

Submission for the possible abolition of corporal punishment March 2013

Help & Shelter has been conducting domestic violence and child abuse sessions and workshops across Guyana for over sixteen years. These sessions/workshops are aimed at raising awareness of the effects of domestic violence on individuals and communities, identifying its causes and prevention strategies. Many of our projects were school based and over the years we have made several interventions for students affected by violence both directly and indirectly. In addressing violence at the school level several sessions were conducted with PTAs, teachers and students throughout the regions of Guyana. As is expected in any discussion on child abuse, the issue of corporal punishment has more often than not come up and while some parents object to its use and others, after examining the effects, have made the conscious decision not to use this method, there are still individuals who are in full support of corporal punishment, refusing to acknowledge its devastating effects. Our understanding from our engagements is that the acceptance of the corporal punishment is regrettably deeply rooted in our culture and socialization. This is evident in the fact that many parents and teachers cannot give any substantial reason/justification for the use of corporal punishment.

This submission reflects the views of parents, teachers, concerned citizens and Help & Shelter in the call for the removal of corporal punishment from Guyana's schools.

Children have the legal right to protection from all forms of violence: The use of corporal punishment in Guyana's schools is a violation of Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Guyana became a signatory to in September 1990 and ratified in 1991, and which prohibits the infliction of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in schools. Children are people too and deserve to have their rights respected.

Spare the rod and spoil the child: A proverb often misinterpreted but in its deeper meaning places greater responsibility on parents for the guidance and prompt discipline (correction) of children. Discipline is not achieved through the use of force but through teaching, mutual respect and tolerance. Adults (parent and teachers) ought to realize that being a behavior model holds a lot more weight than words. Correction of a misdeed will never be effective by inflicting pain as is the view of many persons, but much greater results could be achieved if persons would exercise a little patience and seek to have dialogue with the child.

If you don't beat them they will not learn: The culture of beating to teach should not be tolerated any longer. Learning is a lifelong process and wisdom teaches that each individual learns differently at varying paces. While many seek to tell children what to do/not to do, we should remember that acceptable/positive behaviors are better learned when modeled. In our work with children we have realize that they will push against boundaries to see how far they can get before the line is drawn. Children sometimes behave quite differently from what is expected and this may result in parents/teachers becoming annoyed, frustrated and embarrassed, leading to the use of corporal punishment. Another important factor is that rules and responsibilities should be taught to students; in the absence of same they are left to their own judgment when faced with particular situations. Recently during a session at one secondary school, our public education officer learned that the students of the

grade 9 class I was engaging had no idea of the school rules; they claimed they were never informed about them. From his own observations, there were no postings of the rules anywhere in the school environs. Also, if the saying is true that “children live what they learn”, is the acceptance of violence/inflicting of pain on others as right what we want them to learn?

I got licks and it made me a better person: So often used by persons who endorse the use of corporal punishment. This seems to suggest that only through pain are we made better, and the notion “love hurts” is believed by both young and old. Whenever people inflict pain on others it is usually for their pleasure rather than the profit of the individual. No one can say how they would have turned out if they had not been beaten. To prove that licks made you better, one would have had been determine to lead a life of wrongdoing, something that we don’t think any child sets out to do. In our opinion, persons who subscribe to this notion do so only to justify/convince themselves that “beating” is right and those who claim to be disciplined as a result of corporal punishment have been socialized to confuse discipline with punishment.

Corporal punishment and its correlation to violence: Corporal punishment is often used when teachers are angry or frustrated by the behavior of students; usually verbalized as “I fed up talking to you”. The argument can be made that corporal punishment is more of an outlet for angry adults rather than a method of correcting children. Similar actions are perpetrated by parents, domestic violence abusers, law enforcement officers, etc. (*who often face no disciplinary actions*), who use their [perceived] power and authority to exert control over others by the use of physical force/violence when the individual does not confirm to their ideologies under the disguise of correction/discipline. Reports of this nature are received by Help & Shelter on a daily basis. This sends the decisive message that if I’m in a position of authority or power and I’m angered by the behavior of someone then I’m justified in inflicting physical pain/hurting that individual. While we acknowledge that those in authority should be respected, corporal punishment does not achieve this; respect has to be earned by giving it and every citizen, every man, woman and child, has this right. Respect is never obtained through the use of fear and intimidation.

Corporal punishment and the school environment: It is no secret that violence in all forms is on the increase in Guyana’s schools, in some instances in ways that were previously unheard of. Many persons attribute this to the absence of corporal punishment, but this is far from the case, as this is still permitted in schools. Remember that violence begets violence. Shall we further complicate an already hostile environment by endorsing the use of corporal punishment? Attention should be given to the concerns of teachers and students in making schools more learning friendly; many teachers and students alike are working under sometimes extremely stressful conditions – overcrowded classrooms, lack of learning resources and the visible lack of male teachers and school counselors are just a few areas highlighted by teachers.

Corporal punishment and the responsibility of parents: Children who witness violence or are victims of violence in their homes often act out similar behaviors in school. Parents need to support the call for the removal of corporal punishment from schools while acknowledging their own contributions to this practice. They have to realize that their children are looking to them to model positive behaviors and

therefore should accept responsibility for their actions and the behaviors of their children rather than supporting and even promoting negative and destructive behaviors. Parents have a responsibility to provide their children with love and security; give guidance by setting and adhering to appropriate behaviors that they want children to follow; allow them to make choices while helping them to understand the possible consequences; communicate with them respectfully and teach them how to deal with conflicts constructively.

We therefore call on the National Assembly to:

1. Set up a legal framework which clearly prohibits corporal punishment and protects children from all forms of violence.
2. Implement laws that strengthen and support families and address the underlying causes of violence in communities.
3. Establish/develop awareness programs that:
 - Bring attention to the negative effects of the use of corporal punishment
 - Promote non-violent behavior and conflict resolution education for parents, teachers, caregivers and the public.
 - Raise awareness of children's human rights, including the right to respect for their human dignity and physical integrity.
 - Promote positive parenting and make appropriate support available for teachers and parents in stressful situations.
4. Provide opportunities for young people to have their views heard and to institute programs to make young people (children) aware of their rights and responsibilities.
5. Address the concerns of teachers and students, develop and publish rules, regulations and consequences [alternative punishment] for misbehavior in schools (public and private) and make available to parents, teachers and students.

Respectfully yours,
(sgd.) Josephine Whitehead
Director/Secretary