



One Minute Guide



What is Physical Chastisement?

Physical chastisement is often associated with smacking or hitting. Cambridge Dictionary defines smacking as:

"to hit someone or something forcefully with the flat inside part of your hand, producing a short, loud noise, especially as a way of punishing a child"

- It is outlawed in Scotland and Wales.
- Physical abuse involves any action that intentionally causes physical harm to a child including fabricating the symptoms of or deliberately inducing illness.
- In England/ NI Law, parents have the right to make choices about 'reasonable' punishments/chastisement. However, there is a fine line between what is reasonable chastisement, which is a defence in law, and assault, which is a criminal offence.
- At the moment it is not illegal for a parent to smack a child, but if the smacking goes beyond the line of 'reasonable chastisement' a parent could be charged with assault.
- Whether a 'smack' amounts to reasonable punishment will depend on the circumstances of each case taking into consideration factors like the age of the child and the nature of the smack.
- Any incident that uses enough force to cause injury is considered assault and is not considered reasonable punishment and can result in criminal charges. ([NSPCC](#))

What is unreasonable chastisement?

It is considered unreasonable or over-chastisement if there is use of a weapon such as a wooden spoon, belt, slipper, stick or any other implement.

Leaving marks such as a visible handprint, bruise, minor swelling, grazes, scratches, abrasions, swellings, reddening of the skin and superficial cuts all cause harm and could be considered a common assault. Smacking/hitting can impact a child's mental and emotional health, how they build trust and develop relationships.

Potential impact of physical chastisement

Smacking a child may be a contradiction to the values and behaviours that parents seek to prevent. It can:

- set a bad example of how to handle strong emotions
- teach a child this is how things are controlled leading your child to hitting or bully others

- stop your child trusting you, encourage them to lie or hide feelings to avoid smacking
- make defiant behaviour worse, so discipline becomes even harder and may lead to resentful angry children,
- damage family relationships if it continues for a long time.

Physical Chastisement and Cultural Competency

There are a wide variety of cultural attitudes to parenting, discipline and the use of physical punishment of children. Some parents therefore may be unfamiliar or actively disagree with the legal and moral principles which forbid parents to hit their children. Cultural competency does not collude with oppressive practices that can be disguised as cultural issues.

Being culturally competent does not include agreeing with oppressive practices that can be disguised as cultural norms: withholding food, putting children in physical stress positions, marking or incisions on body, excessive labour etc

Which agencies are involved?

Agencies should follow their usual child protection procedures and report through to Wakefield Social Care and/or police.

In cases of children with black skin, there are other techniques that can be used, including UV photography, to assess bruising when it cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Responding to concerns about physical chastisement

Where there are concerns that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm, a referral to Children's Social Care should be made immediately.

A referral to Children's Social Care should be considered where there is reason to believe:

- a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm (Section 47 Children Act 1989);
- a child may be a Child in Need requiring statutory assessment or services (Section 17 Children Act 1989).



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Examples for a referral to Children's social care in relation to physical chastisement:

- physical chastisement has caused an injury to the child
- use of implements (belt, stick, shoe, etc.)
- fear of an adult and/or going home
- significant concerns about the child's emotional well-being and presentation
- concerns that a crime may have been committed
- explanation provided is not consistent with the injury
- no adequate explanation provided for the injury/bruise, causing concern

A delay in parents seeking medical help for a child when it is needed should also be reported. Professional judgement is always required. Is your decision defensible? Share in a timely manner rather than waiting until the end of day.

Universal / Early Help / Family Help Services

Physical Chastisement does not automatically require a referral to Children's Social Care. Practitioners should use professional judgement, consider the child's lived experience and level of risk, consult with their safeguarding lead, and consider whether Early Help or other support services may be the most appropriate response.

Where concerns do not meet the threshold for Children's Social Care involvement, practitioners should:

- listen to and speak with the child
- record the child's views and any concerns accurately
- consider speaking with parents/carers where safe and appropriate to do so
- record concerns within the child's chronology
- consider the wider context and any emerging patterns of concern
- discuss concerns with the safeguarding lead
- consider Early Help or other family support services

If in doubt, always contact Children's Social Care for advice and consultation. Seeking advice can help determine the most appropriate response, including Early Help, Section 17 Child in Need support, or Section 47 Child Protection intervention.

As well as following the 'Dealing with disclosures' advice on the handout card for school staff it may be useful to also try to establish:

- When was the child hit?
- Where on their body they were hit?

- How were they hit?
- How often this may happen?
- Whether they were hurt/had any marks or injuries (describe injury shape, appearance, size and location)
- Their thoughts/feelings/actions around this.
- How would they feel about parents being contacted and informed of their disclosure?
- How the child feels about going home?
- Has any assault been reported to the police?

Advice for parents

- Set clear rules and expectations. Keep rules simple, clear to follow and not too many.
- Set clear boundaries and consequences, which should be fair, realistic and logical.
- Be aware of your emotions and escalation, can you give yourself time to calm down?
- Everybody likes praise! Try telling your child when they are doing well, describe exactly what you are praising them for, this will reinforce the behavior you want to see and helps keep you calm.

Resources

[Alternatives to smacking, physical/corporal punishment \(booklets\) - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](#)

[EPACUK | Join Our Parenting Support](#)

[AFRUCA Safeguarding Children](#)

[Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief](#)

[Identifying Child Physical Abuse & How to Prevent It | NSPCC](#)

<https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/alternatives-to-smacking-physical-corporal-punishment-booklets/>
[Make it clear. End physical punishment. | NSPCC](#)

Visit the [WSCP website](#) for more links, guidance and practical tools

