

Corporal punishment at school and in the family: a long process for its complete elimination

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Right from the start in this single-subject dossier dedicated to the issue of corporal punishment, we claim a more “activist” approach, if we may say so, of this study. It is certainly not anything new, but it is worth explaining this approach to the research that characterises, in a particular and in-depth way, pedagogical studies that are often intertwined with ethical questions and have become involved with critical social issues and the educational needs expressed by individuals and communities. Pure research, intellectual commitment on a more theoretical (and historical) level, even in the distant past, has frequently gone hand in hand with the desire to improve the conditions of education and make a contribution to change. Let’s think, for example, of the «pedagogy of the oppressed» of Paulo Freire ([1974], 2002; [1968], 2018, *passim*), of the critical pedagogy of Henry Giroux (2011), of the intellectual struggle against the «black pedagogy» of Katharina Rutschky and Alice Miller (Miller, [1980], 1983; 2006, *passim*).

From these cultural roots, we have gone forward to promote renewed reflection on and attention to childhood, with a focus on corporal punishment. This is an aspect that, more than others, is capable of throwing a powerful light on childhood living conditions, on the behaviour of adults and on the collective imagination of an entire society. Although often hidden within the home or institutions, it is not a marginal aspect, neither for the quality of life during childhood nor for the wider community in which the child is born and is raised. Indeed, it is a first-rate

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indicator of collective attitudes towards children and, more generally, of the position assigned to them in the social hierarchy. Focusing on corporal punishment is therefore of great interest and usefulness because it represents an epiphenomenon, capable of making us understand a brand new world of behaviours towards children. In fact, we should not only speak about corporal punishment, but also about all the other childhood sufferings that are always associated with it, among which the psychological aspect is certainly of primary importance.

Unfortunately, obedience and punishment have been part of education and schooling so continuously over time and so rooted in the collective consciousness that they appear completely “natural”, and are even considered as “spontaneous”. This has led to the use of authority through beatings being considered as an essential and non-modifiable aspect of the educational relationship, as a duty of the parent to guarantee the perfect maintenance of family unit and the uninterrupted transmission of values between one generation and another.

For a very long time, in a multi-generational chain, adult-child relationships – even outside the family – had a prevalent authoritarian mark: the child’s first duty, well above all the others, was obedience and therefore respect for the rules set forth by the adult. The biological bond of the child’s dependence on adults and the natural asymmetry between the two figures have fostered a relationship within which the primary needs of children have often remained unheeded. Truthfully, we must say that the educational burden placed on the shoulders of adults, especially of parents, was decidedly significant. Society entrusted them to educate children, from the first months of life, so that they could then be accepted and recognised as effective members of the community, or, if not, be excluded, with the additional penalty of dishonouring the family.

A commitment in which the influence of religion, as a fundamental protection against sin and vice, played a major role in parental care, then continued during education in schools. The idea of the innate and unavoidable tendency to sin, deeply rooted in Western culture, contributed to the persistence of adult behaviours (Greven, 1991) which concerned, it is useful to note, both children and women:

A rather profound disconnect exist in advanced societies where spanking is legal, such as the United States and Canada. Most adults have accepted the idea that a man does not have the right to correct his female partner with physical blows. Yet, the majority, religious and non-religious, still believe that hitting a child is an acceptable and even desirable way of behaviour correction. An im-

portant task for family violence activists, religious or secular is to publicly call attention to the fact that hitting of loved ones, whether adults or children, has long-term individual and social detriments (Jolyne, in Holtmann, Nason-Clark, 2019, p. 79).

With a comparative approach, we can see that the economic structure has constituted the common basis for a massive use of violence against children even in societies very distant from each other, both with regard to geographical location, and cultural and religious aspects. While following a logic of multifactorial explanation, it is necessary to highlight that

All agricultural societies [...] placed vivid emphasis on the importance of obedience and strong discipline, usually including physical discipline. This served various purposes, of course, including religious goals. But surely related to the need to plant early a habit that would help sustain children's commitment to the family economy even in the teenage years (Stearns, 2005, p. 17).

During the twentieth century, a series of factors contributed strongly to modify these assumptions, with evident repercussions in the collective imagination: think, for example, of the positions expressed in the pedagogical and psychological fields (especially from Psychoanalysis), to sociological developments regarding the rights of the family and women, to the encouragement of youth participation starting from the 1970s. Parents, in some parts of the world, have begun to put, first and foremost, not obedience but the happiness of children, thus changing a centuries-old family custom (Stearns, 2010).

Regulatory changes to protect minors have certainly played a major role, starting with Sweden, which in 1979 prohibited any form of corporal punishment in any context of life. The picture of growing international attention for the rights of children and for their well-being has been consolidated and become detailed over time (Bitensky, 2006).

The twentieth century has thus given us a precious legacy, which finds its highest expression in the concept of "best interest of child", a true super-regulation of international legislation on children (Zermatten, 2010): «In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration» (UN, *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, Article 3, Paragraph 1).

The initiatives launched internationally by both the UN (Pinheiro, 2006) and Europe in order to reach a situation whereby the use of cor-

poral punishment is prohibited in any situation, but above all to eradicate it once and for all in our daily lives, are very significant. We recall, in particular, the commitment that was made in 2004 but which to date has still not been fully maintained, with the *Europe-wide ban on corporal punishment of children* (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2004, *Recommendation n. 1666*). The concept is simple and clearly explained: «Children have the same rights as adults to respect for their human dignity and physical integrity and to equal protection under the law» (Council of Europe, 2007a, 2007b). The apparent simplicity and correspondence to the international culture of protection and promotion of children, however, must not deceive us because we are still far from reaching such a goal at a global level.

As documented by *The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children*, over time the number of States that have completely eliminated the use of corporal punishment has grown, especially in the 21st century, although the legal prohibition does not necessarily imply abandoning the practice in daily life and therefore leaves a vast and problematic area of intervention (Global Initiative, 2001-2020). In any case, it is a path towards improvement that we must not be afraid of defining as real progress, because it is based on a documented series of facts, of numerous data of reality that on the one hand convince us, at least in this area, of a positive development of humanity, on the other hand they push us to promote this improvement “trend” in every way (Pinker, 2018; Schiavone, 2020).

This monographic study for the 16th volume of «RIEF» aims to write a reflection of a wide range of violence done against children. Because the “formative question” is embedded in a social order where the most vulnerable remain as the most gravely affected by the acts of violence, it is at the heart of the institutions of the family sphere. The vision of a relaxing society in respect to order and discipline has the goal of submission of the most dominated members, including forgiveness of resorting to the use of force. The use of deprivation, bullying, and corporal punishment is a well-founded societal norm imposed upon the domination of the weakest. In this context, educational acts of violence have been minimalized, along with the idea that chastising, punishing, and correcting the child are unavoidable, at the heart of the family, as well as in the structures of supervision and upbringing.

The base of this study addresses the burden of social representation toward the replacement of corporal punishment. The text proposed by Stefania Carioli also adopts a historic, legal, and comparative perspecti-

ve, to examine the rights of the parent to the correction of the child in the Italian context. Luz Estela Tobón Berrio, Colette Sabatier, and Jorge Palacio, reveal the sociocultural and ideological frame in which corporal punishment is embedded in Colombian society.

In examining the acts of violence done against children in Switzerland during the twentieth century, Gabriella Seveso updates the implication of the institutions within the situations of abuse and of intervening violence at the heart of establishments of internment of adoptive families. The essay also exposes the complex process of a reparative justice as seen in the recognition of suffering prejudices.

The study is therefore not content with simply collecting studies that examine the question of the most violent manifestations of punishment, which have constituted a determined attachment for developing the international politics seen in their eradication. If the trifold of chastising-punishment-correction associated with the social norm manifests itself in brutal forms, it also deploys more subtle forms, which are essential to repair. Thus, the article by Elisabetta Biffi and Chiara Carla Montà addresses humiliations inflicted on the child, with respect to their place in formative everyday routines.

The studies published here therefore show the importance of the continuing reparation of the place and the forms of corporal and psychological acts of violence. Nevertheless, they also precisely underline the necessity of leading the interventions to develop the knowledge of these processes conceived within. The essay by Laura Cerrocchi and Alessandro D'Antone also examines the corporal chastisements to the prism of different forms of violence, which confront families. Hence, these aforementioned acts are conducive to dysfunctions in family relations. In order to repair and prevent them, the socio-educational services of family and parental support prove to be essential services. Their actions directed towards parents and professionals should become engrained in the field of upbringing throughout the entire life.

The article by Caterina Benelli also affirms the importance of the educational alliances between families and professionals. It emphasizes different theoretical and methodological models (Eric Berne, Claude M. Steiner, Ferdinando Montuschi, Daniela Lucangeli). Their provisions offer solid paths to develop educational and didactic situations taking into account emotions and expressing the importance to recognize and remember the well-being of children. Those, which are the highlighted approaches in the studies, are reference to the socio-anthropological concept of structural violence, proposed in the contribution of Mari-

nella Muscarà and Alessandro Romano, proven central. In fact, it aims to recognize and to question the burden of social responsibility shared among to raise the question of punishments where children are the victims.

In crossing the cultural and socio-historical contexts, as well as those theoretical approaches, this study encourages to place within a global and systematic frame the prevention strategies and the fight against the acts of violence against children. Each of the articles provides reflection but also encourages the exploration of new studies surrounding the theme of physical and psychological brutalities, the forms of negligence or of exploitation, the fight against factors of major stress which produce risks for the families, or even the exposition to acts of violence, whether they are done by adults, or between children themselves. Within the academic establishments, different studies show that the sentiment of well-being at school is significantly correlated to the fact of having been victim or witness to acts of violence between students (Centre d'analyse stratégique, 2013).

The appearance does not conform to the norm distributed by the media, which continues to strongly object to bullying, but very inadequately takes into account actions done by adults. In this way, the mocking about weight, size, look, name, the manner of speaking, and the colour of the skin are frequently minimized micro-aggressions, which often have harmful long term consequences, and include the students who were in the position of success. The studies on the practices of harassment or school bullying show that the acts of physical or verbal violence between students in the school setting should make continued actions, in the direction of togetherness of the community, to hope for their eradication (Debarbieux, 2011).

Taking into account the intersectional responsibilities should encourage the placing in open and evaluation of programs which integrate the collaborative approaches between the concerned actors and which implicate the children. Indeed, the support of expression of the child's experience and the listening to their speech within all their places of life to develop a culture of respect, and of their rights, remain at the center of what is at stake in the processes of democratization of educational relations (Francis, 2017; Jesu, Le Gal, 2015). In that, the example of workshops of familial democracy, exposed by the surroundings and founded with the theoretical and methodological model of the French educationalist Celestin Freinet, confirm that are underlined in 2009 the Committee on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations:

A family where children can freely express views and be taken seriously from the earliest ages provides an important model, and is a preparation for the child to exercise the right to be heard in the wider society. Such an approach to parenting serves to promote individual development, enhance family relations and support children's socialization and plays a preventive role against all forms of violence in the home and family (UN, 2009, p. 18-19).

In addition to the abovementioned papers, two articles enrich the reading of this 16th volume. Giada Prisco and Clara Silva examine the identity-construction processes of girls from migrant families, and how that is tied to the period of adolescence. This essay is specifically focused on the experience of exile marked by the traumas, and to the challenges that characterise the route and the choices of girls.

Ivana Bolognesi and Chiara Dalladonne Vandini examine the interactions between children and parents during the completion of homework. Thanks to an ethnographic survey, the Authors highlight the co-construction of skills, which facilitate the access of the parent to the culture of the school, and of their expectations.

In each of these essays, different points are the driving forces to make the links with the thematic approach within the study. Concerning school work in the family context, one can for example make a reference to the scientific advice of the Federation Council of Parents of Public School Students (Douat, 2017), which signals that this activity is a potential source of conflicts within the home, because it is assumed to be a generally progressive organization, a parental mobilization, and an exercise of authority adapted to the needs of each student. In all "social media", the ritual of homework is susceptible to feed into and exacerbate inter-familial conflicts.

In conclusion, the path to accomplish is to completely eliminate corporal punishments in formative institutions – and, thus, in the family – always deserve a permanent and increasing attention, on all levels of society.

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