

Spanking: Should it be banned?

Twenty-two countries have already banned it, but in France, spanking is still not punishable by law. Dr Catherine Gueguen explains to us why spanking is harmful to the development of the child.

Should we ban spanking or not? The question comes up regularly in public debate. It could soon be decided. The Minister of Health, Agnès Buzyn, indeed spoke in favour of the bill proposed by 29 deputies on February 22. It aims to ban "ordinary educational violence". Like spanking, pulling your child's hair, slapping, or shaking, which are not punishable by law. However, this corporal punishment harms the development of the child. Dr Catherine Gueguen, paediatrician, answers our questions:

A slap on the bottom ... to a lot of people, seems trivial. But it isn't. Why? Dr Catherine Gueguen, paediatrician: "Since the dawn of time, all adults in charge of children have had this attitude, we cannot blame them. They thought they were doing good. But we are in the 21st century, and researchers in the all over the world who work with children have published papers about it. Their studies show that both verbal and physical abuse have effects on children's brains."

What damage does this ordinary violence have on children's health? "A child's brain is extremely fragile and immature. Anything that stresses them (and violence is stress) will damage their brain. Many researchers, all over the world, have shown that violence damages essential parts of our brain: the hippocampus, for example, which allows us to memorise and learn, the prefrontal cortex which allows us to think, reflect, plan, solve problems and have empathy; the orbitofrontal cortex which allows us to regulate our emotions, to make choices and to have an ethical and moral sense. A Dutch researcher recently showed that verbal violence damages this structure which allows us to be fully human. This prefrontal cortex differentiates us from great apes. Do we want to be great apes?"

Shouldn't we also help parents so that they raise their children differently? "Up to 5-6, the brain is very immature and the child does not know how to manage his impulses and his emotions. Some adults think: "it is a small animal, so to be trained, it must be punished." But this is totally counterproductive. We must of course support and help all adults in charge of children because educating a child is extremely difficult. Parents' workshops exist. They must be developed."

Margret Parker, Health and Science, October 2020

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