

(Motern Narrowe, Chief Rabbi Emeritus)

Sikhism

Human Rights are the foundation of Sikhism. The fundamental tenet of Sikhism is that the formless creator, the Supreme Soul, resides in each individual. Each human being is entitled to equal respect and equal dignity no matter what the person’s age, faith, belief or station in life.

“Avoid harsh discipline. Of all the forms of punishment that a parent uses, the one with the worst side effects is physical punishment. Children who are spanked, hit or slapped are more prone to fighting with other children....”
Pacific Conference of Churches

During the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan, Korea, in 2013, an open statement – “Putting Children at the Center” – was endorsed by ecumenical bodies, alliances and child rights advocates, including the Pacific Conference of Churches.

“In the accomplishment of God’s mission our churches, ecumenical bodies, interfaith networks, NGOs and inter-government organisations have to respond to the ethical, moral and spiritual imperative to uphold children’s dignity by:

- encouraging positive non-violent parenting where children can grow in an atmosphere of respect, love and compassion;
- working with others in the global movement to prohibit and eliminate corporal punishment of children;
- using the scriptures to promote peace, justice and non-violence in living with children;
- building partnerships with inter-government organisations, ecumenical partners and other faith communities and networks and alliances for promoting children’s rights.”

The statement in full is at churchesfornon-violence.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Putting-Children-at-the-Center.pdf

Statement by Caribbean Christian leaders in support of law reform

In 2012 Christian leaders in Aruba, Guyana, Jamaica and the Cayman Islands signed a statement in support of law reform to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings, clarifying the meaning of “discipline” and emphasising that physical punishment is incompatible with core religious values and that attempting to justify its use through religious texts is inappropriate. They stated:

“Some Christian groups use their religion to justify physical punishment and may argue that it is sanctioned in scriptural texts such as in Proverbs 13:24, ‘those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them’. But it is not appropriate to take such texts out of their ancient cultural context to justify violence towards children. As Christians, our reading of the Bible is done in the light of Christ’s teaching and example. Jesus treated children with respect and placed them in the middle of the group, as in Mark 9:37: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’”

The statement in full is at www.endcorporalpunishmentcaribbean.org/background/religious-support.html

For further information on all aspects of faith-based support for the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment of children, see churchesfornon-violence.org or email chris@churchesfornon-violence.org.

For information on global progress towards prohibition and technical advice and support on law reform to achieve prohibition, see www.endcorporalpunishment.org or email sharon@endcorporalpunishment.org.