

***“I don’t get sad, only when  
my mum smacks me.”***

Young children give advice about family discipline

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*Children are Unbeatable! Alliance, 2009*





# Introduction

This small-scale research study was carried out on behalf of the Children are Unbeatable! Alliance, a group of more than 600 organisations and thousands of individuals which campaigns for children in the UK to have full legal protection from violence.

The research aimed to examine what children aged under 5 think about parenting, family discipline and punishment, including smacking, in order to present information on children’s views to parents and those who work in children’s services.

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## Background

Physical punishment of children in the UK is currently legal. Section 58 of the Children Act 2004 allows parents and some other adults charged with common assault against a child to use the defence of “reasonable punishment.” Children are the only group of people in the UK that can legally be hit and hurt.

The UK Government has been criticised three times by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for its failure to provide children with legal protection from all forms of violence. Most recently, in October 2008, the Committee recommended that the UK Government should,

*“Prohibit as a matter of priority all corporal punishment in the family, including through the repeal of all legal defences.”*  
(2008, p. 9).

Similar criticisms have been made by the European Committee of Social Rights and by other UN bodies including the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the UN Human Rights Council.

The Children are Unbeatable! Alliance campaigns for the UK government to remove this defence and afford children the same legal protection from violence that adults have. Alliance supporters number thousands of individuals and organisations, including all the major children’s charities and organisations concerned with safeguarding children. Many providers of children’s services, including Sure Start projects, children and family centres, after school clubs and voluntary groups are also supporters.

In recent years, a number of other studies into children’s opinions on smacking and family discipline more generally have been published (Willow & Hyder, 2004; Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Sherbert Research, 2007). All of these have found that children do not approve of smacking as a form of punishment, and that children have much to say about these issues, which concern them deeply and personally.

This is the first study to concentrate primarily on the views of children aged under 5. As research suggests that younger children are hit most frequently (Nobes & Smith, 1997) the views of these young children are very relevant to the debate surrounding physical punishment. It is to be hoped that their views will be listened to, and that adults who work on their behalf will find this publication useful in deciding their position on the legality of corporal punishment in the UK today.

## Key messages

**1. Parents do many good things for their children**, including giving them food and shelter, playing with them and caring for them emotionally.

*“If you colour in a picture, if you take to my mum, my mum says then, ‘Lovely, you make picture.’”* (Child aged 4).

**2. However, children condemn parental violence.** When asked what things parents do that children don’t like, violence (including smacking, hitting and kicking) was the most common answer, given by 40% of groups of younger children who were asked this question.

*“Smacking’s hitting and kicking. No kicking... no spiking, no biting, no punching.”* (Boy aged 4).

**3. Smacking hurts physically.** Several children demonstrated what smacking is by hitting themselves, often with considerable force. Some listed serious physical effects of smacking.

*“If you fall down, you bleed.”* (Child aged 4.)

**4. Smacking hurts emotionally.** Children said that children who are smacked feel upset and sad.

*“I don’t get sad, only when my mum smacks me... and then, I cry...”* (Girl aged 4.)

**5. Children suggest alternative discipline strategies.** Both younger and older children suggested ways of teaching children to behave that they felt were better than smacking. These included talking to the child, removing privileges, and giving rewards for good behaviour.

*“[A parent] might say ... ‘You lie down in bed for all the time and you can’t go park.’”* (Child aged 4.)

**6. Smacking causes more smacking.** Younger children often made links between adults hitting and children hitting. Older children were concerned that children who are hit may learn to hit others, including their own children.

*“I know! If children smacks their mum, they smack them! If their dad smacks them, they smack the dad!”* (Boy aged 4.)

## Methodology

The research was carried out in centres for young children which are supportive of the Children are Unbeatable! Alliance. In total, six centres were visited. These included Children's Centres, nursery schools, Sure Start programmes, a crèche and a children's club. They were in cities and towns in various regions of Northern and Southern England.

Children took part in the research via small group discussions of between two and five children. Altogether, 13 of these discussions with young children took place. The discussions were recorded and later transcribed. Some of the centres requested and were provided with a copy of their transcription.

The researcher introduced the topic by reading a short storybook to the children. The story introduces Zog, a four year old, and Zig, an adult who looks after Zog. It goes on to say that sometimes Zig feels worried and unsure about how to take care of Zog, and asks the children if they will help Zig by answering three questions:

1. What are some good things that parents do? ("What would make Zog happy?")
2. What are some things parents do that children don't like? ("What would make Zog sad?")
3. "Zig has heard of smacking and wants to know what you think about it." This led on to a general discussion of smacking, which was child-led where possible, and included discussion of some of the following questions:
  - What is smacking?
  - What does a smack feel like? ("How would it make Zog feel?")
  - Is smacking good or bad? Why?
  - Why do parents smack?
  - Does smacking help children learn how to behave?

This methodology draws strongly on the work of Willow and Hyder (2004), which was also used in studies in Wales (Crowley and Vulliamy, 2002) and New Zealand (Dobbs, 2005). In planning the practical details of the study, the researcher drew heavily on the reports of the two most recent studies.

45 children aged 2 - 4 participated in the research. Of these, a large majority (78% or 35 children) were aged 4, 7 were aged 3 and 3 were aged 2.

55% of the participants (25) were boys and 45% (20) were girls.

Fifteen of the 45 young children took part in the pilot study, in which the main methodology described above was not used. These children were shown cartoon pictures of various situations in families and asked to talk about them with the researcher. Many of the children found this difficult or uninteresting and so the method was changed. However, where children in the pilot study did give opinions or advice these have been included in this report, with an indication that the child concerned was taking part in the pilot study.

In addition to the 45 children aged under 5, 8 children aged 5 - 10 took part. Three of these children, aged six and seven, took part in discussions in groups with younger children, in a mixed-age setting. The other five older children took part in a separate discussion with the researcher, in which a general conversation about parenting and discipline, including punishment, took place. The older children had many opinions to give and these are included in the report. The ages of the children speaking are indicated throughout.

## Terminology

For the purpose of this study, the term **punishment** is understood to mean a retributive response to behaviour in a child which an adult feels is undesirable. **Physical punishment** involves using physical force to punish a child. **Smacking** is the kind of physical punishment discussed most in this study, frequently defined by children as 'hitting' (see 'Conversations about smacking' for further details). **Violence** is understood to be the deliberate use of physical force to cause pain or discomfort. Physical punishment, including smacking, is a form of violence under this definition.

**Discipline** is a wider concept than punishment, understood for the purposes of this study to be the overall guidance of children's behaviour, including responses to desirable and undesirable behaviour. Punishment, including physical punishment, may or may not be a part of a person's concept of discipline or any given discipline strategy. Some of the children's suggestions for behaviour management strategies that parents should use seemed to refer to punishments, while others referred to other forms of discipline.

## Ethical issues

A key ethical issue in research with children, especially such young children, is that the children participating consent fully to doing so, not just at the beginning but also throughout the process. It is also important that children understand why their opinions are being asked and what will happen to them.

The discussions took place in areas which were separate from the main rooms of each centre. A member of staff or adult volunteer was present in each discussion except the one group of older children. At the beginning of each discussion, the researcher explained to the children that they did not have to take part in the research, and that they could leave the room and return to their usual activities at any time without getting into trouble. Five children chose to leave the room during a discussion.

Children also had the option of remaining in the room, but not taking part in the conversation, and several chose to do this.

Before beginning to record the discussion, the researcher explained what she was doing, and demonstrated the recorder by giving each child a turn to talk into it and hear their own voice played back to them. The researcher explained that what the children said would later be used to tell grown-ups, including parents, about what children think. The children were assured that their names would be kept secret.

Parental consent was obtained before the discussions took place. A copy of the letter sent to parents is included in the Appendix.

## Results

### *What good things do parents do for their children?*



The first question is deliberately phrased in general terms, and was intended as a warm-up question as well as an opportunity for children to discuss good things that parents do. At this stage in the conversations, discipline had not yet been mentioned, and most of the responses did not deal with discipline specifically.

Children had many ideas about good things that parents do and gave a wide variety of answers.

Answers concerning play were the most common, with 23 responses. Children said that parents play with their children at home, and take them to places to play. Parks were mentioned frequently. Swimming and the cinema were also mentioned, and *“play[ing] in the nursery”* (child aged 4).

Some children listed specific games, including *“tickle,” “jumping all about,” “colouring,”* and *“story”*.

Some children mentioned toys:

*“...do you know, my dad makes some toys for me, and my mum makes the toys for me too...”* (Girl aged 4).

Specific toys which children mentioned included books, teddies and toy cars.

Many children talked about food (13 responses). Children said that parents *“make tea,”* for children and *“make biscuits.”* Some children listed particular foods, including sweets and chocolate. One older child suggested that Zig should *“[not] just give him [Zog] sweets, give him other healthy food”* (boy aged 6).

The remaining 17 responses dealt with other parental care, both physical and emotional, in a variety of ways. Children said that parents *“keep [children] in the house”* (boy aged 4), *“look after”* them, make sure that they rest and sleep, and give them clothes. One child said that, *“...when I need to go to the toilet... my mum takes me.”* (Girl aged 4).

Children’s replies also indicated that parents care for them emotionally:

*“If you colour in a picture, if you take to my mum, my mum says then, ‘Lovely, you make picture.’”* (Child aged 4, in pilot study).

*“When I’m sad, my mummy gives me some toys.”* (Girl aged 4).

*“...[Zig] should ...read him [Zog] bedtime stories and also give him a teddy to cuddle in bed.”* (Boy aged 6).

## What are some things parents do that children don't like?



Although punishment, including smacking, had not yet been mentioned by the researcher at this stage in the discussions, children in several groups chose to bring it into the conversation themselves. The most common answer given to this question was that children are sad when parents act violently towards them.

Violence was mentioned by 4 groups of younger children (40%) out of the total of 10 who were asked this question (this question was not asked in the pilot study). It was the only thing mentioned by more than one group. *“Smacking”* was the word used most frequently. *“Hitting”* and *“kicking”* were also mentioned. One child suggested that parents might *“throw him [the child] in the dustbin”* (boy aged 4).

One group mentioned another kind of punishment that makes children unhappy:

Child [pointing at storybook]: *“Look, she’s not happy!”*

Researcher: *“She’s not happy. What might make her not happy?”*

Child: *“Er... sitting on a wall.”*

Researcher: *“Why’s that?”*

Child: *“Facing the wall.”*

Researcher: *“Facing the wall?”*

Child: *“If you’ve been naughty.”* (Two boys aged 4).

It was less clear whether some answers referred to either punishment or discipline. One child said that *“if you don’t give them [children] food, they’ll be sad,”* (boy aged 4) while another group said that children are sad if they don’t have things they like (clothes or toys). One child said that parents breaking toys would make their children sad.

Older children also said that parents hitting children makes children unhappy. One older child said that parents might *“take your favourite toys away from you”* (boy aged 6) as a punishment and that this would make children sad. Older children also said that children are unhappy when parents argue or shout, and that *“when grown-ups are unhappy it makes me feel unhappy too”* (boy aged 7). One child said that children are unhappy when parents throw away their toys while tidying.

## *Conversations about smacking*

In the third question, children were told that Zig had heard of smacking and wanted to know what they thought about it. They were asked what smacking is, and then whether smacking is ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ From then on, the conversation was led by the children where possible, with the researcher asking questions only when children seemed to want prompting. A wide variety of subjects were covered.

Most of the children knew what smacking was. Smacking was most frequently defined as *“hitting.”* *“Slapping”* and *“kicking”* were also mentioned.

Several children explained what smacking is by demonstrating hitting themselves, on the hand, arm or face, usually with considerable force.

All the children who were asked except one said that smacking is *“bad,”* *“nasty,”* and would make Zog *“sad.”* Only one child said that smacking is *“nice.”* Some children expressed their opposition to smacking at the same time as defining it:

*“Smacking’s hitting and kicking. No kicking... no spiking, no biting, no punching.”* (Boy aged 4).

Many children chose to discuss the effects of smacking:

*“Smacking - when you get cry.”* (Boy aged 4).

*“I don’t get sad, only when my mum smacks me... and then, I cry, and then she knows, and then I go out.”* (Girl aged 4.)

*“If you fall down, you bleed.”* (Child aged 4.)

Child: *“It [smacking] hurt her head.”*

Nursery staff: *“Might hurt her head.”*

Researcher: *“Mmm. Might hurt her head, that’s right.”*

Child: *“Maybe bleeding.”*

Nursery staff: *“It might even bleed. That really hurts.”*

Child: *“Might be go hospital.”*

Researcher: *“Maybe. That would be very bad.”*

Child: *“Bandage around her head.”* (Child aged 4, taking part in pilot study.)

Children often made links between adults and children hitting. Children who took part in the pilot study mentioned hitting, kicking and slapping as both a ‘naughty’ thing that children do and a thing that adults do to punish ‘naughty’ children.

*“I hit my dad because he’s always locking me in the room and I smack the door.”* (Boy aged 4).

*“Not nice to hit each other.”* (Child aged 4, taking part in pilot study).

One child exclaimed eagerly:

*“I know! If children smacks their mum, they smack them! If their dad smacks them, they smack the dad!”* (Boy aged 4).

One child made a link between how parents and children try to change the behaviour of those around them:

Child: *“You could bite somebody as well [that’s a naughty thing that children do].”*

Researcher: *“...And if you bite somebody, what could your mummy do to stop you biting?”*

Child: *“Say ‘Stop biting!’”*

Researcher: *“That’s a good idea... Is there anything else she could do?”*

Child: *“If somebody hits you in nursery, then you say ‘Stop! I don’t like that!’ then you tell a teacher.”* (Child aged 4, taking part in pilot study).

Some children said that smacking would work to change their behaviour, saying that after a child was smacked they would be *“good”* next time, and even that if the smacking was a punishment for accidental behaviour such as dropping something, they would not do it again.

Some children chose to discuss other forms of discipline, including by advising Zig about what they thought were good ways of teaching Zog how to behave:

*“She might say... ‘You lie down in bed for all the time and you can’t go park.’”* (Child aged 4, taking part in pilot study.)

*“...my mum says no.”* (Boy aged 4).

Shouting was mentioned by several children. Some said that it was a good way for parents to change children’s behaviour, suggesting that parents could:

*“...say [shouts] ‘STOP THAT! DON’T DO THAT! SIT ON THE CHAIR!’”* (Child aged 4, taking part in pilot study.)

However, some children showed fear and negative feelings about shouting:

*“The mum... the mum going to shout at me. No! I’m not going to drop things today!”* (Girl aged 4, taking part in pilot study.)

Several children associated both shouting and smacking with parents feeling angry. One child suggested that smacking could make a child feel angry too.

### **Older children’s views**

The older children agreed with the younger children on most issues. Firstly, they were clear that smacking is hitting, and that it hurts and makes children sad:

*“Smacking is when you slap people. So it’s not very nice to hit people, is it?”* (Boy aged 6.)

Children discussed the emotional and physical effects of smacking, saying that it hurts, and makes children *“feel upset and miserable”* (boy aged 7).

Many of the children were concerned about violence causing more violence, both immediately and in the future:

*“You just have one hit, accidentally, then it turns into a big fight, and that’s what I hate about hitting. I hate hitting, it really hurts.”* (Boy aged 7.)

*“If you hit your child, then they’ll hit their children, and it’ll go on forever.”* (Boy aged 9.)

Unlike the younger children, the older children felt strongly that smacking does not ‘work’ to change children’s behaviour. Some of them suggested that smacking would simply make already difficult situations worse:

*“If they hit her [a shouting child], she’d shout much more, because they would have just hit her!”* (Boy aged 10).

*“[Smacking will] just make them run away or something to stop them from being hit.”* (Girl aged 7).

The children had suggestions for alternative discipline strategies:

*“I think it would be better if the parent said, ‘Can you not talk to me like that? Can you just talk to me nicely not badly?’”* (Boy aged 9).

*“Maybe, like, there’s this board, and if you’ve been good, you get a star on the board, and if you get a whole row of stars by the end of the week you get a treat.”* (Boy aged 7).



The law on smacking was briefly discussed. Some of the children were aware of the current legal position: *“It’s illegal to smack grown ups, but it’s legal to smack children”* (boy aged 9). Others were not aware of it, and expressed shock when they were told about the current law:

*“Why, why, why would they say that children can get smacked, but grown ups can’t?”* (Boy aged 10).

Children suggested that the current law is *“age discrimination,”* and that:

*“All the laws should be the same for all people... no matter where they’re from, who they are.”* (Boy aged 9).



## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to all the children who took part in this research project. Thank you for talking to me about what you think and feel. Many thanks also to the adults working with children in nurseries and children's centres. Without your generous help and support, this research would not have been possible.

Thanks to Carolyne Willow and Tina Hyder, and to others who have used similar methodologies to discover more about children's views. I am privileged to have had the opportunity to draw on so much fascinating previous work in the planning and execution of this study.

Thanks to Judith Sutcliffe for stimulating conversation and exchange of ideas, and to Anne Sinclair Taylor for putting us in touch.

Thanks to the Children are Unbeatable! Alliance for overall support.



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## Appendix

### *Letter for parents/carers*

Dear Parent,

On [date], I will be visiting [centre], as part of a small-scale research project on what very young children think about family discipline, including smacking.

The children will be asked to talk about their opinions about families and family discipline, in small groups. The discussions will be recorded. Eventually, I will write a report of the research which will include anonymous quotes from children: no names of children or of centres will be used.

The report will be used to give information about children's opinions to providers of children's services and to parents. I will send a copy to the centre.

I hope that the children will find taking part in the research fun and interesting, and will enjoy talking about what they think. But the research is optional and they will be able to stop taking part at any time.

The discussions will NOT encourage children to talk about their own experiences at home. The research is about children's ideas and thoughts, not about their personal experiences. If a child does want to talk about personal experiences, centre staff will follow their usual procedures.

If you consent to your child taking part in the research study, please tear off the permission slip below and return it to the centre. If you have any questions, please feel free to discuss them with a member of staff, or to contact me.

Thank you,

Elinor Milne

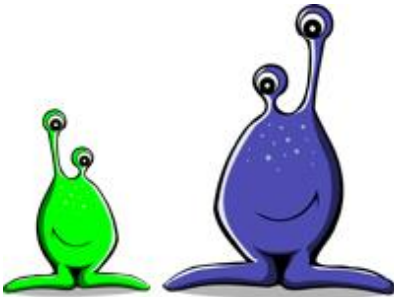
Children's Campaign Co-ordinator, Children are Unbeatable! Alliance.

## Zig and Zog



This is Zog.

Zog is four years old.



Zog lives with Zig.

Zig loves Zog very much.

Zig wants to look after Zog.



But sometimes, Zig feels worried.

Zig thinks, "I don't know how to look after Zog!"

Zig thinks that children know all about how to look after them.

So Zig has sent me to ask for your help.

Will you answer Zig's questions?