



Submission to the Australian Government Consultation on the Second Action Plan

National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Prepared by



On behalf of End Physical Punishment of Australian Children (EPPAC)

Auspiced by the Parenting and Family Research Alliance (PAFRA)

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**More than six in ten Australians experience physical
punishment during childhood.**

**Preventing violence against women begins with preventing
violence against children.**

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1. Executive Summary

The Parenting and Family Research Alliance (PAFRA) and the End Physical Punishment of Australian Children (EPPAC) campaign welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Second Action Plan for the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.

Australia has committed to ending violence against women and children within a generation through prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. While the National Plan recognises that preventing violence requires changing attitudes, behaviours and social norms, one significant gap remains: the legal use of physical punishment of children.

Physical punishment remains lawful in every Australian jurisdiction despite overwhelming evidence that it is ineffective, harmful and associated with increased aggression, poorer mental health, impaired child development and increased risk of child maltreatment. More than **six in ten Australians** experienced physical punishment in childhood, making it one of the most common forms of violence experienced by children.

Australian and international evidence shows that **physical punishment contributes to the intergenerational transmission of violence**. Children who experience physical punishment are at greater risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Preventing violence against children is essential for preventing violence against women.

Recent Australian reviews reinforce the need for reform. The Queensland Law Reform Commission recommended repeal of the legal defence permitting physical punishment, while the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence recommended legislative prohibition as part of Australia's violence prevention strategy. Internationally, more than 70 countries have prohibited physical punishment. New Zealand provides a particularly relevant example, demonstrating that legislative reform, combined with public education and parenting support, can reduce physical punishment and shift community attitudes without criminalising well-intentioned parents.

Key Recommendations: PAFRA and EPPAC recommend that the Second Action Plan:

1. Recognise physical punishment as a driver of intergenerational violence.
2. Support nationally consistent legislative reform removing legal defences for physical punishment.
3. Invest in public education promoting positive, non-violent parenting.
4. Expand access to evidence-based parenting programs.
5. Embed prevention of physical punishment within Australia's primary prevention framework.
6. Monitor prevalence, community attitudes and implementation of reform.
7. Strengthen children's participation in violence prevention policy, including consideration of a National Minister for Children.

Removing legal defences for physical punishment is not about criminalising parents. Rather, it establishes clarity that children deserve the same protection from violence as every other Australian, while ensuring families can access effective, evidence-based parenting support.

Ending Physical Punishment: A Missing Piece in Our National Plan

Preventing violence against women begins with preventing violence against children.

THE PROBLEM

Physical punishment of children is common and legal in Australia.



Drives the intergenerational transmission of violence



Harms children's mental health and development



Increases aggression and use of violence



Undermines children's rights and equality

OUR 7 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1



RECOGNISE

Recognise physical punishment as a driver of intergenerational violence.



2



REFORM LAW

Support nationally consistent legislative reform removing legal defences for physical punishment.



3



INVEST IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Invest in public education promoting positive, non-violent parenting.



4



EXPAND PARENTING SUPPORT

Expand access to evidence-based parenting programs and early childhood supports.



5



EMBED IN PRIMARY PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

Embed prevention of physical punishment within Australia's primary prevention framework.



6



MONITOR & EVALUATE

Monitor prevalence, community attitudes and implementation of reform.



7



STRENGTHEN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Strengthen children's participation in violence prevention policy, including consideration of a National Minister for Children.



THE OUTCOME



**SAFE CHILDHOODS
RESPECTFUL
RELATIONSHIPS
SAFER FUTURES**

Break the cycle.
End violence against women and children within a generation.

2. Australia's Missing Primary Prevention Strategy

Australia has invested substantially in preventing violence against women and children through initiatives promoting respectful relationships, gender equality, healthy masculinities, early intervention and improved responses to domestic, family and sexual violence (Australian Government, 2022).

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 rightly recognises that long-term reductions in violence require changing the attitudes, behaviours and social norms that support violence. Yet one of the earliest and most common forms of violence experienced by Australian children remains legally sanctioned (Haslam et al., 2024; Havighurst et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2025).

Physical punishment is the only form of interpersonal violence that continues to receive explicit legal protection when used by parents under the defence of "reasonable chastisement", "lawful correction" or equivalent common law principles. While adults are protected from physical assault, children do not receive the same legal protection within their own homes (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021; End Corporal Punishment, 2024; Queensland Law Reform Commission, 2025). This inconsistency is increasingly difficult to reconcile with Australia's commitment to preventing violence across the lifespan.

Violence prevention begins long before violence appears in adult intimate relationships (Australian Government, 2025; World Health Organization, 2025).

Violence prevention begins in childhood. Children learn about relationships, conflict and use of power in their families. When physical punishment is used to enforce compliance, it reinforces the acceptability of violence in close relationships and contributes to the intergenerational transmission of violence (Cuartas et al., 2021; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Despite this evidence, physical punishment receives little explicit attention within Australia's primary prevention strategies (Australian Government, 2025). The Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to address this gap.

3. Physical Punishment is a Public Health Issue

Scientific understanding of physical punishment has changed substantially over recent decades (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; World Health Organization, 2025). Once viewed as a parenting choice, it is now recognised as a public health issue and a form of violence against children (World Health Organization, 2025).

The World Health Organization concludes that there is **overwhelming evidence that physical punishment causes harm while having no benefits for children, parents or society** (World Health Organization, 2025). This reflects more than 50 years of international research.

Meta-analyses involving hundreds of studies consistently show that physical punishment is associated with:

- increased aggression and antisocial behaviour;
- anxiety and depression;
- poorer emotional regulation;
- impaired cognitive development;
- reduced parent-child relationship quality;

- increased risk of child maltreatment;
- poorer educational outcomes; and
- increased risk of mental health problems across the lifespan (Cuartas et al., 2021; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021).

These findings are not limited to severe punishment. **Even "smacking" or "light physical discipline" is associated with adverse developmental outcomes** (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021).

Advances in neuroscience further show that physical punishment may alter children's developing brains through stress-related pathways, affecting threat processing and increasing vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Cuartas et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2025).

Accordingly, leading medical and public health organisations - including the British Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians - advise against physical punishment and recommend positive, non-violent parenting strategies (Rowland et al., 2025; Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 2013; Sege & Siegel, 2018).

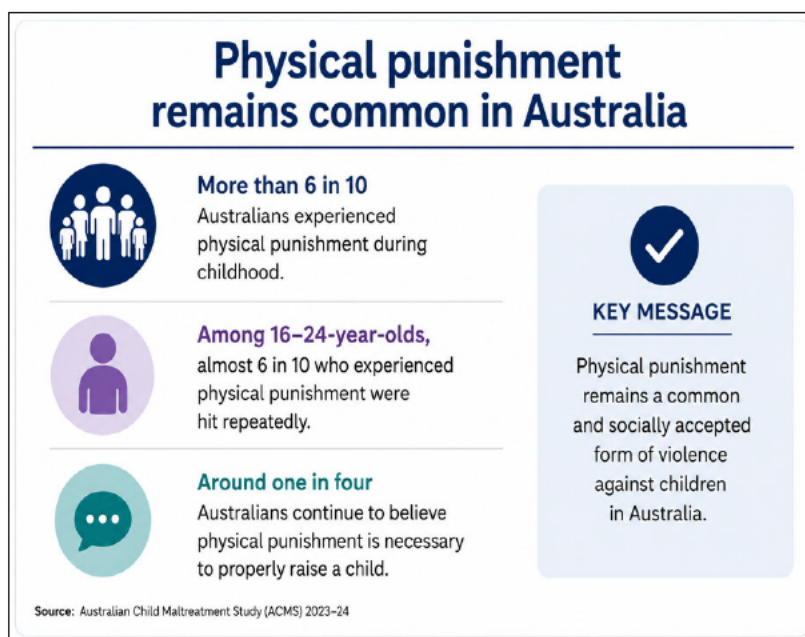
The evidence supports recognising physical punishment as a public health issue requiring coordinated legislative, educational and policy responses.

4. Physical Punishment Remains Common in Australia

Although community attitudes are changing, physical punishment remains widely experienced by Australian children.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study - the first nationally representative study of child maltreatment in Australia - found that **62.5% of Australians experienced physical punishment during childhood**. Among young people aged 16–24 years, almost six in ten reported repeated experiences, demonstrating that physical punishment remains a contemporary, rather than historical, issue (Haslam et al., 2024).

Encouragingly, attitudes appear to be shifting. Only around one-quarter of Australians now believe physical punishment is necessary to raise children, with substantially lower support among younger generations. These findings suggest Australia is increasingly receptive to non-violent parenting and that legislative reform would reflect evolving community expectations (Haslam et al., 2024; Saunders & Goddard, 2010).



However, repeated exposure remains concerning. Young Australians who experienced physical punishment on four or more occasions were twice as likely to experience major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder as those who had not (Haslam et al., 2024).

Together, these findings demonstrate that physical punishment is not simply a parenting issue but a population-level public health concern with important implications for child wellbeing, mental health and violence prevention.

5. Physical Punishment Contributes to the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

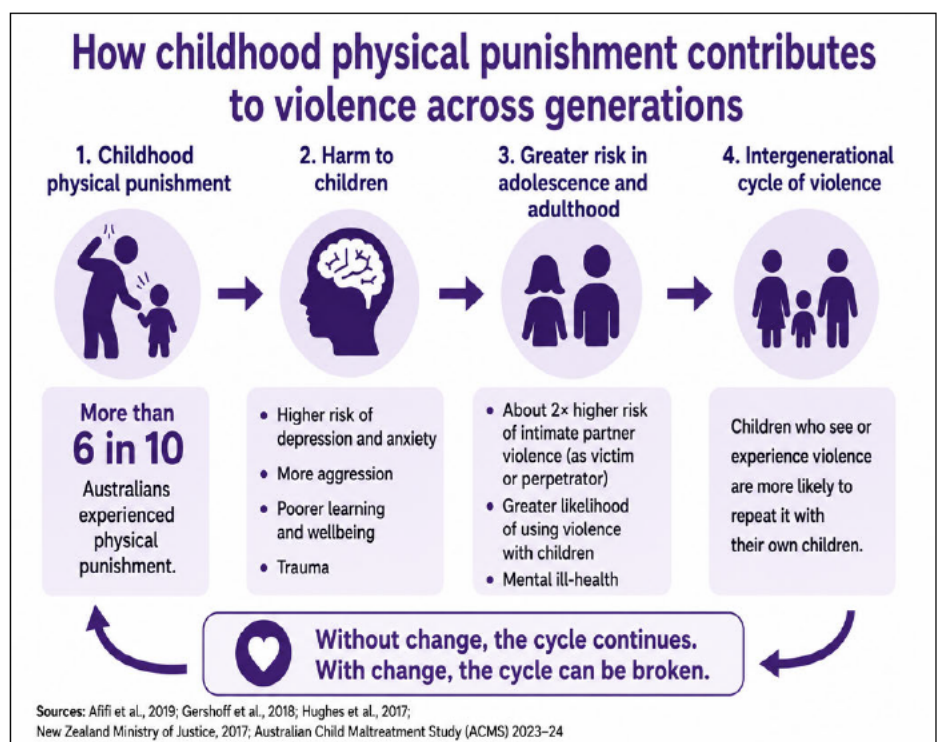
A central aim of the National Plan is to prevent violence by addressing the attitudes, behaviours and social norms that underpin it. Increasing evidence indicates that physical punishment should be recognised within this prevention framework (Cuartas et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2025).

Physical punishment is not an isolated parenting practice but part of the broader ecology of family violence (South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic Family and Sexual Violence, 2025; World Health Organization, 2025). Children learn about relationships, conflict and the use of power within their families. When physical punishment is used to enforce obedience or resolve conflict, it reinforces the acceptability of violence in close relationships and contributes to attitudes that normalise violence across generations (Bandura, 1977; Cuartas et al., 2021; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Australian longitudinal research shows that adults who experienced physical punishment during childhood are significantly more likely to become both victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence, even after accounting for other childhood adversities (Poulsen, 2018; Poulsen et al., 2025).

International research similarly links physical punishment with later dating violence, intimate partner violence, aggression and criminal offending (Cuartas et al., 2021; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021).

Recognising physical punishment within Australia's primary prevention framework would strengthen the National Plan by addressing one of the earliest forms of violence experienced by children. **Violence prevention begins in childhood.**



6. Australian Law Reform Momentum

Australia has reached an important point in the evolution of evidence and policy. During the past two years, three major Australian developments have substantially strengthened the case for reform.

First, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study demonstrated that physical punishment remains widespread across Australia, with more than six in ten Australians reporting experiences of physical punishment during childhood. The study also demonstrated strong associations between repeated physical punishment and poorer adult mental health outcomes (Haslam et al., 2024).

Second, the Queensland Law Reform Commission undertook a comprehensive review of the criminal defence permitting physical punishment. The Commission examined Queensland Police Service data relating to 571 matters in which the defence of parental discipline had been relied upon (Queensland Law Reform Commission, 2025). Approximately **40 per cent** involved serious allegations of violence, including assaults occasioning bodily harm and grievous bodily harm - equivalent to around 228 children affected by the continued operation of the defence. These findings challenge the assumption that the defence exists only to protect parents who lightly smack children, demonstrating that it can operate to prevent prosecution in serious assault cases. The Commission recommended staged reform to ultimately repeal the defence over seven years, alongside broader child protection and criminal law reforms (Queensland Law Reform Commission, 2025)

Third, the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence concluded that physical punishment should be prohibited as part of South Australia's strategy to reduce domestic and family violence. Recommendation 89 recognised physical punishment as a form of family violence and recommended legislative prohibition alongside public education and support for parents (South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic Family and Sexual Violence, 2025).

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that legislative reform is no longer simply advocated by researchers and child rights organisations. It is now supported through Australia's own law reform and domestic violence review processes.

7. International Experience Demonstrates that Reform Works

Australia is increasingly becoming an international outlier. More than 70 countries have now prohibited physical punishment in all settings, including the family home (End Corporal Punishment, 2024).

Importantly, these countries demonstrate that legislative reform does not criminalise parents (End Corporal Punishment, 2024; World Health Organization, 2025). Instead, legislative reform establishes a clear societal expectation that children should not experience violence while supporting parents to adopt more effective approaches to discipline (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

8. New Zealand: A policy model for Australia

New Zealand provides the most relevant comparison for Australia because of the similarities in their legal systems, parenting cultures and social contexts (D'Souza et al., 2026).

In 2007 New Zealand repealed the defence of "reasonable force" for the purpose of correction while retaining parents' ability to use reasonable force where necessary to protect children or others from harm (Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act, 2007; D'Souza et al., 2026). The reform was accompanied by substantial public education campaigns promoting positive parenting and explaining the intent of the legislation (D'Souza et al., 2026; New Zealand Government, 2015).

Monitoring by New Zealand Police found that fears of widespread prosecution of well-intentioned parents did not eventuate (New Zealand Police, 2009, 2013). Instead:

- prosecutions of parents for minor incidents did not increase (New Zealand Police, 2009, 2013);
- public support for physical punishment declined substantially (New Zealand Police, 2009, 2013);
- parents reported reduced use of physical punishment (D'Souza et al., 2026);
- community awareness of positive parenting increased (New Zealand Government, 2015).

Most importantly, nearly two decades after reform, national evidence shows that young New Zealanders report substantially lower levels of both experiencing physical punishment and witnessing violence in the home than previous generations (D'Souza et al., 2026).

The New Zealand experience demonstrates that legislative reform, combined with public education and parenting support, promotes long-term cultural change rather than criminalisation (D'Souza et al., 2026; World Health Organization, 2025). It provides Australia with a practical, evidence-based roadmap for reform.

9. Children's Voices Must Be Heard

The National Plan rightly recognises women as central participants in violence prevention policy. However, children's own voices remain comparatively absent (Australian Government, 2022). While children are often recognised as witnesses or secondary victims of family violence, they are less frequently acknowledged as victims of violence in their own right (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Ending physical punishment helps prevent violence



Childhood physical punishment is associated with around **double the risk** of later involvement in intimate partner violence (as a victim and/or perpetrator).



New Zealand case example

- Repealed the defence of "reasonable force" for the purpose of correction in 2007.
- Supported by extensive public education and positive parenting campaigns.
- Since reform, the proportion of parents who agree that physical punishment is sometimes necessary has fallen from 58% in 2007 to 39% in 2023.
- Police data show prosecutions of parents for minor incidents did not increase. Well-intentioned parents are not criminalised.



Preventing violence against women begins with preventing violence against children.



KEY MESSAGE

Removing the legal defence for physical punishment is a primary prevention strategy for ending violence against women and children.

-  Sets a clear societal expectation that hitting children is not acceptable.
-  Supports parents with positive, non-violent alternatives.
-  Protects children and builds safer, more respectful communities.

Sources: Afifi et al., 2019; New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2017, 2023

Physical punishment illustrates this gap. Although children experience it directly, debates about its legality have rarely considered their perspectives (Queensland Law Reform Commission, 2025; Saunders & Goddard, 2010).

Research shows that children describe physical punishment as painful, frightening, humiliating and harmful to their relationships with parents. Young people consulted by the Queensland Law Reform Commission similarly opposed physical punishment and recognised its harms (Queensland Law Reform Commission, 2025; Saunders & Goddard, 2010).

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to express their views in matters affecting them, while Article 19 recognises their right to protection from all forms of violence (United Nations, 1989).

Children's voices: What children say about physical punishment	
'It makes you feel sad'	8 year old girl
'Its horrible ... painful'	9 year old girl
'It hurts... where it hits'	8 year old boy
'Upset'	7 year old boy
'Angry'	8 year old boy
'It feels unfair'	7 year old girl
Source: Crowley, A., & Vulliamy, C. (2006). <i>Listen up! Children talk about smacking</i> . Save the Children UK.	

The Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to strengthen children's participation in violence prevention policy. EPPAC and PAFRA recommend consideration of a National Minister for Children to ensure children's rights, wellbeing and perspectives are consistently represented across Commonwealth policy and coordinated across health, education, justice, child protection and family violence portfolios.

10. Recommendations

PAFRA and EPPAC recommend that the Second Action Plan include the following actions.

1. Recognise physical punishment as an evidence-based driver of intergenerational family violence and explicitly include its prevention within Australia's primary prevention framework.
2. Work with states and territories towards nationally consistent legislative reform removing legal defences that permit physical punishment of children.
3. Develop and fund a national public education campaign promoting positive, non-violent parenting, explaining legislative reform and increasing awareness of the harms associated with physical punishment.
4. Increase investment in evidence-based parenting programs that strengthen emotional connection, positive discipline, emotion coaching and non-violent behaviour guidance.
5. Monitor national prevalence, community attitudes and implementation of legislative reform through population surveys, including the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, the National Parenting Today Survey and other surveillance systems.
6. Recognise children as rights-holders and active participants in violence prevention policy by strengthening mechanisms for children's participation and considering establishment of a National Minister for Children.
7. Support ongoing collaboration between governments, researchers, professional organisations and community agencies to ensure implementation of evidence-based reforms that reduce violence against children.

11. Conclusion

Australia has committed to ending violence against women and children within a generation. Achieving this ambition requires recognising that violence prevention begins in childhood.

Physical punishment is one of the earliest, most common and legally sanctioned forms of violence experienced by Australian children. It is associated with poorer developmental outcomes, increased risk of child maltreatment and the intergenerational transmission of family violence, with no demonstrated benefits.

Australia now has a unique opportunity to strengthen its prevention agenda. Recent Australian research, independent law reform reviews, international human rights obligations and growing international experience all point in the same direction: protecting children from physical punishment is both achievable and necessary.

Legislative reform is not about criminalising parents. It establishes a clear expectation that children deserve the same protection from violence as every other Australian, while supporting families through public education, evidence-based parenting programs and early intervention.

The Second Action Plan provides an opportunity to close a longstanding gap in Australia's violence prevention framework. By recognising physical punishment as a preventable form of violence and committing to nationally coordinated reform, Australia can help break intergenerational cycles of violence and create safer futures for children, families and communities.

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