**A case for love**

BY M A D E E H A A N S A R I 2021-02-28

A VIDEO went viral recently, of a young child being brutally beaten by his instructor in a madressah-style setting. The more the little boy cried, the more abuse he got to make him `stop`.  
  
The source of the video was unverified so the real details will remain blurry but each frame contains a story from the past and for the future. What did that young man experience in his own childhood, to make him feel entitled to use violence as a strategy to `teach` and to `discipline`? How will that little boy internalise the experience and how will he respond to others, the day he`s in a position of relative power? When his mind is numbed by fear, what else will he learnin thatclass? The degree of violence may vary, but corporal punishment as a strategy for children is not the exception. According to Unicef, about half the world`s children are subjected to corporal punishment at home, with about three in four children between the ages of two and four experiencing violent discipline at the hands of parents and other primary caregivers. There is less research around schools, but corporal punishment is a common tool used by teachers for infractions as minor as an untidy uniform to forgotten homework, to not `knowing` the answer. The rationale would be that the pain or shame of physical or verbal abuse would lead to behaviour change or somehow bring a magical revelation with all the answers.  
  
It sounds obvious to say: it won`t.  
  
Instead, perhaps it is not fully understood that violence in childhood can have lifelong effects on physical health, mental health, learning and behaviour. Apart from the obvious threat of injury from physical violence, prolonged exposure to adverse childhood experiences can cause long-term health problems including obesity, heart disease and diabetes. Traumatic experiences in childhood can shape a child`s brain architecture and response to stress even as an adult. In particular, it can shape the response to conflict children who learn violence can become bullies in the playground and in life. Finally, violence in schoolspacescanleadtopoorereducational outcomes and higher risk of dropout for children who are already struggling to learn.  
  
One reason for the widespread use of corporal punishment is that in Pakistan, there has been no legal barrier to it. Campaigners such as Shehzad Roy have made a compelling case to overturn existing impediments and ban corporal punishment in schools, and only recently a landmark bill was passed by the National Assembly. However, there is a long way to go this is a hard-won battle with limited geographical scope, andhistorically there has been little political will to actually push through legal reform.  
  
Even while protection from violence is a human right that children are entitled to, the legal landscape in Pakistan has provided impunity to perpetrators.  
  
Enabling environment aside, another huge reason for the use of corporal punishment as a strategy by both caregivers and teachers is the lack of knowledge around alternatives. There is a perception that too much love can spoil a child, that violence keeps children `straight`. One response from teachers in workshops we`ve held has been that children don`t `learn any other way`.  
  
In fact, the science of brain development demonstrates that love and positive approaches to discipline can transform a child`s path through life. Early experiences can help determine the person you`re going to be, and love and care are essential in terms of shaping a tender, sympathetic understanding of the self, the world and future relationships. Happy, well-adjusted children learn and concentrate better -and finding ways to reinforce self-esteem and conndence can do wonders for classroom performance.  
  
Caregivers and teachers need to know this. Politicians who should be concerned about thefuture of a country with alarmingly high, self-perpetuating cycles of abuse they should know this. `Maar Nahi Pyaar` should be a slogan with universal resonance, that everyone can get behind. More than that, those entrusted with the care and instruction of children should be equipped with real, practical strategies to teach and maintain discipline without violence.  
  
In Pakistan, corporal punishment being taken too far has had documented and dire consequences for children. There have been reports of serious injury and even death.  
  
That viralvideo, that hideous police report by grieving parents should not be the impetus for taking legal and practical steps to protect children. Why must we wait for the unimaginable before we act? It should not be this hard to build a case for love in childhood, and for overturning a culture where violence is normalised. It is only by doing so that we can look forward to a generation of kinder, more empathetic adults. The writer is founder of Cities for Children, a non-profit that focuses on street-connected children.  
  
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