



children's
institute
child rights in focus
Research • Advocacy • Education

14 June 2022

Teachers need to control their classes without using corporal punishment

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Children's Institute, represented by the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC), today, 14 June 2022 made submissions as a friend of the court (*amicus curiae*) in the matter between the *Centre for Child Law and Others*, and *South African Council of Educators (SACE) and Others*. [SACE](#) is the professional council for teachers and also has a duty to protect children.

This case centres on how teachers who use corporal punishment, a breach of the law and the code of ethics, should be sanctioned. Corporal punishment violates children's rights and has long term negative effects, around 200 cases are heard by SACE every year. SACE's mandatory sanctions allow for the removal teachers in serious cases, but teachers are returned to the classroom in most instances. SACE admits that teachers lack training on how to manage discipline in a non-violent manner.

The Children's Institute argued that, before teachers who are found guilty of using corporal punishment return to the classroom, they must be compelled to attend a retraining program. Training programmes, such as [Peace Discipline](#), that develop the skills and techniques to manage behaviour are available and accessible.

Corporal punishment is still widely used in schools

The use of violence at schools by teachers against learners is reported daily. Yet, corporal punishment in schools was prohibited 26 years ago in South Africa. The law has made little difference in how learners are managed by teachers in the classroom.

The evidence is clear that children's experience of corporal punishment can interfere with their learning and compromise their ability to manage reactions to strong emotions like frustration and anger as well as deal with conflict. Schools can become a place of constant fear of being harmed by teachers and learners, leading to a dislike or avoidance of school, difficulty concentrating and learning, performing less well at school or even school dropout.

In addition to physical injuries, school corporal punishment is also linked to mental health and behavioural outcomes, suggesting that the practice may aggravate rather than eliminate behavioural problems among learners and fuel later use of violence by learners.

Most schools are under-resourced and classrooms are overcrowded

Most schools in the country are under-resourced with overcrowded classrooms, large learner to teacher ratios, low levels of parental involvement in schools and low levels of in-classroom educator support, all of which increase the likelihood of educators using harsh forms of punishment, including physical punishment to manage learners in the classroom. Teachers may also face learners' substance abuse, gang violence spilling onto school settings including weapons brought into schools.

"No teacher should be expected to manage complex issues such as sexual harassment, gang violence, or substance abuse alone. These complex problems require a whole school approach," warns Professor Shanaaz Mathews, director of the Children's Institute at UCT.

One reason for the continued use of school corporal punishment arguably has been a lack of understanding of what alternative non-violent disciplinary methods exist. Yet, evidence shows that a wide range of non-violent discipline options do exist and have been found to be effective across age, gender and disability status, in ethnically diverse samples and with severely challenging behaviour.

"Teachers need a range of tools as it is clear that one skill will not fit all situations and different learners respond to different approaches. Most of us did not grow up with a model of non-violent discipline, so it can be difficult to think of effective ways to deal with challenging behaviour once we take corporal punishment out the toolkit," says Karen Quail, from Peace Discipline.

Tools that teachers can use to manage learner behaviour

There are lots of [tools](#) that teachers can use to teach and guide learners to behave appropriately and to support them to do better. These interventions, when used appropriately, have been found to have significant positive effects. Teachers can choose skills according to what they feel would best fit the situation, the learner and their own teaching style, and can use them on their own or together with other skills. These skills should be incorporated into teacher training and refresher courses should be compulsory for teachers found using corporal punishment in the classroom.

"Working with the parents is a very important part of school discipline and regular feedback to parents holds learners more accountable for their behaviour. Teachers can message parents regularly about assignments, tests, positive or problem behaviour, and meet with them to work together to support learners who are not doing well," says Quail.

Corporal punishment in schools is part of a wider problem

Corporal punishment experienced by learners in schools has become normalised as it is also a reflection of forms of violence that have become all too common across communities. Therefore, eliminating its use in schools is part of a response to a complex problem. Working with the Good Schools Coalition, Mathews conducted a review of the evidence of 'what works' to prevent violence in and through schools.

"We found that many interventions are siloed and tackle only one issue, such as dating violence or bullying. Yet, children typically experience multiple forms of violence at the same time, so our responses need to be multi-component and incorporate the whole school community," explains Mathews.

For media interviews, contact:

- **Evidence of the effects of corporal punishment and whole schools:**

Professor Shanaaz Mathews, UCT | 0832461676 | shanaaz.mathews@uct.ac.za

- **On skills and strategies that teachers can use:**
Karen Quail, [Peace Discipline](#) | 0763035324 | karen@peacediscipline.com

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za