

MEDIA STATEMENT (FINAL DRAFT)

Children's Amendment Bill must promote positive discipline, support parents and ban corporal punishment, argue child rights and development experts

Cape Town, 7 August 2007 – No form of violence against children should be legal.

Violence against children negatively impacts on their mental and physical development.

This is the core message of a working group against corporal punishment, which includes child rights advocates and experts on prevention and management of abuse and neglect, child development and child care from various civil society and faith based organisations. They are supporting government's plans to outlaw corporal punishment of children in homes and in other places that care for children. Such punishment is already banned in educational, judicial and other institutions.

The working group is highlighting the issue because the draft Children's Amendment Bill comes before Parliament for public hearings and further debate next week, from 13 until 17 August 2007.

Despite calls from some to exclude the ban from the final Bill, numerous valid reasons exist to oblige parliament – and society – to outlaw smacking and hitting of children as a way of disciplining them. The organizations and bodies represented in the working group are aware of numerous reports and instances which indicate that many South African children are subjected to beatings with belts, sticks, cables and hosepipes on a daily basis.

“Children are the most vulnerable members of society, and they must receive equal protection under the law as is granted to adults,” says Samantha Waterhouse, Advocacy Manager at Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. “Corporal punishment often escalates into serious physical assault, and many of the beatings that

children suffer at the hands of adults would be considered completely unacceptable if committed against an adult. Also, while many adults would try to defend themselves, get away or lay charges, children don't have these options."

The Bill provides for the development of effective and positive disciplining of children while obligating the state to provide parents and the public with information and education on positive child-rearing strategies that are based on non-violence, self-discipline and respect for the human rights of others.

Furthermore, the Bill recognizes that prosecuting parents is seldom in the best interests of the child and indicates that only serious cases should be prosecuted – as is currently the case with most of the violence carried out between adults.

The banning of corporal punishment will contribute to the reduction of general levels of violence in the society as well as protection of the individual rights of the child, the experts argue.

"We cannot and should not underestimate the role played by the nature of childhood experiences of violence in exacerbating the violent nature of our society" argues Carol Bower, an independent consultant specializing in child rights and prevention of abuse. "Five studies conducted since 1997 show evidence that on average, the behaviour of children whose parents use corporal punishment got worse. They also demonstrate a strong association between corporal punishment and children's aggression and anti-social conduct."

The experts also emphasize that traditionally African communities and cultures have an integral and progressive approach toward disciplining children. As examples, two isiXhosa sayings recommend anti-violent relationships and means of resolving conflict with children.

They are:

"Imbeko ayikhiwa ngoswazi" (Respect cannot be built with a stick)

"Induku ayinamzi" (Beatings do not build a home).

Similar expressions exist in other southern African languages. An isiZulu proverb says that you cannot raise a child with a stick – “*umntwana akakhuliswa ngoswazi*” – which is paralleled in the xiTsonga proverb that you do not raise a family with a stick – “*nhonga a yi aka muti*”.

These sentiments are echoed by most major religions. Judeo-Christian and Islamic texts tell about the importance of kindness and respect towards children as the cornerstone of adult and social relationships with the younger generation. So, while some within churches and religious communities support corporal punishment, many others believe that it is no longer appropriate in today’s world – where any violation of a person’s human rights may be regarded as an unacceptable way of correcting unacceptable or anti-social behavior. A more contemporary idiom, “hurt people hurt people” sums up the traditional saying that “violence begets violence.”

The working group urges parliamentarians and all South Africans to support the ban and ensure that it is passed into law. “What the ban will achieve, in essence, is to protect all children regardless of who they are or where they live, while introducing measures to develop and popularize positive methods to discipline children,” says Keith Vermeulen of the SACC.

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Notes to editors:

Who constitutes the working group on corporal punishment?

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Issued on behalf of the working group on corporal punishment

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