**Discipline or abuse?**

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WHEN I asl(ed a man to stop spanking his five-year-old in a shopping mall, he glared at me and said, `I am his father`, as if that designation certified his right to strike his child. This is not uncommon in Pakistan.

Parents, older siblings and teachers believe that hitting the child in the family or at school is their right.

Unfortunately, corporal punishment is looked upon as a means to curtail bad behaviour and to discipline children. The theory underpinning it is to impart some degree of discomfort. Examples include spanking, hitting, kicking, burning, scalding, vigorously shaking, slapping, or thrashing with a stick or belt. Other forms of punishment include verbal abuse, threats and humiliation.

There is no simple instruction manual on how to be a good parent. Our parenting style reflects our own childhood, relationships, home environment, cultural background, living situation and individual personality traits these mould the child into either a caring, responsible human being, or a selfish, destructive individual.

The common understanding is that corporal punishment is appropriate to teach discipline. An increasing number of studies are negating this perception. Research shows that hitting a child does more harm than good. Aside from inflicting physical harm, it is shown to negatively affect the behavioural, psychosocial, emotional and cognitive development of the child.

Abused children tend to develop aggressive, violent behaviour as well as mental health problems including anxiety and depression, even suicidal tendencies.

Corporal punishment has also been associated with cognitive and language development deficiencies and poor academic performance. It increases the incidence of medical health problems later in life.

Those who believe in hitting children say it is an effective way of disciplining them if done within limits. But how do we differentiate between a harsh and mild spanking? Some say that it is mild if marks or scars do not appear. Have they ever thought of the indelible scar left on the child`s mind and emotions? Children may be resilient, but their level of enduring such punishment varies. While one child may seem unaffected by constant spanking, another might be scarred for life by a single episode.

According to The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, `corporal punishment violates children`s right to respect for their human dignity and physical integrity`; it recommends adding corporal punishment to the definition of child abuse.

Parents should understand that hitting a child does not make the latter realise thatwhat they did to incur such punishment was wrong. What results is good behaviour in front of the parents, and not at any other place. It increases the child`s anger and aggression and can result in the loss of control. Additionally, constant fear of getting hit may activate the body`s stress response leading to psychological problems manifesting themselves as distrust, low self-esteem, and difñcultyinsocialinteraction.

The Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act, passed in 2017, prohibits physical punishment, verbal and emotional abuse in schools, madressahs, orphanages and other alternative care settings. Despite this, we regularly hear news of brutality sometimes resulting in a child`s death at the hands of teachers in schools and madressahs. The blame for not implementing the law lies with the government and law enforcement as well as parents, caregivers and teachers who think their own childhood experience of corporal punishment justifies its continued use.

What, then, is the most effective strategyto discipline a child? The first lesson is that children are bound to misbehave when tired and irritated, or when they want something.

Until early adolescence, children cannot fully understandthe long-term consequences of their actions.

So it is for the parents, teachers and other elders to guide them. But guidance is only practical when it is encouraged through means other than punishments.

A few useful tips for parents are: (a) an open discussion with children is the best method to explain to them what you consider wrong. They may disagree with your viewpoint but you should be very clear about it; (b) for very young children who cannot benefit from such a discussion, redirecting their attention is an indispensable technique. Their focus would then be taken away from whatever is making them misbehave; (c) time-outs have always been an excellent strategy to give the child time to practise self-control and reflect; (d) positive reinforcements encourage acceptable behaviour.

The main point is that physical punishment and verbal abuse may stop bad behaviour but only temporarily. Corporal punishment has both shortand long-term consequences for the child. Instead of teaching our children discipline, it will lead them to solve their problems via violence. The writer is a paediatrician at AKUH.