

DOES SPARING THE ROD REALLY SPOIL THE CHILD?

A fact sheet to address religious justifications of corporal punishment

SONKE GENDER JUSTICE

Sonke Gender Justice is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation, established in 2006. Today, Sonke has established a growing presence on the African continent and plays an active role internationally. Sonke works to create the change necessary for men, women, young people and children to enjoy equitable, healthy and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies. Sonke pursues this goal across Southern Africa by using a human rights framework to build the capacity of government, civil society organisations and citizens to achieve gender equality, prevent gender-based violence and reduce the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS.

MENCARE

MenCare – A Global Fatherhood Campaign – is coordinated by Promundo, Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke) and the MenEngage Alliance, as an effort to promote men's involvement as fathers and as caregivers. It seeks to provide support materials, messages, policy recommendations and research to encourage local MenEngage partners, NGOs, women's rights organizations, governments and UN partners to implement campaign activities in their settings.

MenCare is conceived as a complement to global and local efforts to engage men and boys in ending violence against women and girls. Together with efforts like the White Ribbon Campaign, it is part of the MenEngage Alliance's global vision to achieve equitable, non-violent relationships and caring visions of what it means to be men.

From a MenCare perspective, the prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings, including the home, is integral to efforts to create change of this nature.



THE FACTS

1 The phrase “spare the rod and spoil the child” **does not appear in the Bible**. It is from a 17th century poem by Samuel Butler called “Hudibras”. In the poem, a love affair is likened to a child, and spanking is commended as a way to make the love grow stronger. The actual verse reads

“What medicine else can cure the fits, Of lovers when they lose their wits? Love is a boy by poets stiled, Then spare the rod and spoil the child.”

The idea was that the absence of periodic spankings in the relationship will spoil it. Further on in the poem, women are said to desire a good spanking more than an assortment of lovely ribbons.

The Book of Proverbs does contain several references to ‘rod’ and ‘chastisement’, e.g. Proverbs 13:24 “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” and Proverbs 22:15: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.”

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There are three different words in the original Hebrew that are translated into English as “rod”; the one used in the often quoted Proverbs text is “shebet”. This was the large walking staff held by the head of a family, the king’s sceptre, or the shepherd’s crook which was used to rescue and guide sheep. A version of the shebet is carried by bishops to this day – as a symbol of guiding, not beating their people. It should be remembered that the “rod” referred to in Psalm 23 comforts people.

THE MYTH

“The Bible gives me the right and duty to spank my children spare the rod and spoil the child”.

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FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

- 3 Similarly, the term “physical correction” is a term often used by parents and others who believe it to be their Biblical duty to punish their children by using corporal punishment. “Correction” is from the Hebrew word “muwcar” and means “chastening” or “let us reason together”. Reasoning together has nothing to do with physically striking a child.
- 4 **There is no mandate from God to beat children.** Within the entire Law or Torah, where God outlined what he required of his people, there is no instruction to beat children. For an issue proclaimed as so important, there is no instruction within scripture of how or when to beat or even who to beat. Christians look to the example of Jesus for the way to live their lives. Jesus was a teacher and a Rabbi and an expert in interpreting the scriptures. There is **no evidence to suggest that he cited the scriptures to justify hitting children.** All the recorded encounters between Jesus and children were kind, gentle and respectful and his reported words about causing children to stumble, and the consequences for doing so (Matthew 18:6), are amongst the strongest in the New Testament. Jesus tells his followers that the kingdom of God is like a little child, and whatever is done to the least of these is done to him. That clearly rules out physical punishment and humiliating treatment of children.
- 5 It is generally believed that the Book of Proverbs was assembled by King **Solomon**, circa 1000 BCE. He brought together a group of sayings which were already current in his time; some may have been his own thoughts; others may have been first written down centuries earlier. The passages which deal with chastising presumably reflect his parenting beliefs with respect to his son, Rehoboam. As an adult, he was vicious, unfeeling, inconsiderate to his subjects, had **no regard for human rights, and was widely hated.** He barely escaped assassination at the hands of his own people, having fled Jerusalem on a donkey in the dead of night.
- 6 As with Christians, **adherents of other faiths** also interpret their holy texts differently. So, there are always those who argue for and those who argue against corporal punishment on the basis of their religion.

According to Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, a renowned **Hindu** guru, the ideals of Hinduism include to never injure others. Hindu children are always treated respectfully as they may be incarnations of a grandparent, aunt or uncle, dearly beloved mother, sister, brother, respected father, a yogi or rishi returned to flesh to help humankind spiritually. Parents and teachers should be asking ‘Who are these souls? What is their destiny to fulfil in this life? How can I help?’ The principles of *ahimsa* – nonviolence and non-hurtfulness, physically, mentally or emotionally – apply in the parent-child relationship.

A high-level Islamic authority on **Shiite Shari’a** in Iran, Ayatullah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, stated that: “By forbidding punishment, particularly corporal punishment, Islam closes the door to an inferiority complex.” Rafsanjani also cites other Islamic leaders such as Imam Ali: “Do not beat your children. To correct them, speak to them for a while, but make sure that it does not last long. (Behar ol-Anvar; Volume 23, Page 114) Instead, encouragement is advised again and again. It has been given priority over all other educational strategies, something that helps children develop their talents and sustain their development.

According to the **Muslim** Quran, children are *amanat* (a trust) from Allah and everyone is required to protect them for the sake of Allah; further, it is the responsibility of all adults to protect and respect children so that they can grow up to feel valued and important. Hazrat Anas (Muhammad’s companion) reputedly stressed the Prophet’s compassion for children.

All the major faiths committed themselves to non-violence in the raising of children in the **Kyoto Declaration on Confronting Violence and Advancing Shared Security**, made during the Eighth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, in August 2006.

At the 9th General Assembly of the **All Africa Conference of Churches** held in Maputo in December 2007, representatives from churches across Africa committed to ensuring that their countries have “a legally binding Children’s Act, duly passed into law by parliament” and that each country “has passed legislation that outlaws all forms of corporal and humiliating punishment of children”.