

# SWEDISH PARENTS DON'T SPANK

By Adrienne A. Haeuser

<http://www.neverhitachild.org/haeuser.html>

Swedish parents rely on a variety of alternatives to physical punishment to discipline their children.

Can you bring up children successfully without smacking and spanking? Sweden appears to be doing just this only a decade after passing a law which stipulates that a child may not be subjected to physical punishment or other humiliating treatment. Initially somewhat skeptical, Swedes now take the law for granted and Swedish children are thriving.

Sweden's example has inspired passage of similar laws prohibiting parental use of physical punishment in Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Austria. These and many other European countries had banned corporal punishment in schools many years before -- Austria, for instance, in 1870. In England, where corporal punishment in schools was banned as recently as 1987, advocates have embarked on a campaign to prohibit physical punishment in the home through a project called EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children). EPOCH-USA is now taking root in the United States [see "For More Information"]. Here, not even corporal punishment in schools has been federally banned (1).

To research the background, implementation, and outcomes of the pioneering 1979 law, I visited Sweden in 1981 under a grant from the Swedish Bicentennial Fund. I replicated this study in 1988, under a grant from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (2). In a variety of Swedish localities, I conducted extensive and intensive interviews - currently known as "oral histories" - with government authorities, human services professionals, teachers and daycare personnel, child welfare organization leaders, parents, and some children. In the 1988 study, for example, I included structured interviews with 16 national authorities and 46 locally-based human services professionals. In addition, although I conversed with numerous parents and children at daycare centers, schools playgrounds, and in private homes, I also conducted formal interviews with 16 native Swedish parents.

## WHY THIS LAW?

Sweden's 1979 laws reflects a sociopolitical and economic evolution, as well as an evolving value system. Prior to the First and even the Second World War, Sweden was essentially a poor, agrarian society significantly influenced by German authoritarianism and Lutheran dogma. Childrearing included regular - often weekly - harsh beatings to "drive out the devil and make room for God's Will."

With postwar industrialization and urbanization, the religious influence on childrearing disappeared almost completely. Most Swedes today attend church only for baptisms and funerals. Social democracy - with its emphasis on rights and equality for all, including children - prevails. The social welfare system of cash grants, services, and insurance benefits provides a supportive childrearing milieu, while the general availability of contraceptives and abortion typically produces families with only one or two children, who for the most part are planned and wanted. Although the Social Democrat party lost power in the 1991 elections, the foundations of the welfare state remain largely agreed upon (3).

Despite seemingly idyllic conditions for childrearing, Sweden moved into the 1970's with widespread child abuse. Corporal punishment in the schools had been banned in 1958; however, the harsh beatings of the previous era - as well as less severe forms of physical punishment - persisted in the privacy of home life. A major Swedish research project concluded that child abuse constituted one end of a large continuum beginning with physical punishment, and that stopping all physical punishment was the "gateway" to preventing most child abuse (4).

Two voluntary child welfare organizations and a government commission exposed the issues. As a result, public opinion of the 1970's shifted from approval to disapproval of harsh physical punishment in childrearing (5). Still, physical punishment, in one form or another, remained in use in some homes; and legal action was deemed imperative. The government's stated intent in passing the 1979 law was twofold: primarily to stop "beatings," and secondly "to create a basis for general information and education for parents as to the importance of giving children good care and as to one of the prime requirements of their care" (6).

This law does not carry penalties - a point that no doubt speeded its passage. When reports of physical punishment are substantiated by social services staff or the police as assault (that is, child abuse) according to Sweden's Criminal Code, the code sanctions apply. Even so, few minor infractions have been reported by spiteful neighbors or children, putting to rest the speculation that such a law would create chaos by turning minor parental infractions into government cases.

Children are well aware of this law. Since its passage, youngsters have reported many more substantiated cases of child abuse than they did before. And I am told that throughout the country, only two children's reports of physical punishment have not been substantiated as child abuse. "I only wish infants could talk," said a Swedish police inspector.

Because Sweden collects incidence data for "unsuitable environments" rather than for child abuse exclusively, it is impossible to know precisely what effect the 1979 law has had on child abuse. Most authorities point out that the major causes of abuse - severe stress and family problems - are not affected by the law. They note, however, that the law does facilitate earlier reporting and intervention. They also note that although they were concerned primarily with physical child abuse in 1981, their focus shifted to sexual abuse in 1988. Nevertheless, social workers and other professionals remain concerned about physical punishment and child abuse among immigrants and refugees, many of whom arrive from countries where authoritarian practices predominate, both in the family and in government.

### **EDUCATION PRODUCES RESULTS**

The law was implemented in several ways. For one, attractive multicolored mailings explaining the legislation were sent to every family with a young child, as well as to schools and daycare centers. The booklet, produced and disseminated by the government, was available not only in Swedish and English, but also in the languages of the major immigrant groups. Entitled "Can You Bring Up Children Successfully Without Smacking and Spanking?" it emphasized that physical punishment has the potential for both physical and psychological harm, and that while parents sometimes get angry and need to express their anger, other options exist for venting rage and frustration. The booklet discussed various alternatives to physical punishment and listed sources for further assistance. Now out of print, it will probably not go back to press because the government believes it is no longer needed.

The law was also implemented through parent education facilities - particularly maternal and child health services, which are utilized almost universally throughout Sweden. Personnel in these programs are now sensitive to case finding and offer guidance or referrals when faced with the potential for physical punishment. To prevent physical punishment of infants and toddlers, public health nurses visit the parents of newborns, bringing advice and materials such as locks and electric outlet plugs to make the home safer for children.

In addition, the law was given wide coverage in the media and on milk cartons. Most parents I spoke with in 1981 said they learned about the law through the media, and it prompted them to "think twice" before hitting their children. Some parents, guided by the belief that legislation cannot change behavior, snickered about the "smacking and spanking law." Only a few parents and one professional actually opposed it, however, claiming that incessant yelling and screaming created more harm than a spanking that caused no physical injury.

In 1988, on the other hand, most younger parents said they learned about the law in school. They had been students when the school system, in response to passage of the law, intensified the curriculum in child development and parenting or grades seven through nine. And parents did not object to having their children learn about the law in school. As one parent said, "This teaches children not to be violent." None of the parents I met on my second trip had to "think twice" about hitting their children. As beneficiaries of the school program and the government's public education materials, they had internalized the message.

Nor did anyone among my 1988 encounters snicker about the law or oppose it. Both parents and professionals agreed that Swedish parents, aside from those with very serious psychological or social problems, were not using physical punishment of any sort, even in the privacy of their homes. Only one parent - a divorced father - admitted to spanking his "hyperactive" son on rare occasions. He added, however, "It's the wrong way to bring up children."

Most parents and professionals I met in 1988 reported that as children, they had experienced some physical punishment and that their parents, today's grandparents, had experienced extensive physical punishment. So it appears that *the generational transmission of physical punishment as a childrearing method* has been broken. Today, Swedish parents simply assume that not using physical punishment is standard practice. In effect, it is now easier for Swedish parents to avoid physical punishment than to defend its use.

### **MORE DISCIPLINE NOT LESS**

An interesting change in Swedish childrearing has occurred since passage of the 1979 law. With the maturing of social democracy by the 1940's and 1950's, child guidance experts began proclaiming the values of permissive parenting. Swedish society, no longer dependent on authoritarian values, wanted children to learn to be creative and self-directed at an early age. Arriving in Sweden in 1981, I was shocked by the general lack of concern about children's behavior. I observed youngsters acting in ways that clearly warranted parental intervention; yet, even parents who were not enamored of permissive childrearing claimed that if they could not physically punish their children, they did not know what to do instead, so they did nothing. I questioned the need for an antispanking law in a society that was not inclined to discipline its children.

By 1988, the picture had changed markedly. Child guidance professionals were admitting that permissive childrearing was a failed experiment, and parent educators were telling parents to "dare to be parents." I saw parents setting limits and disciplining their children - partly because the professionals were now giving this sort of advice, partly because the sociopolitical had become more conservative, and partly because the 1979 law had forced parents to think about childrearing options.

Swedish parents now discipline their children; and in doing so, they rely on a variety of alternatives to physical punishment. The method most commonly used is *verbal conflict resolution*, which invites parents as well as children to express their anger in words. Parents insist that discussions involve constant eye contact, even if this means taking firm hold of young children to engage their attention. Parents and professionals agree that discussions may escalate into yelling, or that yelling may be a necessary trigger for discussion. Still, many point out that while yelling may be humiliating, it is better than ignoring the problem or containing the anger, and it is usually less humiliating than physical punishment.

Verbal conflict resolution may come more easily to Swedish parents than to most others, due to Sweden's proliferation of couple communication classes. Parents who know how to communicate with each other tend to be adept at using these skills with their children (7).

To socialize preverbal infants and toddlers, Swedish parents make every effort to avoid conflict. They thoroughly childproof their homes and give their children a great deal of attention. Society supports include paid parental leave, which permits one parent to remain at home throughout a baby's first 15 months of life. Many municipalities provide

neighborhood parent-child centers, where mothers - particularly those who feel isolated at home - can gather for sociability and respite while their babies and toddlers enjoy supervised play. Staffing the centers are early childhood educators and social workers who are equipped to help parents solve early socialization problems.

Problems that arise in the early years are addressed in nonpunitive ways. Although the 1979 law does not prohibit the use of physical force or restraint in removing a child from danger, parents do not resort to physical tactics, even while removing a child from the middle of a street. Instead, they talk to the child and watch the child more carefully in the future. Children, for their part, get the message - without a smack or even a swat.

Swedish families appear to be flourishing. The children I saw in 1988 were generally well behaved and, according to their teachers, easier to teach because they were accustomed to discipline at home. They also seemed much more self-disciplined in public than they were on my first visit. Although Sweden has its share of teen drug problems, juvenile crime, and slightly increasing rates of property crime, violent crimes against people are decreasing (8). Moreover, adults are considerably more optimistic about Sweden's children than they were a decade ago.

### **NONVIOLENCE IN SOCIETY BEGINS AT HOME**

Sweden has not been to war in over a century. Indeed, Sweden's social democracy, which promotes cooperation over competition, has been characterized as a movement of "ballots not bullets" (9). This disdain for violence has clearly provided a favorable milieu for helping parents abandon physical punishment.

The aversion to violence remains rooted in Swedish culture. The news media, controlled largely by the government, depict violence only while airing international news. Imported videos rented out for at-home viewing are another story entirely. Both the government and parents are acutely concerned about the violence portrayed in these films. Educators and healthcare professionals assert that even many video cartoons, including those starring Donald Duck, are violent. Parent-teacher associations are rising to the occasion and actively helping parents learn how to regulate their children's video viewing.

Another area of some concern is institutionalized power sports, which some Swedes believe are an alternative to the expression of aggression and physical violence. Channeling physical aggression through forms of ritualized physical activity, they claim, teaches physical control. And indeed, judo and karate parlors and schools are proliferating throughout the country. While most research now concludes that identifying with any form of aggressive behavior - in reality or in the media - promotes aggressive behavior (10), a number of Swedes maintain that the physical control learned through power sports is a deterrent to violence.

While the macho male may be revered on video screens or in karate parlors, he is not a Swedish ideal. Nor are fathers macho figures. Much to the contrary, they tend to be active participants in parenting and characteristically do not model aggressive values.

Over the years, Sweden's social welfare support for families mitigated many tensions and stresses that would have otherwise sparked parental tempers.. For nonviolent Sweden, however, this was not enough. By 1979, it became necessary to enact a law specifically directing parents not to hit their children. Now, a decade later, the law appears to be effective - and to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to bring up children without smacking and spanking.

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### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

EPOCH-USA  
Center for Effective Discipline

155 West Main Street Suite 100-B  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

This organization advocates an end to parental use of physical punishment in the United States. Information mailings are available, as are sample statements and resolutions for readers wishing to propose the adoption of antispanking position statements or legislation by state or local groups.

Parents Anonymous - National Office  
520 S. Lafayette Park Place  
Los Angeles, CA 90057  
800-421-0353

This network of local support groups provides help to parents seeking to avoid the use of physical punishment.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrienne Ahlgren Haeuser, a professor at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee and a project director for the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, has participated in numerous research and demonstration projects in child welfare, primarily in the areas of abuse and neglect. She is the founder of EPOCH-USA and was formerly vice president of Parents Anonymous. Prof. Haeuser is the mother of four children and the grandmother of four.

### REFERENCES

- 1) See Robert E. Fathman, "Child Abuse in Our Schools," *Mothering*, #58 (Winter 1992): pp. 92-99.
- 2) A. A. Haeuser, "Sweden's Law Prohibiting Physical Punishment of Children" (unpublished 1981 Swedish Bicentennial Fund Study Visit Report); and "Reducing Violence Toward U.S. Children: Transferring Positive Innovations from Sweden" (unpublished 1988 Sweden Study Visit Report, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, School of Social Welfare).
- 3) A. T. Nilsson, "Swedish Voters Opt for Change," *Swedish Information Service Newsbrief* (Dec. 1991).
- 4) A. W. Edfeldt, *Violence Towards Children*, Stockholm, Sweden: Akademilitteratur, 1979.
- 5) Sifo and Radda Barnen, "Aga Och Barnmishandel" ("Corporal Punishment and Child Abuse"), 1981.
- 6) Swedish Information Service, "The Anti-Spanking Law," 1979.
- 7) Elam Nunnally, a professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, initiated a training program in couple communication in Finland several years ago, and Finnish trainers then trained Swedish professionals in the process.
- 8) A police inspector in Umea, Sweden, 1988.
- 9) H. Haste, "The Age of Heroes: Bullets or Ballots?" *Inside Sweden*, #2 (May 1989).
- 10) See J. H. Goldstein, *Aggression and Crimes of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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