

As child was hit, we all watched without intervening

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NONE of us waiting in line with grocery carts at the Superstore on McPhillips Street envied the young mother whose child was throwing a tantrum.

The boy, about four years old, started screaming when his mother pried out of his hand a chocolate bar he had seized off a nearby rack. She tried talking — “No, we’re not buying that today, Liam” — but the boy continued hollering and repeatedly yelled, “You promised!”

The mother raised her voice — “Stop it now, Liam!” When the boy sat on the floor in passive protest and sobbed, she warned: “I’m going to start counting!” She counted backwards from five, slowly, allowing space between each number to give Liam time to change his behaviour. He didn’t.

With her left hand, she grabbed one of his arms and hoisted him in the air. With her right hand, she hit him on his bottom.

None of us intervened. About six of us shoppers lined up at adjacent cashiers had witnessed the violence and none of us said or did anything.

If it had been a domestic dispute involving a man hitting a woman, or if it had been elder abuse with a caregiver striking a senior person in a wheelchair, it likely would have been different. Someone among us would have stepped in. At a minimum, we would have asked the victim if they wanted us to call 911, and we might have recorded the violence on our phone cameras to collect evidence for police.

But none of us rose to Liam’s defence, even though, as a boy, he was helpless to protect himself. What happened to “it takes a village to raise a child”?

Unfortunately, the law sides with Liam’s mother, permitting the use of physical force by a parent, teacher or qualified supervisor “if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances.”

For those of us who feel the physical punishment of children is archaic and barbaric, there is hopeful news that Canada could join the 59 other countries that have banned corporal punishment.

On May 19, the House of Commons gave first reading to a bill by the NDP house leader, MP Peter Julian, to repeal Section 43 of the Criminal Code, which is the section that permits the hitting of children. On June 14, Sen. Stan Kutcher introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

While the simultaneous bills in the House and in the Senate offer reason for optimism, there’s still a long way to go before the law would be changed. Many bills don’t survive the lengthy process of second readings, research reports, debates by committees and third readings.

People have tried to ban spanking in Canada for decades, including Truth and Reconciliation Commission chair Murray Sinclair. In the TRC’s recommendations, the sixth Call To Action is to repeal the laws that allows physical punishment of children.

Part of the reason it's so difficult to change the law is that the issue is highly emotional for many people. Adults who were spanked as children are more likely to spank their own children, studies show. For these people, it can be unsettling to acknowledge that the physical violence inflicted on them by their loving parents — perhaps euphemistically soft-pedalled as “just a little smack” — caused them harm, and now they're harming the next generation in the same way.

Definitive research was compiled by the University of Texas and the University of Michigan and published in 2016 in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. It included a meta-analysis of 50 years of studies on spanking involving more than 160,000 children.

The compilation concludes the more children are spanked, the more likely they are to grow into adults with low self-esteem, aggression, anti-social conduct and mental-health problems. Regardless of their parent's objective, the brain of the victim can't distinguish spanking from abuse.

This is not to say parents who spank are evil people acting out of cruelty. Their intention for spanking may be to reinforce good behaviour, but it's misguided. Children who are spanked are more inclined to defy their parents, not improve their behaviour. In other words, spanking achieves the opposite of what the parents intended.

Those of us who have parented children know calming their meltdowns can be difficult, particularly in public places. We can reason with them, threaten to withdraw privileges, model the desired conduct — and sometimes they still act like brats.

Still, it's crucial not to resort to violence, even when they act out in a supermarket with the added stress of nearby strangers judging our style of parenting.

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