

Will the Domestic Violence Law halt domestic violence?

Daily Graphic (Tuesday, May8, 2007)

As a nation, have we finally arrived at a solution to domestic violence? Will wife battering be something of the past? Are child and mature adult battering in the name of discipline not violence?

I do not presume that I have discovered the final answer to one of the most divisive issues in parenting and on violence, but I do think that I have uncovered some truths, or at least some nagging questions, that deserve to be reckoned with if as a nation we really want to end all forms of violence not only against women but against all human beings.

I have come across parents who themselves were victims of corporal punishment and who have admitted spanking their own children frequently and these were parents of the mid 1950s to the early 1990s. It was the order of the day in almost all household.

They have admitted that times have changed, and so has their perception of spanking and child upbringing. Most of them have openly stated that if they had had all the information they have now or if they had known what they know now, they would not have spanked them at all. They have agreed that no child needs to be hit; not under any circumstances.

Many physicians, church leaders, psychologists and paediatricians in this country are also advocating doing away with corporal punishment as a corrective measure. Among these are Pastor Anthony Kukubor of the Royal Chapel International, Michel Camp Assembly and Dr. E. Badoe, Consultant Paediatrician of the Children's Department of the Korlebu Teaching Hospital, Accra.

They all agree that spanking is detrimental to the well being of the child and the family system. They are also joining in the call for a change in the way children are trained in this country because corporal punishment has been found to have serious physical, social, sexual, emotional and psychological risks for all children, particularly on the developing brain. It also has a long term effect on marriage life and child upbringing as it becomes a vicious circle.

Pastor Kukubor who is a parent, brought up all his four children without raising a hand against them; yet they are doing well and is proud of them. This is someone who is preaching the word of God yet does not use the Mosaic Law to inflict pain unto his children but respect the major themes of the New Testament which teach love and forgiveness and a respect for the beauty and dignity of children, and which overwhelmingly reject violence and retribution as a means of solving human conflicts.'

According to Rev. Kukubor, the brutal and vindictive practice of corporal punishment cannot be reconciled with the major themes of the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. And all those who hold to this idea are not really practicing what the Lord Jesus Christ stood and died for. He holds dearly to the Lord Jesus' commandment when He said "whatever you do to the least of these ones you do it to me".

Dr. Badoe admitted that cases which are reported at the hospital could be avoided if parents could manage their children with love and patience. According to him, horrible cases are brought to the hospital something he believes could be avoided. To his surprise, the culprits are almost always protected by relatives and friends, and the innocent children are always blamed for what happens to them. The shocking part is that the real cause of the accident is not

immediately reported for fear of the culprit being accused. Different scenes are created to show that it was an accident. Pathetically, the children also protect the victims out of fear.

It should be understood that corporal punishment either mild or harsh has the same effect on the child. It affects the developing brain of the growing child. Children who are hit become more aggressive. They learn from the parents' behaviour that might make right. The stronger one is the easier to impose one's view on others irrespective of their feelings or opinions.

Corporal punishment is generally no more effective than non-physical disciplinary techniques in instilling acceptable behaviour, that the greater the frequency of corporal punishment, the higher the risk of negative consequences.

It only suppresses the so-called misbehaviour briefly, but does not change its probability of occurring. We do not need corporal punishment in changing the behaviour of our children, what we need is to live by what we preach for them to emulate. Today's children do not have role models, no wonder they are confused about what is good or bad.

They are told one thing is bad and yet the very adults in their lives practise it. They are being bombarded in the media by the very things they are told are bad, and what do you expect them to do? Let us live right and speak right for them to emulate.

There is an important distinction to be made between discipline and punishment since the word discipline has been abused so much when it comes to parenting and teaching. Punishment's main goal is to stop the present occurrence of inappropriate behaviour. It is less concern with the future than with "stop it right now". It has nothing to do with teaching rather than inflicting a maximum pain.

Discipline on the other hand has to do with teacher-student relationship. Its Latin root is "discipuli" which means student. Its main objective is to teach the offender what to do instead of the offence, rather than merely stopping the offence. Biblical spankers could learn from the Lord Jesus' own example with His disciples. He never spanked them as it is in almost all our training workshops (fitting, tailoring, carpentering shops...). When He needed to reproach them, He did it with love and humility.

Once spanking is allowed, child abuse is legalised. There is no acceptable level of what is allowed or not. This is because no one can quantify what is acceptable or not. The velocity of the whip would depend on the adult and the injury once not reported cannot be taken for abuse until someone reports it.

Thus spanking can escalate toward physical abuse, potentially injuring the child, and can contribute to later emotional and behavioural problems. It's also less effective than alternative disciplinary tactics, and it's a hard habit to break. This is why spankers themselves mostly spank their spouses and matured children. Children also become use to it and no longer fear it.

Studies have shown that people who were spanked as kids tend to spank as parents, perpetuating the cycle. Studies also showed that kids who are spanked are more likely than their peers to display behavioural and emotional problems later in life. The more frequently they're spanked, the more harmful the consequences tend to be. This can be seen in our schools, they are the type who bully their friends and are constantly in trouble with school authorities.

Many people argue that they were spanked as children yet they grew up and are alright or it never affected them socially. To these people there are some few questions I always

asked.

As Kofi was growing, both parents were heavy cigarette smokers yet Kofi did not get lung cancer despite the fact that scientist are saying that the non-smoker who stays close to smokers and inhales nicotine is highly at risk of getting lung cancer. Does this mean that it should be recommended to the general public?

For the fact that Ama was in the same car as the parents who were drunk with the father driving and they had an accident where both parents died but Ama survived the accident; should we recommend to the general public that drinking and driving is alright.

Also for the fact that Kweku was able to dodge a bullet while playing with the brother who aimed the father's loaded gun at him, should we tell the public that bullets are not dangerous and are easy to dodge?

I believe the answer to these questions would be no. This goes to say that for the fact that some people think that they were raised in violent homes yet are doing well in society does not mean that violence against children should be permitted in any way.

As a matter of fact, most people who claim that they have not been affected by the violence in which they grew up are not always right. A critical study of their life reveals the effect.

Biologically adrenaline output increases sharply during fear, anger and physical punishment. When this is prolonged or often repeated, the endocrine balance fails to return to the baseline. The victim becomes easily angered and prone to poor impulse control and spontaneous violent outburst; mostly timid. As a boss, they shout at everybody, are autocratic – reflecting their childhood homes; dominate their home, create fear around them; attack anything that resembles their infancy and become moody at no provocation – this is as a result of the constant fear that has dominated their childhood.

Since those people do not see anything wrong with what was done to them, they are destined to do same. No wonder such people later on assault their parents and the boys assault their girl friends. It becomes more serious when they get employment in institutions where they have power over others; particularly in educational institutions and the forces.

Those who pay the price the most are the wives of the male who were brought up in these homes. There are today, so many educated women who are being abused emotionally by their partners and yet this goes unreported. At least I have come across so many.

Mothers who use corporal punishment on their male children should understand that they are also contributing to the making of a future female molester and child abuser. To make the law of protecting women effective, women must start calling for a stop to this.

The best way out of this is through legislation and education. Today we have a law which criminalises domestic violence but it is interesting that this law does not criminalise domestic corporal punishment. One wonders how we could stop domestic violence without stopping what causes it. So long as we legalise child abuse in the name of discipline, it would be a mirage calling for the success of this law. For this law to be effective, we first and for most need to call for the complete abolishing of all forms of corporal punishment against children and even mature adults in our homes, educational institutions and all penal systems for young offenders.

When we allow mature ladies to be beaten on their buttocks in our educational institutions and even in our homes, how do you expect them to understand what is abuse and what is not?

It should be understood that victims of abuse become abusers themselves. It is legal for a mature adult of 20 and even more to be caned on her buttocks in our educational institutions and even by parents at home. If this does not constitute abuse then I am afraid what is abuse then?

A friend had a shock of her life one day when her co-tenants complained to the police that she was abusing her niece for which she was charged in court. The niece Ama did not wake up early on Saturday to do her house work and the aunty punished her. This infuriated her co-tenants and they had her arrested.

Meanwhile, Ama was late to school on Friday and did not sweep her plot, and was caned on her buttocks by her class teacher- a male teacher. This does not constitute abuse? A male teacher caning her on her buttocks, this should have being a felony outside the classroom. Why this double standard in our laws? Do we have a special law for our schools and another for our homes? Any employer could do same when their subjects failed to perform well or report to work early. How do we expect our children to understand what abuse is or not? How do you expect a child who bent down for a smack on the buttocks on Friday to say no to an abuser on Saturday?

In my friend's case if I were her lawyers I would have asked the court what makes it a crime for a female to beat a mature lady but makes it legal for a male teacher to do the same thing, even worst by beating her on her buttocks? It is high time we call a spade a spade and stop defending one form of violence against the other if we really want to do away with all forms of violence from our society. This is possible if only we all agree that any form of corporal punishment is violence as the UN considers it.

We need to legislate against all forms of corporal punishment. Those who fall short of the law would have to undergo a certain number of weeks of compulsory counselling as their punishment.

With the introduction of the domestic violence law, care should be taken so that one sex does not become over powerful to the detriment of the other. Failure to work at this would lead to an increase in divorce cases as it is happening in some industrialised countries.

For fear of being punished for assaulting their spouses, most men prefer leaving their marital homes to save themselves. In these countries, the women have become so powerful that they are the first to hit their men.

We can learn from the mistakes and successes of countries that have outlawed corporal punishment all these years. Sweden was the first country that introduced an explicit ban on it in 1979, followed by other European nations including Israel.

Since parenting is not taught and most people do what they have seen their parents and grandparents do over the years, parenting programmes should be put in place to encourage parents and parents-to-be to adopt new methods of parenting style which are suitable to the making of responsible adults.

Ghana needs a new generation of people who would act out of conviction and not out of fear of punishment. A new generation of people, who would say no when they need to do so without fear. This can be achieved when we consciously work at removing fear from our educational system and parenting, and replace it with love. It is only love that would save this nation.

Not until the groups calling for the Domestic Violence Law start advocating for public education on the effect of corporal punishment on the individual; the society; particularly our mothers and mothers-to-be; and alternative form of disciplines which are more effective and more human, we would in some few years come to realised that much has not being achieved and that in trying to solve one problem we have successfully created another one - high rate of divorce and more single mothers.

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