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Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 2000

CHILDREN

Please Don't Hit Us

UK children demand protection from all forms of physical punishment

BBC News, United Kingdom

Hundreds of children marched through central London April 15 to demand an end to smacking. They paraded along the streets of Westminster chanting "Stop the smacking," and waving placards which read "Violence is not the answer" and "We have rights too." The children ended their protest at Downing Street, where they handed in a letter addressed to Tony Blair, urging him to ban all physical punishment of children. The demonstration was organized by children and teenagers from campaign group Article 12, a young people's organization dedicated to promoting children's rights to expression. The group's name refers to Article 12 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm] which asserts the right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child. It should be noted, however, that the convention itself does not explicitly ban corporal punishment of children.

"We want to show the government actively that we are opposed to physical punishment of children," said one of the organizers, 16-year-old David Henry from Manchester. "We want to make a political statement to the whole world that children should not be smacked or hurt in any way by anyone. A lot of the little children who are here today have got a lot to say, but they are the ones that don't get listened to." Another teenage protester, Kate Wood from north London, said: "We believe that all forms of physical punishment are wrong, and therefore smacking should be illegal." She criticized government proposals to tighten the law on assaults on children, which stop short of an outright ban.

"The government did a consultation document that was in very complicated language that children could not understand, and they did not even bother talking to children about it," said 14-year-old Kate, asserting her right under Article 12 to be consulted. The children were given strong support from a retired chaplain, the Rev. Charles Dodd, who said all physical punishment should be banned. "Smacking is the root of all violence which is current in our society," he said.

"There is no such thing as a loving smack." And the 70-year-old churchman said the Church of England should issue an "unequivocal statement" to say that it did not support smacking. Tony Blair, whose fourth child is due to be born in August, was not at Downing Street to meet the kids.

In 1998 a survey by the Office of National Statistics found that 88% of parents felt smacking was sometimes necessary but only 7% approved of caning. Smacking has already been banned in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Cyprus, Croatia and Latvia. Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Belgium and the Republic of Ireland are all in the process of legislating against it. In the US the law varies from state to state, with caning still allowed in some. A growing minority of parents in India, Lanka and Nepal oppose corporal punishment in the school and home, but with little impact to date.