The Caning Backlash
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HUMAN RIGHTS

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Schools try to bring back corporal punishment-but is it right? Does it even work?

In 18th-century America and most other countries, the master of the house could freely beat his wife, his child, his dog or his slave. Around 1830 people realized slaves were human beings, too, and laws eventually granted them freedom and the human right not to be beaten. A century or so later people realized dogs had feelings, and laws were passed against mistreatment of animals. Recently, society is taking wife-beating seriously and has slowly begun to put a stop to it. Now, with the 21st century nearing, it may have come the turn of children to gain their right as human beings to not be beaten.

A 12-year-old UK boy who was caned by his stepfather challenged British laws allowing "reasonable physical punishment of children" and is getting his case heard before the European Court of Human Rights in France. A decision by the court would be binding, and a finding in favor of the boy could force Britain to change its laws about punishing children. "This is a landmark decision for children, the first step towards confirming that children have the same rights as adults to protection from violence," said Peter Newel, coordinator for the

British group End Physical Punishment of Children.

A hot subject in today's international debate about child abuse is corporal punishment in schools. The practice of hitting students was reduced or abandoned in many countries in the 1980s or earlier. But growing indiscipline in and outside class has caused many to call for the return of the teacher's paddle. In a UK poll, 68 percent of the public were in favor of the cane's return. Teachers, however, say they will not beat pupils, even if given the power. Nigel de Gruchy, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters said teachers do not feel it will be effective. A real concern is retribution by the student--in February, a 16-year-old boy in Alaska, USA, shot dead the school principal who had frequently disciplined him. In India thugs can be hired by students to harass or even cripple a teacher who dares beat them.

In Malaysia, caning had been greatly reduced since 1983. About one percent of the country's 300,000 teachers had been reported for abusing their authority to strike a child--not a great percent, yet it represents 3,000 abusers and perhaps 300,000 abused students. "But between growing indiscipline among our schoolchildren and the problem of abuse, the former is the greater evil," stated an editorial in the New Sunday Times which endorsed the return of the cane.

Caning is commonly employed in schools for such minor infractions as being late to class, talking in class, not bringing one's books or scoring low on tests. Students are hit on their hands or buttocks with long, rattan canes, are slapped, have their ears twisted, a rubber band snapped against their ear, or

their hand held against their head, one finger pulled back as far as possible and then released sharply. Some teachers administer discipline with restraint, others with uncontrolled anger. Studies on corporal punishment suggest the method does not really produce better behavior, but rather arouses a seething anger in the child which later results in antisocial and violent tendencies.

Malaysia's schools are faced with an alarming growth of gangsterism and drug use among students. This has, in part, fueled the call for the cane. It is not clear, however, how punishment for such offenses as talking in class would prevent a teen from becoming a drug dealer. Discipline problems in some American schools, such as in Los Angeles, are so bad that metal detectors are installed at the doors to catch students entering with guns or knives.

It is common for parents to tell teachers to do whatever is necessary to make their children study and behave, including striking them. But Malaysia's International Trade and Industry Minister, Rafidah Aziz, said, "If I have my way, I would have these parents grilled for not monitoring their children's activities. We believe that many youths are involved in vice because there might be something wrong at home."

A widely published UK study pinpointed one thing wrong at home: mothers are out working. Researchers at North London University found that children with working mothers are twice as likely to fail the GCSE (final high school) exams as those whose mothers stay at home to bring them up. Children of working mothers, especially boys, were more likely to have

behavioral problems. A recent Dutch study found that women with high status jobs were more likely to have children who failed to reach their academic potential.

Patrick Morgan, of the Institute of Economic Affairs, says the evidence will force working mothers to rethink what is best for their children. "The entire debate has been hijacked by a feminist clique, determined to uphold women's rights. But what about the rights of the child?...You can always go back to work, but the damage done in a child's early years can never be rectified."

Indiscipline to the point of criminal behavior among youths is a serious problem in countries around the world. The question teachers and parents face is whether misbehavior can be solved by more physical punishment in schools, and just how such policies infringe children's right to be protected, as adults are, from physical abuse.