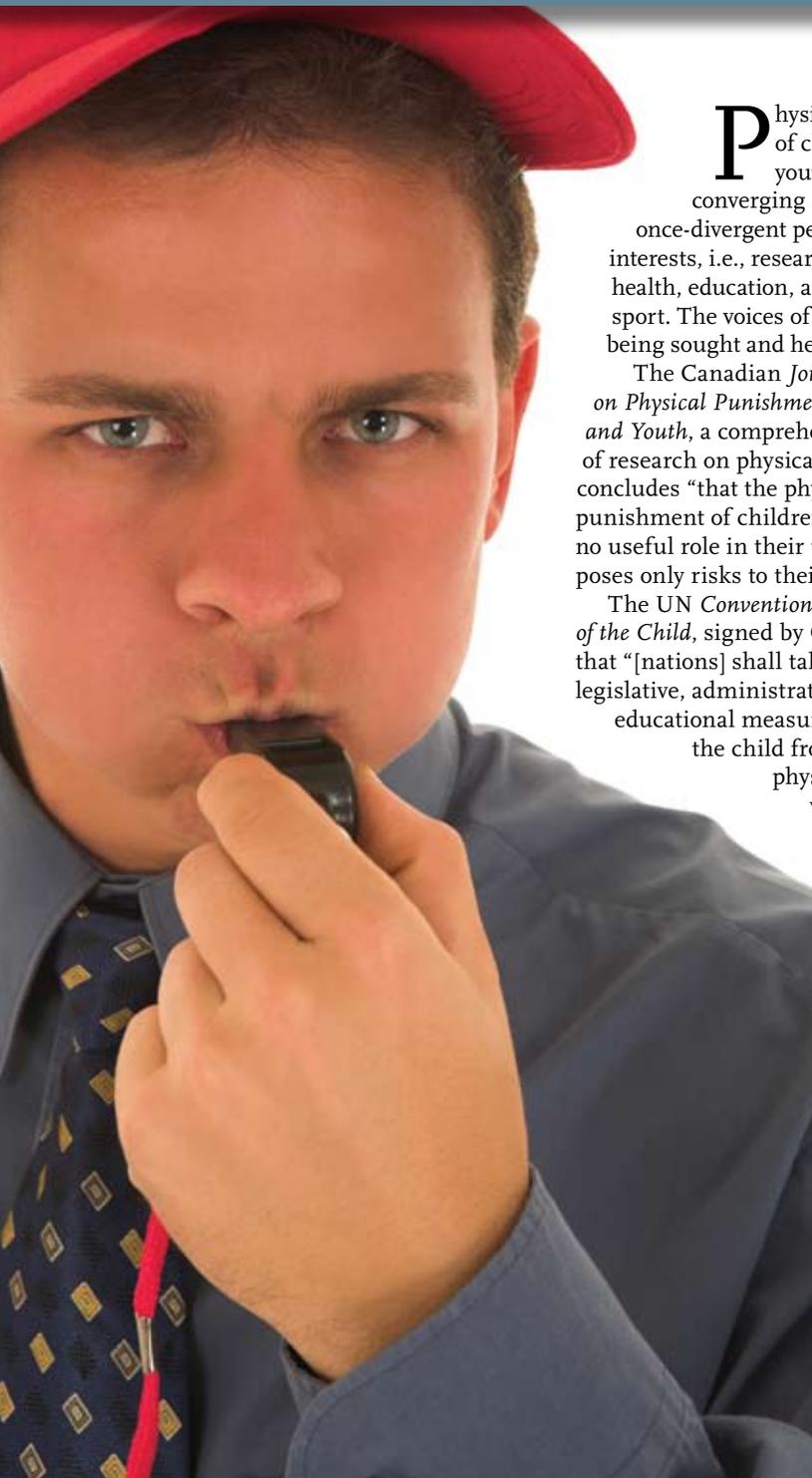


# Physical punishment of children in sport and recreation

By Ron Ensom and Joan Durrant



Physical punishment of children and youth is receiving converging attention from once-divergent perspectives and interests, i.e., research, human rights, health, education, and, more recently, sport. The voices of youth are finally being sought and heard.

The Canadian *Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*, a comprehensive review of research on physical punishment, concludes “that the physical punishment of children and youth plays no useful role in their upbringing and poses only risks to their development.”<sup>1</sup>

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, signed by Canada, states that “[nations] shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect

the child from all forms of physical or mental violence ... while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.”<sup>2</sup> The *UN Secretary General’s Study on Violence against Children* examines the particular consequences of physical punishment and urges prohibition by all nations of “all forms of violence against children, in

all settings, including all corporal punishment.”<sup>3</sup>

The Canadian Paediatric Society “recommends that physicians strongly discourage disciplinary spanking and all other forms of physical punishment.”<sup>4</sup>

Educators<sup>5</sup> across Canada are disseminating research evidence that physical punishment has a significant negative impact on students and schools. Abuse of youth in sport from an education perspective has recently been examined in *Abuse in Youth Sport: What Schools Can Do*.<sup>6</sup>

Sport leaders<sup>7</sup> are acting to ensure that Canadian children and youth participating in sport and recreation programs are better protected from the exploitation and abuse that was once often known to adults involved in the sport sector, but largely unknown to the public. It should be acknowledged, at this point, that many people view abuse and physical punishment as two very different things. Many parents, and some professionals, will assert that, while abuse of children is abhorrent and that abusers should be charged with assault, physical punishment is not assault and parents should retain the legal right to use it. (The Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 2004 that teachers may no longer legally use physical punishment.) There is, however, compelling research evidence that from the standpoint of risk of injury specifically and harm generally, the two cannot be distinguished.<sup>8</sup>

The voices of Canadian youth are captured in *Seen, heard and believed: What Youth Say About Violence*. “[Youths’ voices] reflect the astonishing fact that most of the violence young people experience is in the very places they should be safest, with the very people who should be protecting and caring for them every day.”<sup>9</sup>

At the core of the research, human rights declarations, advice from health and education professionals, and youths' accounts of their experiences is the notion of harm. But, what is harmful to children and youth – and through its impact on them to those they will encounter in their lives and ultimately to their communities – has not been well understood until recently. The *Joint Statement* summarizes research published before 2004: "... physical punishment places children at risk for physical injury, poorer mental health, impaired relationships with parents, weaker internalization of moral values, antisocial behaviour, poorer adult adjustment and tolerance of violence in adulthood."<sup>1</sup> Research published since 2004 reinforces and extends these findings. Of particular concern to educators and parents is more evidence that physical punishment is strongly linked to bullying, and that it is associated with restricted cognitive development and poorer academic achievement in young children.<sup>10</sup>

What are the implications of this growing body of knowledge for the sport and recreation sector?

While few adults involved in sports programs would support coaches punishing children by hitting them to hurt them, many adults would be understandably uncertain about just what counts as physical punishment. The *Joint Statement* includes in the definition of physical punishment "forced physical exertion."<sup>11</sup> In sports parlance, would "Drop and do 10!" for a youth arriving late for practice or "Wind sprints 'til you drop!" for disappointing performance count as physical punishment? Two tests – intent and consent – can assist in distinguishing between physical punishment and legitimate physical exertion.

**Intent:** There is a crucial distinction between demanding performance of an activity intended to cause physical discomfort/pain or humiliation solely to punish and requiring performance of an appropriate training activity that may have some associated physical discomfort/pain to build athletic ability (endurance, strength, speed). Forcing physical exertion intended to hurt a child physically or humiliate him/her in front of coaches and peers is punitive.

Requiring the physical exertion inherent in appropriate training intended to build a child's athletic ability is not punitive. By intent, "Drop and do 10!" is punitive if push-ups are not a part of regular training and the purpose of the demand is solely to cause physical discomfort and/or humiliation.

**Consent:** Participation in sport and recreation should always turn on the informed consent of children and parents. Assuming there is a fair description of the program that includes what is expected of a child and what she/he and a parent can expect from the program, few children would join or parents permit their joining if it were known that participants would have to perform painful activities, with no athletic benefit, as punishments for behaviour or performance displeasing to their coach. When children and parents consent to participation, they are agreeing to learning skills in a supportive environment. They are not consenting to the punitive infliction of discomfort/pain or humiliation. Once in training, a child's participation must continue to be voluntary. Participation is based on mutual and ongoing agreement – with coaches they will come to know and program administrators they may never meet – to help a child achieve his/her athletic goals.

For far too long, too many trusting children and youth have been subjected to and harmed by the punitive and exploitive behaviour of some of the adults who train them and administer their programs. In recent years, the fact of this betrayal of children and youth has received increasing attention (e.g., *Human rights in youth sport: A Critical Review of Children's Rights in Competitive Sports*<sup>11</sup>) and steps taken to prevent its continuation.

The old sport adage that you should "respect your opponent" is being reframed by the action of Canadian sport leaders to create among coaches and administrators the imperative to "respect your kids." Many initiatives and organizations – among them the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, Coaching Association of Canada, Coaches of Canada, and Respect in Sport – are tackling the issues. The *Canadian Policy on Prohibited Conduct in Sport*<sup>12</sup> and companion *National Code*

*of Conduct*,<sup>13</sup> for example, give substance to the imperative that children and youth in sport and recreation programs across Canada must be assured that their trust, and their parents' trust, is well placed.

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