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No, it is definitely 'not OK to smack'

EXCLUSIVE

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To smack or not to smack. That is no longer the question. The verdict is in on the corporal punishment of children, and the answer is a resounding no.

It not only undermines a child's right to live free of violence, and often accompanies other forms of child abuse, but corporal punishment has also been shown to significantly increase the risk of children going on to suffer serious, lifelong mental health disorders and to use violence as an adult.

Even so, over-65s are still more than twice as likely as those in their teens and 20s to believe using physical force to correct or control behaviour is necessary when raising children.

And it remains lawful in Australia, despite being banned in 65 countries.

A new research paper from leading Australian academics published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health strongly puts the case for making corporal punishment of children by their parents or carers illegal in Australia.

University of Melbourne professor of psychiatry Sophie Havighurst, lead author of the report *Corporal Punishment of Children in Australia*. The evidence-based case for legislative reform, said Australia should not be lagging the rest of the world.

"It's illegal to hit your neighbour, their child or their dog, why is it legal to hit your child? Why don't children have the same right to protection from violence as adults?" she said.

Corporal punishment of a child by a parent or carer is still legal in all jurisdictions in Australia, provided it is within "reasonable limits".

And it is still prevalent, the paper notes, with six in 10 people aged between 16 to 24 reporting they had experienced four or more incidents of corporal punishment in childhood. That work, in the first national Australian

Child Maltreatment Study published last year, shows 16 to 24-year-olds who were smacked repeatedly by their parents were nearly twice as likely to develop anxiety and depression later in life.

Co-author Professor Daryl Higgins, director of the Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies, said older people were more likely to believe corporal punishment was a legitimate part of parenting, with 38 per cent of over-65s considering it necessary compared to 15 per cent for those aged 16 to 24.

"We cannot continue to ignore the conclusive evidence that shows corporal punishment significantly increases the risk of developing serious lifelong mental health disorders, often accompanies experiences of child abuse and neglect, and undermines a child's right to a life without violence," he said.

The paper reviews national and international evidence on corporal punishment, finding that not only is it ineffective in changing children's behaviour, it is damaging in the long term. It decreases trust in the parent, and increases the odds that they will go on to use violence.

"A parent's role is to care for and nurture a child – to help them grow into humans who have empathy for others and know what it is to be treated with respect. A parent's role is not to hit and hurt," said Professor Havighurst, who also leads the Ending Physical Punishment of Australian Children campaign.