[**Corporal punishment as culture**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1667931/corporal-punishment-as-culture)

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IN February 2021, a [landmark bill](https://www.dawn.com/news/1608981) to ban corporal punishment in all educational and childcare settings was moved in the National Assembly by MNA Mehnaz Akber Aziz and passed with cross-party support. The Islamabad Capital Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Bill 2021 was then sent to the Senate where it was [cleared](https://www.dawn.com/news/1637447) by the Standing Committee on Human Rights — but not without amendments. Two guest senators called in to apply a religious lens had reservations, backing the right of the teacher to apply discretionary force to maintain discipline, and to prevent “moral deterioration of society”.

Whether or not these reservations have actual basis in religion, they certainly point to social and cultural norms that justify violence as a means of teaching a lesson. The validation of the use of corporal punishment “for the benefit” of children formerly lay in the law — in section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which the new legislation overrides. However, it also lies in a tradition in which older people are vested with the power to teach through force — to hit, spank, pinch or use other creatively cruel means to punish a child for ‘not listening’, or ‘not learning’.

Violence as a means of establishing authority is a concept perpetuated across generations, from a time pre-dating the articulation of child rights. The idea of childhood has evolved even since 1860, when the PPC was formulated: no longer is it a time when children are to be seen and not heard, straitjacketed into a mould. The thinking around the effectiveness of corporal punishment has — or should — also change, based on scientific evidence. A comprehensive review of studies published by *The Lancet* journal in June 2021 presents overwhelming evidence that physical punishment actually makes children’s behaviour worse over time, rather than being linked to positive outcomes.

**Read:** [*Corporal punishment — How long will Pakistan's children remain at risk?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1504995)

Fear of pain or humiliation can be a tool for deterring ‘bad behaviour’ as long as the threat is present — but not for self-regulating behaviour when the adult is not present. As for learning, the impact can only be detrimental, pushing children away from the teacher as well as the space of learning. The answer to a question has never magically dawned upon a child after being struck, or while squatting in a ‘rooster’ position, but substantial numbers of children in Pakistan have been driven away from school for fear of physical punishment and non-physical humiliation.

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The ICT Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Bill, passed in the joint session of Parliament on Nov 17, is a step towards recognising children’s dignity and human rights, as well as the science that points to the adverse impacts of violence on children. Remarkably, it is rooted in an evidence base that confirms the harmful effects of corporal punishment on the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, and directly addresses the psychosocial effects — including the creation of aggressive behaviour. Children experiencing corporal punishment in childhood are more likely to use violence to resolve conflict with peers, bully others, or to be involved in partner and domestic violence later in life.

The new law is hugely welcome, especially as a blueprint for other provinces where it can be taken forward by the Ministry of Human Rights. Its coverage spans spaces where children access education or protection services, including formal, non-formal and religious schools; childcare institutions, including foster care and rehabilitation centres; and the juvenile justice system. It also lays out varying penalties for violation of the ban — ranging from censure and withholding promotions, to dismissal from service. The call for a complaint system and clear consequences for violation add an important practical dimension, even though the highest level of consequence — disqualifying the offender from future employment — seems to have been removed in Senate deliberations. Presumably, this would have been for the most egregious form of violence or offence, so it can only be hoped that employers hiring people to work with children would carry out some form of background check.

What is essential now is the formulation of rules of business to take things forward. Protocols for implementation will be needed for the designated competent authorities — the Ministry of Education, Wafaqul Madaris and the Ministry of Human Rights. There will need to be greater clarity on the mechanisms for complaint and redress, and on how the penalties are to be applied. In addition, while experiences from all over the world have shown that legal prohibition of corporal punishment works, it is not enough. Teachers, care institution staff and — in the case of juvenile justice systems — the police, will need support in order to change and to embrace new codes of conduct in practice.

To transform a classroom culture that they themselves have known, teachers need to be equipped with alternative tools and strategies to corporal punishment. Another important aspect that will have to be addressed is how parents and caregivers approach the issue. The law is not a blanket ban that covers the private sphere or aims to regulate what happens within the home. However, there is a strong link between the home and the school: when holding workshops with teachers on positive approaches to discipline via Cities for Children, one response that came through was that children ‘did not know how else to learn’, because that’s how they were taught at home. Parents from underprivileged communities, working hard to send their children to school, would themselves tell the teachers to hit their children into submission and learning.

According to the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, “No culture owns corporal punishment, but all have a responsibility to disown it”. Cultural norms can change — as can people. The first step is to declare certain practices as unacceptable, which the bill clearly lays out. The second step is to share, through public campaigns and specialised trainings, the evidence that those practices don’t work; that they actually harm children and affect who they become in the world; and that there are other, better ways of teaching both academic and life lessons. The case for love is powerful, and is ultimately reinforced by science, religion and culture — we just have to adjust our lens.

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*Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2022*