

# Physical Punishment of Children in Sport and Recreation:

## The Times They Are A-Changin’<sup>1</sup>

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**C**ourtney [not her real name] was an 11-year-old girl in Texas on a middle school basketball team... Courtney’s coach had punished her for arriving ten minutes late to an early morning practice (her mom had gotten caught in traffic), forcing her to run five sets of bleacher stairs and do five defensive hustle drills. After running the stairs for twenty minutes, Courtney became ill and ran to the bathroom to throw up. When she returned to the basketball court—humiliated, scared, and too sick to continue—her coach ordered her to finish her stair-running. Collapsing after vomiting again, she was benched for the next game. The coach imposed the same form of punishment on other players who were late to practice.<sup>2</sup>

Courtney’s story illustrates some of the core issues associated with physical punishment in sport: (1) it can have lasting impacts that undermine the actual purpose of the child’s involvement in the activity; (2) it is distinct from training and skill development; and (3) it contravenes ethical coaching practice.

### Physical punishment’s impacts

In a previous article in *Coaches PLAN du coach*,<sup>3</sup> we noted that physical punishment of children is an issue of growing interest to researchers, human rights bodies, health professionals, educators, and more recently, sports leaders. One of the reasons for this interest is the ever-expanding body of research demonstrating that physical punishment risks negative lifespan consequences for children and the people they will encounter as they grow, interact with peers, work, partner, and become parents in their turn. The dimensions of potential harm include physical injury, impaired relationships with parents, weaker internalization of moral values, restricted cognitive development and poorer academic achievement, poorer mental health, bullying and other antisocial behaviour, poorer adult adjustment, and tolerance of violence in adulthood.<sup>4,5</sup> None of these outcomes would be welcome for parents who could foresee them; all are certainly at odds with the purpose of children’s participation in sport.



### Punishment versus training

In sport, physical exertion and even physical suffering are integral to training. Some coaches may wonder whether a particular demand they impose on a youngster could be considered punishment rather than appropriate training. In our previous article, we proposed two criteria for evaluating whether coaching conduct is appropriate or punitive: consent and intent. **Consent** is the requirement that participation in sport and recreation should always turn on the informed and ongoing consent of children and parents. When they become involved in a sport activity, children and parents consent to training and skill development, not to humiliation or punitive infliction of pain. **Intent** reflects the crucial distinction between demanding performance of an activity intended to cause physical discomfort/pain or humiliation in order to punish, and requiring performance of an appropriate training activity that has associated physical discomfort/pain to build athletic ability (endurance, strength, speed).<sup>3</sup> A standard in the Coaching Code of Ethics developed by Coaches of Canada clearly articulates this crucial distinction: “Coach in a way that benefits athletes, removes harm and acts consistently for the good of the athlete, keeping in mind that **the same training, skills and powers that coaches use to produce benefits for athletes are also capable of producing harm** [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Courtney’s basketball coach felt no such ethical obligation.

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## Ethical coaching practice

The four overarching ethical principles elaborated in the Coaching Code of Ethics set standards for coaching conduct that prohibit physical punishment. For example: “Coaches have a special responsibility to respect and promote the rights of participants who are in vulnerable or dependent positions and less able to protect their own rights”; “Coaches must interact with others in a manner that enables all participants in sport to maintain their dignity”; coaches’ activities “will benefit society in general and participants in particular and **will do no harm** [emphasis added]; and coaches will “abstain from and refuse to tolerate in others all forms of harassment.”<sup>6</sup> A thorough and thoughtful exploration of the issues has been published in *Human Rights in Youth Sport: A Critical Review of Children’s Rights in Competitive Sports*.<sup>7</sup>

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We are on the cusp of a worldwide sea change regarding physical punishment of children. The voices of youth are being heard.<sup>8</sup> Twenty-seven countries to date have banned its use in all settings:<sup>9</sup> home, school, alternate care, correctional programs, and sport/recreation. Passage of these laws is often preceded, and usually accompanied, by public education regarding physical punishment and the value of positive approaches to discipline. Implementing measures to ensure the protection of children from harm—including physical punishment—is an obligation of governments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>10</sup> which Canada ratified in 1991.

Support for physical punishment is declining in Canada. Eight provinces and all three territories now prohibit its use in schools. Nearly 400 organizations spanning most sectors of the Canadian community, as well as a number of distinguished Canadians, have endorsed the Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth.<sup>4</sup> Many school boards—English and French, public and Catholic—have endorsed it. The Canadian Paediatric Society “recommends that

physicians strongly discourage disciplinary spanking and all other forms of physical punishment.”<sup>11</sup>

Now a growing number of voices from within sport and recreation are raising awareness of physical punishment and supporting its elimination. The Joint Statement has been endorsed by sport leaders—Coaches of Canada, Coaching Association of Canada, Respect in Sport, Right To Play Canada, and Dr. Andrew Pipe; and by organizations that provide recreation programs—Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, Girl Guides of Canada, Scouts Canada, YMCA Canada, and YWCA Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Canadians have demonstrated time and again that credible information will change even long-standing attitudes and behaviour. Consider the normative shifts we have witnessed regarding drinking and driving, exposing others to second-hand smoke, wearing seatbelts and helmets, UV exposure, and use of pesticides. Growing numbers of Canadian parents are accepting the evidence that physical punishment is ineffective as discipline and potentially harmful, and are becoming familiar with and using “positive discipline.”<sup>12</sup>

The sport and recreation community—leaders, coaches, volunteers, parents, and youth—has begun to reflect on the fundamental difference between punishment and appropriate training. Sports leaders, coaches, volunteers, parents, and youth are speaking up. The times indeed are a-changin’.

(2004). *Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*. Ottawa: Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth. [www.cheo.on.ca/en/physicalpunishment](http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/physicalpunishment)

5 Straus, M.A., Douglas, E.M., and Medeiros, R.A. (in press). *Corporal Punishment and Cognitive Development. The Primordial Violence: Corporal Punishment, Cognitive Development And Crime*. Walnut Creek California: Altamira.

6 Coaches of Canada. *Coaching Code of Ethics: Principles and Ethical Standards*. [www.coachesofcanada.com](http://www.coachesofcanada.com)

7 David, P. (2005). *Human Rights in Youth Sport: A Critical Review of Children’s Rights in Competitive Sports*. Routledge.

8 Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates, UNICEF, and Save the Children Canada (2006). *Seen, heard and believed: What Youth Say About Violence*. [www.unicef.ca](http://www.unicef.ca)

9 Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. [www.endcorporalpunishment.org](http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org)

10 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm)

11 Canadian Paediatric Society, *Effective discipline for children* (April, 2008). [www.cps.ca/english/statements/pp/pp04-01.htm](http://www.cps.ca/english/statements/pp/pp04-01.htm)

12 Durrant, J.E. (2007). *Positive Discipline: What it is and how to do it. Save the Children Sweden Southeast Asia and the Pacific*. [www.cheo.on.ca/en/physicalpunishment](http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/physicalpunishment)

1 Bob Dylan

2 de Lench, Brooke (June 30, 2010). *MomsTeam: The Trusted Source For Youth Sport Parents*. [www.momsteam.com/bill-would-end-corporal-punishment-in-school-sports](http://www.momsteam.com/bill-would-end-corporal-punishment-in-school-sports)

3 Ensom, R., and Durrant, J.E. *Physical Punishment of Children in Sport and Recreation (Winter ‘08/09) Coaches PLAN du coach*

4 Durrant, J.E., Ensom, R., and Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth

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