



# The new Smacking controversy

A politician has called for the laws on smacking to be relaxed, while the NSPCC maintains it should be banned altogether. Who's right?

**O**ne subject bound to get parents talking is smacking. In England, The Children Act 2004 says parents are allowed to smack their offspring as long as they don't cause 'reddening of the skin'. Any hitting that causes bruising, swelling, cuts, grazes or scratches can result in five years in jail.

Many campaigners have long called for a total ban. "We believe very strongly there are alternatives to smacking that are much more effective," says Chris Cloke, head of child protection awareness at NSPCC.

But politician David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, wants the laws to be relaxed and believes the government shouldn't impose on how parents discipline their children. "It's up to parents to determine the way they want to help their children navigate boundaries and how they define right and wrong," he says.

## DISCIPLINE – OR ABUSE?

The NSPCC agrees that children need discipline and clear boundaries. "But our view is that

smacking doesn't work, and because of this, you can end up smacking more heavily," says Chris.

Psychologist Dr Aric Sigman, author of *The Spoilt Generation* (£12.99, Piatkus), disagrees. "There's no evidence that there is a slippery slope from a smack leading to more violent forms of hitting," he says.

He also says smacking shouldn't be confused with child abuse. "There's huge confusion about what the word 'smack' means. There seems to be little distinction between a punch in the face and a swat on the wrist for a toddler who might be reaching for a hot stove," he says. "By lumping this all together and saying we need to control it legally is really saying that we don't trust parents to know the difference."

## CONFLICTING RESEARCH

Trying to measure the long-term impact of smacking is difficult. "Often adults will say 'I was smacked as a child and it never did me any harm', but we never actually know that – it's a very difficult thing to prove," says Chris.

The lack of distinction between a light slap with an open hand and other forms of hitting or beating has also skewed research results, says Aric. "So the idea that smacking creates a violent society, in my view, has not been borne out," he adds.

## YOUR CHOICE

What both experts agree on, however, is that parents should trust their own instincts, although Chris says public education on alternatives to smacking is important. "To begin with, some parents might feel very reluctant to use those alternative methods because they think they won't work," he says. "But actually, when they do spend time putting those techniques into operation, they find they can work," he adds.

"It should be a parental choice and a parental decision," says Aric, who says he's neither pro nor anti-smacking. "But I'm very much against arresting parents for slapping their children on the wrist or the backside."

Is it ever OK to smack your child? Two mums with different views argue it out in our debate →

# Is it OK to smack your child?

## YES "IT'S A DETERRENT THAT WORKS"

"Like most 2 year olds, our son Harvey has little concept of danger. He's an adventurer and for the most part I'm happy to encourage him, keeping a close eye to catch him or kiss him better. But then there's the hot cooker, the washing machine he wants to clamber into and the wooden spoon he uses, not only as a baking utensil or magic wand, but also as a weapon against his baby brother. This is where the threat of a smack comes in handy.



### "A light slap only"

For us the smack is used as a deterrent rather than a punishment. The idea of it is usually enough to stop Harvey from hurting himself or someone else. I'm sure I could count on one hand the number of times I've actually physically smacked him (I'm talking a little slap on the hand, nothing more).

Typically the phrase 'Do you want a smack?' has him recoiling from whatever act of destruction he was about to embark on. This is especially useful when I'm stuck on the couch breastfeeding baby Vincent and can't make a dive to stop Harvey doing something that will inevitably end in tears.

### "It's a last resort"

It's not about hurting him, getting him to behave well or teaching him right from wrong. I can do that with reasoning, distraction and deleting *Fireman Sam* from the Sky+ box. Smacking is used as a last resort to stop Harvey (or Vincent) getting hurt and is never done in anger.

It's a considered act and we always make sure that he understands why we're doing it. This means we never have to smack him for the same thing twice. Because we use it so sparingly, it's effective and I for one would rather have an upset toddler than an injured one."

*Maria Brett, 32, from West Lothian, mum to Harvey, 2, and Vincent, 6 months*

## NO "IT MEANS YOU'VE LOST CONTROL"

"Clambering into the car at a supermarket recently, I saw a normal-looking bloke giving his daughter, who was perhaps 6, an almighty whack on the bum. He was shouting a variant on the familiar retail-based tellings-off – 'I told you to get out of the trolley/watch the cars/behave yourself' – and he was furious. It must have really hurt. That's why I don't hit my 2-year-old son, Frank, and why I'm not convinced by David Lammy's call for smacking laws to be relaxed.



### "It's done in anger"

I'm no bruiser but if I hit Frank, or anyone else, while I was as furious as the man in the car park, I'd do some damage – damage that, quite rightly, is banned under The Children Act 2004. Smacking children isn't done in a cool, rational way.

It's done in anger, when good judgement and self-control tend to go out of the window, and that's not a time when I want to be wielding power over someone smaller than me.

### "I lead by example"

Of course, Frank is starting to test the boundaries, which means getting bolshy in a variety of natural, but deeply irritating and disruptive, ways. He's not above batting us on the legs or face, but how can I tell him not to do that to me or other kids if his punishment is a smack?

Our approach is to isolate Frank somewhere where he can't do any damage or hurt himself. His cot does the job, and is also lonely and boring, so it's perfect for cooling off – and because I can walk away safely, I calm down too. The threat of a spell in his cot is a suitable deterrent in our house, and thankfully it works in supermarket car parks, too."

*Emma Sturgess, 33, from Altrincham, mum to Frank, 2* **PPP**

## SMACK-FREE SOLUTIONS

The NSPCC recommends you:

- **Have clear, simple rules and limits. Be consistent in expecting them to be met.**
- **Praise good behaviour and ignore behaviour you don't want repeated as much as possible.**
- **Criticise behaviours you don't like, not your child. Use mild reprimands when a rule is broken.**
- **Distract your tot instead of punishing him, and use humour to lighten tricky situations.**
- **Impose a consequence such as a removal of privileges.**



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