Sparing The Child
Category : July 1998
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1998

SOCIAL ISSUES

Sparing The Child

Should corporal punishment end?

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Though they don't say much about it, young Hindu adults today feel deep resentment and anger at having been beaten as children. We struggle with feelings of low self-esteem and failure. Many of us will continue the cycle of violence by beating our own children or our spouses simply because we are unable to resolve those feelings. We don't blame our parents, who genuinely loved us and sacrificed for us, for they are themselves just the previous round in this same cycle. We don't blame our Hindu faith either, for corporal punishment of children is present in every culture. But as advocates of nonviolence, we do claim a special role in solving this problem. Unfortunately, when objections are raised to corporal punishment, the Hindu community's reaction too often is outright denial, or a curt dismissal, as it "never happens in high-caste houses." Some offer the defiant defense, "I was beaten as a child and am a better adult today," or, "It is in our tradition." Unfortunately, such evasive and erroneous replies mask the real harm being perpetuated.

This extensive report on child discipline includes accounts from Hinduism Today correspondents worldwide, but mostly from V.G. Julie Rajan, who was born in Madurai and raised in the USA. The topic is "corporal punishment," in the specific sense of slapping, spanking or hitting a child as a means of discipline at home or in school, either with the hand, a cane, a belt or a hard object. Also included are other forms of physical distress as well as emotional battering. Our topic is not "child abuse," in the sense of bodily injury, though corporal punishment can easily lead to such results.

Many Hindu adults deny there is any problem with corporal punishment in our community. The reality is too often like this report from a young Indian-American Hindu: "I know of a Hindu boy whose father hits him severely. Once, he gave him a black eye. I didn't believe it, but then I saw it. He had covered it very well with his sister's makeup foundation. That scared me because when you can cover it that well, you don't know how many times he's covered it. A couple of weeks later, his father hit him in the other eye. I think that there was also a lot of verbal and emotional abuse." Hinduism Today correspondent Choodie Sivaram reports from Bangalore, "Beating is everywhere in India and in all classes, especially in families with working mothers. Just recently, I saw a prominent man slapping his grandchild at a public event." [See page 32 for Choodie's three-page report.] A 1996 survey of university students in India found 91% of boys and 86% of girls were physically punished as children.

And in school? In America, it would be rare for the super-achieving Indian-American children--even in those states that allow it, such as Texas and Florida--to be on the receiving end of the vice-principal's three-foot paddle. But in India, Malaysia, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, teachers routinely hit even good students with a rattan cane or ruler on the hand, back, legs or buttocks, slap them across the face, bang their head against the blackboard, twist their ears, make them stand on desks with hands raised high, squat in the sun or stand with books held in outstretched hands for long periods. Catholic schools in particular are noted for their brutality. Despite new laws in several countries to reduce such punishment, all these practices continue to this day. A few weeks ago, for example, a teacher in a Chennai, India, school hit every student in her eighth grade class on the hand for poor performance on a math test. One student in Malaysia said, "Vigorous slapping for not paying attention during lessons is a daily affair." [See "Healing," page 44, for the physical effects of hitting children.]

Corporal punishment of children is legal in most countries of the world. Only Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria and Cyprus outlaw hitting of children by their parents. The Parent Code in Sweden, the first country to pass such laws, states, "Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality and may not be subjected to physical punishment or other injurious or humiliating treatment." The Austrian lawmakers wrote, "The motive for this reform is our knowledge of the immeasurable harm children suffer when parents are not willing or able to avoid physical punishment as a way of bringing up their children." Some countries outlaw only hitting of students by teachers, including Malaysia and South Africa. Corporal punishment in schools is legal in 23 of America's 50 states, and by parents in all states. According to recent polls, 70 percent of American parents hit their children.

Opinions of saints in North India: Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik queried a number of saints and sadhus present at the Kumbha Mela in early April on the issue of corporal punishment. Many--but not all--condemned the practice. Ramesh Bhai Oza, the famed Kathak singer from Mumbai said, "Only by dealing with the child with a lot of love can his immense latent potential be brought forward. What can be done by the power of love cannot be attained through a rod." Sri Mahant Ganga Puri Ji, Secretary, Sri Panchayati Akahar Mahanirvani, Haryana, concurred, "I do not approve of the practice of physically manhandling children. We must use other positive methods of reforming children."

Sri Mahant Govind Das Ji, Secretary, Sri Panchayat Bada Udasin Akhara, of Haridwar observed that, "When a child is beaten, he becomes stubborn. And a stubborn child becomes a confused child. When the child knows that the ultimate punishment given to him will be beating, he becomes mentally prepared. This is not the solution."

Sri Kapil Puri Ji, former Sri Mahant, Juna Akhara, Haridwar, was one of the few who demurred."Our scriptures say that to age five we must love the child. Five to sixteen is the time when he must get tadana, reprimanded [by beating], because it is from five to sixteen years that his life is made."

Dr. P. Jayaraman, head of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in New York, disagrees. In the scripture cited by Kapil Puri, which comes from the Neeti Shastra by Chanakya (dated 350bce) the term tadayet, according to Jayaraman, "while literally meaning Ã¯strike' or Ã¯hit,' symbolically means Ã¯teach discipline' or Ã¯teach strictly.'" Jayaraman states, "My personal view, and that of the Bhavan, is completely against corporal punishment of children. We cannot quote some references from smritis [secondary scriptures, such as Neeti Shastra or the various Dharma Shastras] in favor of this, since smritis are subject to change from time to time and are based on the circumstances of the time and period in which they were written." For example, parents will quote the saying, "Sama, dana, bheda, danda," which means "using kind words (or negotiation), bribery, sowing dissension and punishment (or striking)," and appears in Manu Dharma Shastra 7.198."These are the four means of achieving success against an enemy," explains Jayaraman, and are meant for a king, not a parent.

Other verses of Manu Dharma Shastra explicitly permit corporal punishment, for example, verse 8.229, "A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil and a younger brother of

the full blood who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo." However, this verse has been rejected in modern times and cannot be used as a defense of wife or child beating.

Swami Satchidananda of the Integral Yoga Institute in Virginia, USA, told Hinduism Today in an exclusive interview he believes "limited thrashing, controlled hitting of children a little, is necessary. Children should know why the parents are doing it, and parents should have complete control over themselves. If I am a big swami today, it is because I had a lot of beating from my father. He had control over it. He told me the reason. The beating comes at the very last, when everything fails. If the children know the parents love them the most, that they are doing everything because they love them, they will not have any resentment."

Swami Tathagatananda of the Vedanta Society of New York also calls for parents to approach their child with love. He said, "Life being an opportunity to reach divine excellences, idealism in Hinduism exhorts us to look upon a child as God Himself. Parents are to treat the child with utmost care and with a reverential attitude for their spiritual well being. Ã¯Sama, dana, bedha, danda' has nothing to do with raising of kids." A few years ago the Ramakrishna Mission in India forbid corporal punishment in its schools.

The Vedic edict is ahimsa, affirms Swami Brahmavidyananda of Satyananda Yoga Ashram, Florida, [see his Minister's Message, page 50]. The Shukla Yajur Veda, Brhihadaranayaka Upanishad says, "Ahimsa is not causing pain to any living being at any time through the actions of one's mind, speech or body." "Nowhere in the Upanishads," agrees Tathagatananda, "do we do find anything like physical punishment."

Swami Sahajananda of the Divine Life Society of South Africa offered this insight: "In the old days, during the parent's and grandparent's childhood, the children had strong nerves and a different mental makeup. Even if they received corporal punishment at school or at home, it did not affect them much. But today, perhaps the children have weak nerves and their mental make-up is also different. Any kind of violence is sure to affect their nerves and mind and even damage their psyche. The scars left on their psyche may be carried over to the next birth."

Does hitting work? Beating children does not instill discipline. Rather, violence brings into play myriad spiritual and psychological problems for both parents and child."Violence against children is a shameful act," states Swami Brahmavidyananda. Beating children "is an act of violence with its root in anger. Anger is caused by a desire for something which, when not fulfilled, results in uncontrolled action. Everything is based on karma. What goes around comes around. You will reap what you sow."

"Those who beat or pinch or slap or whip their children are the enemies to religion, because they are pushing the next generation into lower consciousness," summarizes Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. [See page 28 for a description of these lowest chakras governing fear, jealousy, anger, revenge, etc.]

Dr. Devika Krishnan is a Hindu psychologist who has been practicing in the USA for over 21 years. He asks, "If a child is born with a low self-esteem, beating is only going to add to the child's low self-esteem. On the other hand, if the core personality is going to be one where there is yearning for independence, you're going to create so much anger in that child. If the child is going to be basically aggressive, you're only going to make the child more aggressive. If the child is going to be passive, you're only going to make the child more dependent, submissive."

Respected astrologer Chakrapani Ullal of Los Angeles concurs, "If the tendency of the child is to be mischievous, then you must teach him dharma by giving him a good training in how to be a better person. If you beat him, then you will only cause those karmas indicated by his astrological chart to develop. Punishing children makes them hide their feelings, tell lies, manipulate their parents and develop poor associations outside the family." Vamadeva Shastri, an expert in ayurveda, pointed out that children react differently to punishment according to their physical constitution (dosha)."A vata dosha child can be damaged for life by physical punishment; the kapha child needs to be stimulated from the inside, not the outside; the pitta child will develop strategies to fight back."

Beating children actually undermines any discipline that parents might be trying to instill in their children. An August 1997 study by Dr. Murray Strauss in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine reported that the more children are spanked, the more likely they will be aggressive or engage in other anti-social behavior. In a 1994 study of 8,000 US families, Strauss found that children who are

beaten more are more likely to attack their own siblings. They develop less adequate consciences, experience depression as adults, and are inclined to physically attack their spouses as adults.

"When they grow older they can see abuse as a way of control," agrees Santhi Periasamy, a US-born, Hindu graduate student in psychology."For boys, they have more of a tendency to hit their spouses and their children. For women, you have a tendency to get into an abusive relationship and stay. It can predispose you to anorexia, depression. It can affect you in so many ways."

Worst of all, when we beat children, we are only falling into a continuous cycle."Beyond any doubt, I think all studies prove that abuse is perpetuated from one generation to another if there is no early intervention," adds Dr. Krishan.

Breaking the cycle: One visitor to the Hinduism Today editorial offices in Hawaii told a shocked staff that "Hindu parents in America know not to hit their kids in public because they might get arrested." A virtual conspiracy of silence prevails."Your parents tell you that what happens in the family stays in the family," explains Periasamy."You also don't want to send bad messages about your parents. Then the kids who are hit all of the time, I don't think they say anything to anyone."

The next generation of Hindus, however, is not prepared to maintain this conspiracy of silence--witness their stark testimonies for this article. Nearly all firmly believe that corporal punishment is wrong, and do not intend to use it on their children. Of course, when the reality of parenthood comes upon them, as it did to Hinduism Today correspondent Shikha Malaviya of Minnesota, young mother of a two-year-old, they may waiver."You don't realize how overwhelming the responsibility of bringing up a child is. If your child is beyond control, and believe me, they can be absolutely defiant, what do you do? I started thinking, Ã¯Maybe it is OK to hit,' then I thought, Ã¯How could I think like that?'"

We can look to the country of Sweden, the first to ban corporal punishment, as a model for the massive change in societal attitudes required. They did it not through criminal penalties, but through a Parent's Code which calls for the intervention of social service agencies to teach parents alternative methods of

discipline. The trend against corporal punishment in Sweden began in the 1920s when it was outlawed in schools. In 1966 it was banned for parents. While there were initial periods of permissiveness by the parents, a recent report indicates they have gained considerable skill with nonviolent methods. By 1994, only eleven percent of Swedes supported corporal punishment. After a year's "experiment," even school headmasters conceded nonviolent methods worked better.

Just as parents can improve the lives of their children by setting a positive example, parents can harm their children by setting a bad example. When you beat your child, you show them it's alright to beat others. When you slap them, pinch them and twist their ears, you teach them that violence and anger are the preferred ways to solve problems. When you beat with the intent of teaching them a lesson, you tell them they are failures, and that they do not deserve your respect. You are not teaching them about the great love and tolerance preached by Hinduism. So the next time that you are about to hit your child, think about it. As a Hindu, will your legacy to your offspring and our community be one of hate or one of hope? Ã¼?

for a list of resources on child rearing, see page 35.

photographs were taken by rohini kumar of rk enterprises and staged with the assistance of the malaysian devotees of hinduism today publisher satguru sivaya subramuniyaswami. no child was harmed in the process.

It's Scary Being Hit By Big People

Corporal punishment thrives at home and in schools

Under the cloak of anonymity, dozens of Hindu youths gave testimony of their experiences with child beating.

USA: "I once remember when I was 11, I had done something wrong. I ran to my room and locked my door, because I knew my father was in an angry rage--he had been beaten regularly as a child. He began beating my door and scratching it so

loud that I did not open it. If I did, I knew it would be bad. The next day, I looked at my door and it looked liked some animal had clawed it."

USA: "My cousin was raised in my family by my parents. As he was the older one, my parents were more harsh with him. I know he has internalized it all. He hates my parents and feels they abused him and hit him too much. They have apologized for it and realize that wasn't the way to do it, but he can't get over it."

Mauritius: "All of us in our lives have been beaten by our parents using hands, canes, hangers, rubber pipes, sticks and brooms. Until I was twelve years old, my mother used to hit me on the head with cooking pans and pots."

USA: "I have been slapped on the face. I think that's acceptable [in the community]. If you say something wrong, they'll hit you on the face. If you hit your brother, they hit you on the hand. If you kick someone, they hit you on your leg."

India: "My friend was hit regularly as a child and cannot get over it. Now he is a parent. Sometimes he gets really angry and takes his mood out on his kid. He doesn't hit her, but he sends the same message."

USA: "As you get older, it turns into verbal abuse. It is always that the Indian parent and Indian-American child are coming from two different directions and end up at a wall. There is just no in-between. When you go to school, you are one person and when you come home you are another person. The only positive way to see it is to think that for my kids it will be different."

USA: "I was eleven. I had just come home from playing with my friends outside, and my father must have gotten mad because he began hitting me in front of my American friends on the doorstep. He just grabbed my hair and hit me. He did the same when we had an Indian friend over. I realized this wasn't normal only when my friend gave me a look of shock and sympathy."

India: "I feel abused because my dad would pick up anything that came to his hand and hit me. I have actually bled, I have actually been cut."

USA: "Sad, but one of my earliest memories was as a child of about three to four years old. I am not sure what I did wrong, but I remember my father picking me up and throwing me, my back, against the wall--I remember this quite clearly. I remember confronting him about it, but he denied it all."

India: "My father told me stories about how his grandparents used to put red chilies around his and his cousin's eyes if they had done something wrong."

India: "In my father's house in India, my youngest uncle, about 19 years old, was always getting into trouble. One day when he came home late, my older uncle grabbed a shoe, chased him into a room and really beat him badly. The screams and beatings were just so loud and lasted for twenty minutes and no one did anything. There were ten adults in the house and not even the mother did anything. I seemed to be the only angry person there, but as a young boy myself, what could I do? Was I shocked when that young uncle committed suicide later? No. When people beat you and tell you are worth nothing, why live?"

Malaysia: "Yelling at the children would be most regular, almost every day in a week. Harsh words painful to hear are used. Stupid would be the very most common."

India: "I saw the father slap his one-year-old baby, and it upset me. The baby did not cry. It made me think, Ã¯He is used to it.' "

India: "My grandmother tried to go to school after she attained puberty. She was going to run away to another town. When her father found out, he beat the hell out of her, black and blue, locked her up for days and married her off. She vowed her own daughter would get an education. That beating made her determined, but also hateful and vengeful. She destroyed the family eventually, destroyed her own children's relationship--my mom and my aunt. My mom and her brothers, never spoke to each other. She destroyed it. My mom realized how destructive that anger

could be, and she never hit us. I always see my grandmother as a woman whose life was molded by that beating."

USA: "My mom never hit me. When I frustrated her, she just popped and would throw things at me, usually the TV remote control. I do not understand how anyone can hit a child. They may do things wrong, but they are learning and can only learn to do things right by making mistakes. We learn from our mistakes. So, I would never hit my kids."