

MEMORANDUM ON THE USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS*

This Memorandum was prepared, following a request from the Department of Education and Science, by a Special Committee of the College under the Chairmanship of Dr J. H. Kahn. The other members of the Committee were Drs S. Wolkind, D. M. Lynch, A. Bentovim and D. Westbury, representing the four Specialist Sections of the College.

Introduction

In May 1977 the Department of Education and Science asked the College for its views on the use of corporal punishment in schools. The College explained that time had not allowed an exhaustive survey of psychiatric evidence concerning the effects of such punishment, but a small working party had discussed the problem. A summary of their conclusions was furnished to the Department together with a copy of the evidence on Corporal Punishment (1) prepared by the RMPA in 1960. The summary of conclusions recommended:

'Corporal punishment does not appear to be an issue which is referred to psychiatrists in their clinical practice, except rarely. There seems to be a measure of agreement that corporal punishment is seldom effective in changing the behaviour patterns of aggressive or immature children, and indeed it may make matters worse. Conversely, there would seem to be some agreement that for the large majority of well-adjusted children corporal punishment does not appear to do positive harm, nor does there appear to be evidence that it does positive good. Where mentally or physically subnormal or maladjusted children are concerned, it seems particularly difficult to justify the administration of corporal punishment.'

The College suggested that there was a good case for undertaking a further study of the psychiatric effects of corporal punishment and prepared to submit a fuller report. The DES requested the College to proceed, and a Special Committee was set up to consider the subject and report.

Research

As the result of a thorough search, it was found that very little had been published on the psychiatric aspects of corporal punishment, although such aspects were mentioned in general sociological and criminological studies and in various works directly relating to punishment. It was therefore felt that any comments on the subject would have to be based on an informed professional opinion and clinical experience rather than on special studies of which there are not

sufficient to give rise to specific psychiatric conclusions.

Background

The use of corporal punishment in schools is based on historical attitudes and traditions, particularly in English public schools, where it was an aspect of the school milieu, being indicative of degrees of seniority within the hierarchy and valued as being a 'badge' of a select community. Indeed, some parents may consider the extent of punishment at particular schools as desirable when choosing a school for their children. Punishment in such circumstances forms part of a convention.

There are adults who remember their experience in schools of high repute where punishment was referred to with affection and pride in terms such as 'six of the best'. The young pupil progresses from the one who is caned to the older prefect who does the caning. Progress is towards responsibility for the conduct of the next generation. This pattern, however, is not applicable to the majority of young people, not all of whom can look forward to the role of leadership, and many of whom will remain permanently disadvantaged.

School

The question of corporal punishment in schools needs to be considered in relation to the total experience of the child and to the part the school plays in personal development. Discipline has its positive aspects in allowing the child to incorporate personal controls at the same time as realizing creative potentials. School for some children is a first experience of democracy, a positive experience from which most people benefit. The attitude of a particular school to corporal punishment is often coloured by its relation to society. When the school is situated in a 'deprived' community where the domestic pattern is to use physical punishment, the school may reflect this attitude.

According to case law teachers are given responsibilities and power in respect of children in their care analogous to those of the parents. It is for the Local Education Authority to interpret these responsibilities and powers and to give guidelines to its teachers as to what powers they may use. There is considerable variation between Local Education Authorities in their interpretations of the teacher's role in discipline. These are subject from time to time to circulars of guidance from the Department of Education and Science. It is possible that these circulars necessarily reflect changing public opinion rather than an

analysis of facts and figures of the actual practice within schools.

The general literature is likewise not well supported by reference to original data. However, in a recent review of the field (2) the editors stated in their concluding paragraph that it seems incredible that those who painstakingly record and analyse natural phenomena should have paid so little attention to everyday punishment. In the book *A Last Resort* (3) the statement is made that 'schools using the cane most heavily show a higher delinquency level in all age groups and that even the threat of a last resort use of the cane produces an opposite effect'. It is noted that the same names appear over and over again in the punishment book, which shows the inefficacy of caning as a deterrent. On theoretical grounds, it has been suggested that punishment may be far less effective than reward which marks out a particular way of behaving and encourages an individual to use it. There is some evidence, indeed, that punishing children, by drawing attention to the behaviour which should be prevented, may actually come to encourage that same behaviour. There are some community schools that have given up the practice of corporal punishment and have found no resulting increase in problems of discipline.

It is recognized that the teacher's task relating to large groups of adolescents is very difficult in present times when society's attitudes are in such a state of turmoil. Many schools are overcrowded, with a shortage of facilities and too large classes. In such conditions the teacher may feel he has little to support him with badly behaved children other than corporal punishment or eventual suspension of the child from school. In many schools, however, there is an increasing awareness of the place of school life in providing the main reparative experience for these children. This does not necessarily apply to the small number of severely disturbed children who are referred to the Child Guidance Clinics or Psychiatric units, nor to those whose behaviour is such as to bring them before the Juvenile Courts.

Clegg and Megson (4), in discussing troublesome children, quote from the Plowden Report that some 15 per cent of all pupils need special care within their schools at some time in their school life because of difficulties they have to face at home. The number of 'children in distress' is far greater than can be dealt with in remedial services. Child distress is not confined to any one stratum of society or to any particular type of school. Not only is punishment unhelpful but, in our own experience of a selection of these children, punishment confirms a feeling of injustice in relation to other things. For the handicapped, the emotionally immature, and the deprived

child, the school can be a liberating experience as well as a source of formal education. The question of punishment for these children can be considered only against the background of prior information.

In many instances the teacher is the protector of the child, seeking to guard him from excessive punishment at home. In the recognition of 'child battering' (non-accidental injury) the teacher is often the one who draws attention to the fractures and bruising which indicates that the child is at serious risk.

Parents' Attitude to Corporal Punishment

There is a wide variation, influenced by social class and other factors, and attitudes have changed considerably in recent years. Some parents may choose a school in the private sector on the grounds of its tradition of corporal punishment, even to the extent of expecting the school to carry out procedures which they themselves would hesitate to use. Most parents, however, have no practicable choice of school and may be strongly opposed to the idea of physical punishment. In the public sector parents may feel disturbed by the idea of corporal punishment, but are unable to avoid its being administered to their children.

The Child's Attitude to Corporal Punishment

Many children are themselves horrified by the idea that teachers should inflict physical punishment on a child. It is noted that repeated caning can cause resentment in the child and affects the child's perception of his teacher. Conversely, however, some children consider physical punishment a normal method of discipline and can be difficult at school if it is not used there in the way it is used at home.

There are children who seek physical punishment: it may make them respected by their peers, give the feeling that they have broken down the teacher's authority and put the teacher in the wrong; or they may get physical pleasure from such punishment. As previously stated, in schools where the use of corporal punishment is a regular occurrence the records show that the same names appear over and over again in the punishment book. To these children the punishment is a regular part of their school life and not the 'last resort'. It would appear that children who are 'abused' in their early upbringing show a tendency to seek and gain punishment. Acceptance of violence is passed on from one generation to the next.

Summary

The College is professionally concerned, but is also aware of its inability to lay down a code of conduct for teachers. The teacher's position is an unenviable

one, since he is in the position of a 'good parent' and has to apply the standards of the 'good parent' but may have no way of influencing the antecedents to the behaviour with which he is confronted. We have been made aware of the fact that in many schools the teachers themselves have discussed ways of phasing out the practice of caning. In a school where a head teacher announced that caning would stop after an interval of two years, the teachers gave up the use of the cane almost immediately.

The use of punishment has its ideological and social aspects. It is a topic on which the parents of children and the staff of schools may be either in conflict or in harmony. Behind the school there remains the family. Children brought up in an harmonious home are able to accept some punishment for their misdeeds and even to accept occasional minor injustice. Children from violent homes may look upon punishment as a confirmation of their disadvantaged position. Children who are suffering from handicap, emotional disturbance or severe deprivation are possibly the most likely to receive it and the most likely to be harmed.

There is a special problem of individuals who show continual social or conduct disorder in the context of relationships with both adults and peers. Many of these have poor educational achievement. Where psychiatric studies have been carried out, it has been found that an important causal factor is an openly

disharmonious family in which violence and severe physical punishment are common. For these children school may be the only setting in which violence is not commonplace and where normal social relationships can eventually be achieved.

If corporal punishment is to be completely abandoned:

1. teachers need considerably more support, such as readily available psychiatric treatment facilities for some of the children, supplemented by a variety of counselling services and advice on more general issues.
2. children who are too disruptive for the ordinary class should have access to special educational units.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is nothing to support the continuance of corporal punishment in schools.

REFERENCES

1. *Corporal Punishment* (1960) R.M.P.A.
 2. *Punishment: Selective Readings* (1972) Edited Walters, Cheyne and Banks; Penguin.
 3. *A Last Resort? Corporal Punishment in Schools* (1972) Peter Newell; Penguin.
 4. *Children in Distress* (1968) Clegg and Megson; Penguin.
- * This memorandum was approved by the Executive and Finance Committee in January 1978.

EXAMINATION RESULTS

Preliminary Test—October 1977

It is regretted that the names of the following were omitted from the list of successful candidates published in the February issue:

311 Bogeswari Venkatesan
 312 Narinder Kumar Verma
 313 Jan Willem Vermeulen
 316 Robin Eric Waller
 317 Howard Linton Waring
 319 Gillian Elizabeth Wilson
 321 Peter John Whewell

322 Peter John Watson Wood
 323 David Wilfred Wozencroft
 324 Samir Zaky Youakiem
 325 Mohamed Nuruz Zaman
 326 Anthony Steven Zigmund
 327 Panayiotis Zikis