



Information sheet 5

Physical Abuse (inflicted injury) is a Child Protection issue

Definition

Physical abuse is when a child has experienced severe and/or persistent ill-treatment through behaviours such as beating, shaking, inappropriate administration of alcohol or drugs, attempted suffocation or excessive discipline or physical punishment. The harm that a child may experience as a result of physical abuse can include, but is not limited to, injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns, bites and fractures.

The difference in presentation between accidental and non-accidental injury may be slight and require expert investigation to differentiate. The harm resulting from non-accidental injury is considered to be physical abuse.

What is the difference between physical punishment and physical abuse?

Under the WA Criminal Code it is lawful for a parent or caregiver to physically punish a child for the purpose of discipline as long as the force used is 'reasonable under the circumstances'. Reasonable force is dependent on a combination of the following variables¹:

- the age of the child
- the stature of the child, the adult and the weight and size differential
- the health and intellectual capacity of the child
- the method of, and reason for inflicting punishment
- the physical harm, if any, caused to the child.

Child physical abuse is often the inadvertent result of physical punishment administered by an angry or frustrated parent who is otherwise caring and loving. Sometimes, however, physical discipline is intended to harm the child either physically and/or psychologically, is more likely to be part of an ongoing pattern of physical abuse and more likely to result in injury. Physical punishment which results, intentionally or not, in injury is physical abuse and may become the grounds for a child protection and/or criminal intervention. The point at which punishment begins to move into abuse is subjectively and culturally defined. In an effort to make this line objective many researchers and practitioners have used the presence, or absence of resultant physical injury to delineate the point at which punishment can be distinguished from abuse. However, this remains a contentious area and from the child's perspective punishment that does not result in injury may still be experienced as abusive.

Physical punishment of a child under 12 months of age is categorised as physical abuse due to the baby's specific vulnerabilities and their developmental incapacity to adequately comprehend correction/discipline². Boys, children between the ages of 3 and 5, and children who exhibit challenging behaviours and 'difficult' temperaments are more at risk of parental violence and potential physical abuse than other children.

¹ <http://www.secasa.com.au/index.php/family/11/95/3>

² Corporal punishment: Key issues. P Holzer & A Lamont. Resource Sheet. April 2010 National Child Protection Clearinghouse.

Parental intent does not distinguish physical discipline from physical abuse as the majority of parents who physically abuse their children believe their behaviours are consistent with exercising their parental right to manage their child's behaviour through physical discipline, even when such behaviours result in injury ³.

Repeated physical abuse is traumatic

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed whereas repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the developing personality as the child is in a physically abusive environment and trapped in a life of repeated physical and psychological trauma. The potential impact on the developing child of growing up in an environment with no available adult to keep them safe and secure cannot be overstated and is usually understated and under-reported.

Minor injuries

When a child has suffered a slight injury, bruising or slight tissue damage for example, it may still be assessed as a child protection issue. Making a determination is likely to be based on factors including:

- The age of the child; if the child is less than 12 months this should be a significant predictive factor in any assessment.
- How often, how hard and in what ways, the child is physically punished.
- If the punishment and parenting style meted out to one child is significantly different than to other children within the same family.
- The overall quality of the parent/child relationship – including whether or not the parenting is generally hostile.
- The presence or absence of other forms of abuse or neglect within the family, including domestic violence.

Some facts about the short and longer-term impact on children who have been physically abused

- Because physical punishment involves hitting or otherwise physically hurting children there is an inherent risk that such parental behaviours can result in injury to children.
- Infants show clear neurobiological disturbances in response to physically harsh parenting styles.
- Toddlers who experience frequent physical punishment have elevated levels of cortisol, the stress hormone which can have adverse results for the child's brain development.
- Children who are hit by their parents are more than twice as likely to suffer an injury requiring medical treatment than children not hit ⁴.
- There are strong correlations between being physically abused and experiencing other forms of abuse and neglect within the family; specifically more than a third of children who witness domestic violence will also experience physical abuse from a parent ⁵.
- The frequency or severity with which children experienced physical punishment, regardless of whether parental intent was disciplinary or abusive, is associated with increased mental health and aggression problems in children in every reported study ⁶.
- Adult mental health problems such as depression are predicted by levels of physical punishment experienced during childhood.

Whenever a health professional has clear concerns of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and/or neglect happening to the child they are seeing, or any other child in the family, they have a responsibility to take action to ensure that protective measures are put in place.

Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* for further information and guidance.

³Distinguishing physical punishment from physical abuse; implications for professionals. J Durrant. In Developing Practice: The child, youth and Family Work journal. Vol 16. Winter 2006.

⁴Report on Physical punishment in the United States: What research tells us about its effects on Children. E Gershoff. Phoenix Children's Hospital

⁵The overlap of witnessing partner violence with child maltreatment and other victimizations in a nationally representative survey of youth. S Hamby et al 2010.

⁶Ibid. Pg 15