

DRAFT MINUTES of the CPG on CHILDREN

Time to do the Right Thing for Children

January 28th 2014

Media Briefing Room

Sponsored by Julie Morgan AM

AGENDA

Chair: Julie Morgan AM

12:35-12:40: Welcome and Introduction: Julie Morgan AM

12:40-12:50: Time to do the right thing for children: Andy James, Assistant Director of Policy, Barnardo's Cymru

12:50-12:55: Jan Pickles, NSPCC Cymru

12:55-1:00: Religious support for ending the physical punishment of children: Chris Dodd, Churches' Network for Non-Violence

1:00-1:10: Cross-Party Responses

1:10-1:25: Discussion

1:25: Close

PROCEEDINGS

- Julie Morgan AM opened the meeting.
- Julie Morgan thanked everyone for attending and introduced Andy James, Assistant Director of Policy, Barnardo's Cymru.
- Andy James made the following points:
 - The overwhelming support for the Children Are Unbeatable! alliance from 130 organisations in Wales, from individuals, from Safeguarding Boards, Cardiff Council, and from more than half of all AMs.
 - The ten years of commitment from the Welsh Government and the Assembly on this issue.
 - The fact that Section 58 of the Children Act 2004 still allows the following to be defended as 'reasonable punishment':
 - Shaking
 - Blows to the head, kidneys
 - Heavy blows that produce no bruising
 - Marks caused by blows that do not show on particular skin colours
 - Pinching
 - Hair pulling
 - Pressure on nerve points
 - Kicking

- The euphemism of ‘smacking’ – children call it hitting and talk about the pain and humiliation of being hit.
- The law is confusing.
- A smack can lead to serious assault – it can become the pathway to serious abuse.
- Children do not tell because they are told that it is permitted/justified.
- The reasons why parents smack has everything to do with their own states of mind, not children’s behaviour.
- The legal duty for due regard under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Wales has a good reputation on children’s rights, but now need to walk the talk. We can lead again.
- A change in the law always comes ahead of public opinion – change happens after legislation. As with seat belts and smoking in public places, once the law is in place, most comply.
- Of the 34 countries that have passed a ban on physical punishment, none has repealed it. In most countries where a law banning physical punishment has come in, violence against children has reduced.
- Jan Pickles from the NSPCC made the following points:
 - There has been a generational change regarding domestic abuse, but we need now to make sure that children are made safe.
 - In parenting initiatives, professionals cannot say that it’s not OK to hit your child because of the defence of ‘reasonable punishment’.
 - The Welsh Government has a commitment to the UNCRC and a commitment to children in Wales. This is lip service unless the right to the defence of ‘reasonable punishment’ is taken away.
 - Children ask us for safety, respect, fairness and not smacking them fits in with this.

Chris Dodd from the Churches’ Network for Non-Violence spoke about the extensive religious support for ending the physical punishment of children and gave the following presentation:

The Churches' Network was set up to broaden religious support for prohibition of all corporal punishment and to challenge faith-based justification for it.

There is growing multi-religious support for reform and religious leaders from mainline churches have been actively promoting prohibition. There is strong support from the URC, Methodist, Catholic and Anglican Churches and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Wales. Recently the Welsh-speaking Churches and Chapels have circulated statements inviting their members to support prohibition. Multi-religious support includes the Christian Muslim Forum, Hindu, Buddhist and Baha'i and Muslim leaders.

Religious leaders have not simply been signing up their support. They have spoken about the issue, held vigils, preached sermons and hosted roadshows dedicated to ending legalised violence against children. The strength of their support is reflected in statements of commitment to reform.

This is what Muslim leaders pledged:

"We are ready to put our faith into action and to speak out on behalf of all children who endure corporal punishment. There are no circumstances under which this harmful, humiliating practice can be justified either in the name of religion, in the guise of discipline or the sacred texts and the tenets of our faith."

"Giving children equal protection from assault is crucial because it says so much about the sort of society we want for all children."

"If we really want a less violent society we must end the legality of corporal punishment and treat our children with gentleness, love, compassion and respect."

Prominent Christian supporters have been led by The Archbishop of Wales, Dr Barry Morgan who stated in a recent letter to the First Minister:

"Removal of the reasonable punishment defence will demonstrate our respect for children as people of infinite value now and emphasise the complete unacceptability of violence against children. This is an opportunity for the Welsh Government and National Assembly to honour children's inherent right to grow up free from violence and ensure that our values and principles shape our laws."

At a vigil held last year at Brecon Cathedral, Geoffrey Marshall, Dean of Brecon said: "Ending physical punishment of children is a religious imperative and the church has a responsibility to work with others to do so."

This is significant because it demonstrates a commitment to reform which is rooted in religious belief – prohibition is a religious imperative.

The consistent message is: corporal punishment of children is not compatible with the universal values which all the major world religions profess: "respect for human dignity, compassion, equality, justice and non-violence".

For Christians, it's contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

For Muslims, it's at odds with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

It's important that religious communities continue to work with others to strengthen religious support for reform. A special Choral Evensong dedicated to ending legalised violence against children, will be held at St Davids Cathedral, Pembrokeshire on Monday, 3rd February at 6pm. The service will be led by the Dean, Jonathan Lean and the preacher is the Bishop of St Davids, Wyn Evans.

- Discussion – participants: Lindsay Whittle AM, Christine Chapman AM, Keith Davies AM, Aled Roberts AM, Councillor Siobhan Corria, Dr Elspeth Webb, Sharon Lovell (NYAS), Robin Moulster (BASW), Viv Laing (NSPCC), Ann Bell (Adoption UK).

All speakers spoke in favour of removing the defence of 'reasonable punishment'.

Points raised:

- It's a question of equal protection for children.
 - This speaks to the heart of what devolution should be.
 - It's a human rights issue.
 - The overwhelming support of Cardiff Council for the campaign.
 - One of the most important themes in child protection conferences is the link between domestic violence and hitting children.
 - Social workers are expected to adhere to a code of ethics – it contravenes the code to allow the hitting of children to continue.
 - 6-7% of all calls to ChildLine are about physical abuse.
 - It's important that adoptive parents are given a very clear message that it's not OK to hit children (especially as adoptive children often come from environments where they have been hit).
- Julie Morgan AM closed the meeting