

Kenya

Making parents and teachers think about the effects of corporal punishment

Based on an interview with Rose Odoyo, Chief Executive Officer of ANPPCAN, Kenya

Corporal punishment has been technically banned in Kenya's schools since 1972 – but it is still a routine occurrence in the country's classrooms and homes, says Rose Odoyo, the Chief Executive Officer of the Kenya Chapter of the African Network for Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN).

“Many teachers don't know any other way to control children than through the cane,” she says. “In fact, one teacher has even been to court recently in an attempt to have corporal punishment re-legalised. They still have the attitude of ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’. But it is not hard to understand why, because they are overwhelmed. They often have class sizes exceeding 70, and they resort to the cane as their only way of coping.”

For parents, too, underlying the widespread use of corporal punishment are the difficult economic circumstances which make it stressful for parents to cope in their daily lives. Children are left alone for long periods while their parents try to earn a living,

ANPPCAN was formed after the First African Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, a pan-African assembly held in 1986 in Enugu, Nigeria. Since then, ANPPCAN chapters have expanded into 20 African countries. In 1990, the Organisation of African Unity, now the African Union, awarded ANPPCAN observer status. The African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights granted similar recognition shortly afterwards. Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, ANPPCAN is registered as an international NGO.

and become idle and bored; the combination of neglected children and stressed parents is a breeding ground for casual violence as the easiest form of discipline.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, afflicting Kenya as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, makes the problem worse.

“So many orphans and vulnerable children are mistreated by their caregivers. When their parents die and they are sent to live with more distant relatives, the standard of care they receive often suffers as a result. They can be taken out of school and used for child labour – because even though primary schooling is theoretically free in Kenya, there are still maintenance fees and other levies to be paid, plus the costs of books, uniforms, shoes and meals. The rights of orphans and vulnerable children are not respected to the same degree, and this includes a greater vulnerability to violence.” (Rose Odoyo, ANPPCAN)

ANPPCAN tries to counter violence through sensitisation and awareness raising. For six years they have been running a Child Rights Awareness and Legal Education Programme in Korogocho, a non-formal settlement on the outskirts of Nairobi, and have now moved to the Soweto area of Embakasi Division to run the Soweto Child Rights Development Programme. These programmes work to raise social consciousness of both the legal and moral responsibility to stand up for the rights of the child.

Strategies include popular theatre, workshops and talks, and establishing child rights clubs in

community institutions. Communities are made aware of telltale signs of abuse, and children told what to do if they are being abused. In the worst cases, ANPPCAN provides direct legal help to victims of violence.

“We try to make parents and teachers think about the effects of corporal punishment,” says Rose Odoyo. “What does it tell children when you discipline them with violence? It tells them that it's okay for the powerful to use violence to get their way in life. We inform parents and teachers about the results of our research, which show the negative effects corporal punishment has on children. It makes them anxious and angry, undermines their trust in adults, and affects their education – they may drop out of school when they are afraid of being beaten. Our experience shows that children who are repeatedly subjected to corporal punishment become cold and unreachable. There is no longer any effective communication between them and their parents.”

ANPPCAN explains to parents and teachers about more positive discipline techniques. The essential element is setting clear and simple rules and explaining the reasons for them. “Children need to understand what's considered right and wrong. This is often a problem in schools, where teachers say one thing and prefects say another. It is very confusing for a child to be punished when they don't know what they've done wrong. Parents need to show interest in their children and reward good behaviour.” Setting a good example is another key: “We explain to parents that they must not drink and fight, and schools that they must put more effort into tackling bullying, which is a big problem.”

Child participation is central to ANPPCAN's approach. They encourage parents to involve their children in discussing the rules for good behaviour, and schools to hold school discussion fora in which teachers, prefects and children can talk through their problems. Despite resistance – many parents and teachers see corporal punishment as the only feasible answer to behavioural problems which have their root in peer pressure, the effect of the mass media, and in children themselves – these public education campaigns are having some effect. The school discussion evenings are a technique which has met with particular enthusiasm and success.



Photo: WENDY STONE

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Another strategy is to make corporal punishment more visible as an issue through techniques such as a regular weekly radio programme, aired on KBC national radio every Saturday, which features youth participation.

ANPPCAN is now working with like-minded Kenyan NGOs to lobby for a training programme to get more expert counsellors and child psychologists into schools, and to propose to the Ministry of Education a set of national guidelines and put together a training manual on positive discipline techniques for teachers.