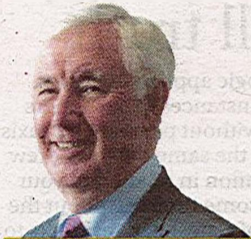


Violence towards schoolchildren is never acceptable



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST



► This picture was taken in April 1947 – the month before the Foundation for Educational Research's investigation began – and served to publicise a young entrepreneur's business supplying canes and birches to schools

SCHOOL corporal punishment refers to causing deliberate pain or discomfort in response to undesired behaviour by students in schools.

In May 1947 the Foundation for Educational Research was invited to investigate the effects on children of various forms of punishment and reward by David Rennie Hardman, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Education and former MP for Darlington. In his opinion, corporal punishment was indefensible.... 'It was bad for the child, and it was very bad for the adult who administered it.' He also argued that it was important for the Ministry to move with public opinion which had to be convinced that without corporal punishment discipline would be maintained.

Legal disputes about corporal punishment were not uncommon at the time. Two years earlier in 1945 bare-bottomed slipping at a prep school was held not to be excessive or unreasonable. In a 1959 case, a six-stroke slipping for a 12-year-old was deemed reasonable by magistrates.

I was a sensitive and possibly normal two-year-old in 1947. Unfortunately I was not born in Poland where corporal punishment had been prohibited since 1783. Nor was I French where it had been banned since the First World War. Just my luck to be born in the UK where it would not be abolished until 40 years later.

For the next 16 years I suffered the tawse (leather strap) in infant school, the cane in primary school and, it appeared, any implement teachers could get their hands on in secondary school, including rattan cane, leather strap, wooden yardstick, blackboard dusters, gym shoes, bunsen burner tubes and of course the odd slap on the head.

The rattan cane was the favoured instrument, between 36 to 40 inches in length. If administered vigorously, this would leave painful weals or 'tramlines' across my posterior lasting several days.

In relatively few places in England the leather strap, tawse, was used. Again just my luck! Two of the 'relatively few places' were Gateshead and Newcastle. On appointment to

my first school, because it was in Gateshead, I discovered that the leather tawse was regularly used on pupils. The senior teachers would carry the folded tawse in their jacket pockets. I have to admit that at the beginning of my career I rarely questioned the effectiveness or the morality of corporal punishment.

For many pupils, particularly the academically gifted, those good at games and of course the girls, this violent aspect of the schools was rarely seen.

Though I can remember when the new Sex Discrimination Act came into being in 1975 there were even suggestions that girls would henceforth have to be caned as much as boys.

Even so attitudes to corporal punishment were changing. In primary schools, where it was common in the 1950s it tailed off quite early. By 1982 a third of Britain's 35,000 schools already banned corporal punishment. However no LEA banned corporal punishment altogether until 1979/80.

In 1982 corporal punishment in Britain's schools was dealt a blow by the European Court of Human Rights. It ruled that beating school children against their parents' wishes was a violation of the Human Rights Convention because parents should have their children taught 'in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.'

Britain was the only country in Western Europe that still allowed corporal punishment in schools. A couple of years earlier, in 1979, Sweden went even further by prohibiting corporal punishment in all spheres of life – in homes, schools, the penal system and alternative care settings.

Tom Scott of the Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment (STOPP) countered by saying it was a 'tremendous day for children, parents, teachers and society as a whole.'

The advice from David Hart, General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers was 'carry on caning.' He said that the judgement – which did not ban caning – would cause confusion in schools which will have to distinguish between children who are allowed to be beaten and those who are not.

In 1986 corporal punishment in state schools was outlawed altogether.

When it passed through Parliament by a very narrow majority some of the pro corporal punishment MPs did not manage to vote because they were stuck in traffic caused by the wedding of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson.

Today the argument about corporal punishment continues, with many parents and commentators, some teachers and community leaders and even young people maintaining the belief that moderate and properly regulated caning helps to maintain order.

In 2008 a Times Education Supplement survey found that one teacher in five, and almost a quarter of all secondary school teachers, would still like to see corporal punishment reinstated. In 2011 another survey found that half of parents and 19% of students also wanted to bring back the cane.

Support remained high for most traditional punishments including sending children out of class (89%); after-school detentions (88%); lunch time detentions (87%); expelling or suspending children (84%); and making them write lines (77%). But shouting at children was less popular, backed by only 55% of parents, and embarrassing children was frowned upon with just 21% of parents supporting it.

In 2013, I was talking to an MP who was just about to be knighted and was bemoaning the loss of corporal punishment in schools. 'Never did me any harm' he spouted. 'Neither did leeches when we used them in medicine' was my reply. I hope he thought of leeches when he knelt before the sword. What he will never understand is that corporal punishment is abusive both to the receiver and the giver. To institutionalise the beating of children is a shame on our education system and those who took part.

For me, as someone who lived through the era of state sanctioned corporal punishment, the thought of its return is horrific. But as I said at the beginning, perhaps I'm a little sensitive.

■ Les Walton is chair of the Northern Education Trust.