

A growth of psychologists?

I DON'T like the New Year, even though I've lived in Scotland for the past 10 years. It's nothing to do with the Scottish tradition of celebrating for several days beyond the chime of the bells – since readers of this column will know that I'm all there for parties. But usually I feel anxious at the turn of the year – partly because I've enjoyed the past one and feel reluctant to move on, but mostly because my birthday is very early in January and that is no longer any cause for celebration. This year I am genuinely sorry that our centenary activities have now come to an end. Not only are we moving on to a new year for the Society but also into our second century. We'll need more than the odd resolution – a whole forward look is in order.

I'm in a good position to comment on some of the opportunities for further growth of academic psychology over the next few years, since I have just finished as chair of the psychology panel for the UK Research Assessment Exercise. Along with colleagues on the panel I had the great privilege last summer of reviewing research from all university psychology departments who chose to submit to the psychology panel for assessment. The grades are due for publication in December, and will be old news when this column appears. But as well as the grades, the panel was invited to reflect upon the state of British psychology. That report will appear any time now.

In the report we note the enormous growth in some parts of the discipline, and relative weaknesses – in scale, and sometimes in approach – in other areas. However, there is plenty of opportunity for such weaknesses to be remedied. As student demand continues, we can use this growth to shape exactly *how* the discipline expands.

There is high-quality work within virtually all areas of UK psychology – and areas such as cognitive neuroscience and

health psychology have recently grown substantially for good opportunistic reasons. Could we not also increase the academic base in such areas as social psychology and developmental psychology (two examples where the total research effort in the UK is relatively small at present)? There is certainly plenty of student interest in these areas, and many scientific opportunities – some at interfaces with other disciplines (management, education) and within our own discipline

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(e.g. the interface between social and health psychology; and between developmental and cognitive neuroscience). There are many practical problems which good research in such areas will help address too.

We are also in a good position for growth within the British Psychological Society. We are currently working on ways to make the Society more attractive to student members. The Board of Directors recently endorsed a proposal from the policy committee of *The Psychologist* to develop an e-mail 'digest' of current research findings, aimed particularly at A-level and junior undergraduate students. We will also introduce a much easier recruitment process in which a departmental stamp can be used in place of a member's signature on the application form for a prospective student member. We hope to recruit many more student members, and that their own interest in and activities within the Society will help maintain a clear role for the BPS within university departments, and in schools and colleges.

In the proposed reorganisation of the

boards of Council, there will also be a clearer focus on undergraduate activity within the Society's curriculum and accreditation work. A single board will deal with all activity up to graduate basis for registration, separate from the board concerned with postgraduate and professional training.

We should also foster the growth of psychology in and for society at large. In universities, in industry, under the 'knowledge transfer' agenda, in the health service and many other public services, there is a desire for good communication of research findings to diverse user groups. Our centenary legacy is already stimulating thoughts about a variety of innovative outreach activities across the range of psychological science and professional practice.

So, my new year resolutions for psychology are that we use demand for psychology to stimulate:

- growth in important but under-represented areas of the subject;
- growth in membership of the Society; and
- growth in actions by this Society to disseminate and publicise the best examples of psychological science and practice to a broad set of audiences.

'What's the collective term for psychologists?' I was asked at a meeting recently. Without too much thought I responded: 'A growth.' It raised a laugh then, anyway.

I wish all members, staff and readers of this column a happy and peaceful new year.

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EATING DISORDERS AWARENESS WEEK

THE Eating Disorders Association (EDA) is planning a number of events and initiatives around the theme 'Caring for the carers', during Eating Disorders Awareness Week from 3 to 9 February 2002.

One of the key events will be the launch at the beginning of the week of two new EDA publications, the *Carers Guide* and the new Educational Resources Pack, along with the launch of a joint EDA, UK Athletics and British Olympic Committee training package for athletics, sport and fitness coaches.

□ For more information contact the Eating Disorders Association, 103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW. Tel: 0870 770 325; website: www.edauk.com.

MENTAL HEALTH VIDEOS

TWO new videos about children's mental health have been released by Mental Health Media, the voluntary organisation dedicated to reducing discrimination and prejudice surrounding mental health and learning difficulties.

Behind the Behaviour, for teachers and schools, and *Behind the Symptoms*, for use in primary care settings, show innovative projects and good practice for supporting children with mental health and behavioural problems.

The launch is backed by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the Royal College of General Practitioners.

□ The videos are available from Mental Health Media. Tel: 020 7700 8171; website: www.mhmedia.com.

ORGANISATIONAL SAFETY RESEARCH GRANT

THE Health and Safety Executive along with the oil industry's Step Change in Safety programme have awarded a grant of £38,000 to industrial psychologists at the University of Aberdeen. The grant will help fund a nine-month project to establish a better understanding of the impact of management practices on health and safety.

Time to seek cash for questions

B RITISH universities should step up their campaign for extra funds from the government. At a meeting in November discussing the future of higher education, university vice-chancellors were told that any pessimism should be replaced by renewed vigour in campaigning for extra money.

According to Howard Newby, chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, 'the lobby should be more frenetic'. Barry Sheerman, who chairs the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, agrees. 'British universities have always consistently undersold themselves,' he said. 'They have been relatively slow in really capturing the imagination of governments as to their power, influence and what they can deliver to society in general and the economy in particular.'

Meanwhile, evidence-based research to back up policy making is facing a crisis of quality and capacity. Ivor Crewe, Vice-Chancellor of the



University of Essex, believes there are no incentives for this sort of work, and recruiting researchers to the area is problematic.

'Social scientists have a highly developed, collective sense of academic prestige, in which evidence-based, policy-relevant work occupies a fairly low place,' he said in *Research Fortnight* (see www.ResearchResearch.com). 'Government-commissioned research reports, even if published, and irrespective of quality, are bronze to the silver and gold of prestigious journal articles and research monographs.'

At a meeting of universities and policy makers in November, Crewe argued that the questions

of career progression, training and salary in the field must be reviewed to fulfil the apparent desire of the current government to base its policies on high-quality research. 'A major cultural shift, reinforced by a new reward system, will be needed to achieve a significant change in the research priorities of academic staff – and their institutions.' Crewe suggested that government departments, consultancies and businesses should get involved in the training of research students, and university social science departments should be encouraged to incorporate the specific skills required.

□ See p.6 for how the BPS is stepping up its attempts to influence government.

Warm Bath welcome for Breakwell

P ROFESSOR Glynis Breakwell has taken up a new job as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Bath. Previously she had been Pro Vice-Chancellor at the University of Surrey since 1994 and is a former Honorary Editor of *The Psychologist*.

Jeremy Thring, Chair of Council at the University of Bath, said: 'We are delighted with the appointment of Glynis Breakwell. She will bring the experience and skills necessary to enable the university to continue at the forefront of research and teaching, and to develop its growing reputation



as a high-quality institution in the region, in the UK and internationally.'

Professor Breakwell had been combining her Pro

Vice-Chancellor role at Surrey with that of Head of the School of Social Sciences there, a post she had occupied since 1997.

Commenting on the new appointment, Professor Patrick Dowling CBE, Vice-Chancellor at Surrey, said: 'The University of Surrey is sorry to lose somebody of Professor Breakwell's undoubted calibre and professional standing. However, Glynis is ready for the next step in her career, and I am sure that I am speaking for all staff and students at our university in sending her our very best wishes in this exciting new role.'

VIPER system success

VIPER, a high-tech video recognition system, may soon be in use in police forces across the UK. Home Secretary David Blunkett said that the traditional identity parade could be replaced by this sophisticated video line-up system as a part of a forthcoming package of police reforms.

VIPER – Video Identification Parade Electronic Recording – was developed by the West Yorkshire force four years ago. Assistant Chief Constable Philip Brear said: ‘West Yorkshire Police has had great success with VIPER since it went online, and we are happy that the force’s revolutionary tool has received national recognition.’

A 15-second live image of a suspect is recorded for eventual appearance in the ‘identity parade’. The suspect and solicitor, in conjunction with the Identification Officer then select suitable other people to ‘appear’ in the parade from a computer database of over 6000 images of members of the public who have agreed to feature in VIPER. Not only do suspects choose the other members of the parade, they may also see and raise objections to the complete film before it is shown to witnesses.

The system has been researched by Tim Valentine, Professor of Psychology at

Goldsmiths College, University of London. Professor Valentine found that video identity parades were fairer to innocent suspects, because volunteers for the videos are a better fit to witness descriptions, reducing the risk of picking the suspect by chance rather than from memory. There is some evidence to suggest that live identity parades are less fair to suspects from ethnic minorities, possibly because people from ethnic minorities are less willing to stand on parades. Professor Valentine’s subsequent research found that video identity parades were fair to African-Caribbean suspects. Therefore, introducing video parades could reduce the risk of racial discrimination.

Peter Burton of the West Yorkshire Police’s Scientific Support Imaging Unit, said: ‘As the requirement for identification procedures increases, more and more parades are having to be abandoned for a number of reasons, varying from the suspect being from a poorly represented group in society or having a distinctive look which makes it difficult to find similar look-alikes. VIPER eliminates these problems. There is also the positive message that the victim does not feel vulnerable by the possible presence of the suspect.’

It is also expected that VIPER will help reduce costs, as volunteers do not need to be paid for each parade.

A NEW YEAR IN THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Welcome to another volume of *The Psychologist*. We hope you enjoyed the last one and that you will continue to contribute – this is your magazine!

We still need your submissions – anything from letters to special issues. We particularly welcome contributions for the formats we introduced last year such as the ‘Head to head’ debates and action plans. See the contributors information on p.47, and visit www.bps.org.uk/publications/thepsychologist.cfm for a writing guide. Here you can also find a growing searchable archive of past issues.

This year, we are introducing more new formats. In keeping with our role as a forum for discussion, we now hope to run ‘Counterpoint’ articles. If you read an article in *The Psychologist* that you fundamentally disagree with, then the letters page remains your first port of call. But if you feel you have a substantial amount of different evidence to cite or numerous points to make that simply cannot be contained within a letter, you can now submit an article of up to 1500 words – but we need to receive it within a month of the publication of the original article.

You will also find a new prize crossword in this issue, and the first of our regular ‘News from the boards’ slots. ‘Around the conferences’ will give you the main findings from Society subsystem conferences in brief, and we hope to expand our international coverage to give you regular updates on the state of play of psychology in various countries.

Finally, we would like to encourage more submissions from practitioners – send us articles on the issues that affect you, or tell us about your typical day of ‘psychology in practice’.

Our week in

THE third week in October marked a significant period for the Society. We wanted to make an impact on parliament, so we held not one but three events: an exhibition, reception, and scientific meeting. These events were designed to make parliament aware of psychology and of our intention to maintain and develop our links with

parliamentarians, and to draw attention to our centenary in the process. Together with our Parliamentary Officer, Nicky Edwards, I have taken on the task of promoting psychology within the 'corridors of power'. Special thanks also to Libby Langley (Centenary Officer), Stephen White (Publications and Communications Directorate Manager) and Stephen Newstead (Chair, Centenary Committee) for their invaluable help in organising our week in parliament.

Over the course of the week we were able to meet with many MPs, peers and influential policy makers. The exhibition, held in the Upper Waiting Hall of the House of Commons, allowed us to display the many faces of psychology and to promote our case for statutory registration. (It was also an excellent means of getting

to know members of the parliamentary police force, now supplied with BPS pens and copies of November's special issue of *The Psychologist* on forensic psychology!)

In Portcullis House we held a reception that brought together senior members of the Society, parliamentarians, and other influential players within Westminster. Sponsored by Ian Gibson MP (Chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology), the reception was addressed by Vicki Bruce (BPS President) and Lord Sainsbury (Minister for Science) – see extracts from the speeches below. We were also able to witness where all that money went (leaking fountains, fig trees, and enormous portraits of senior politicians, past and present)!

Our final event was a highly successful and topical (thank you David Blunkett MP)

The minister's view

I WOULD like to start by congratulating the Society for 100 years of promoting the advancement and diffusion of psychology, pure and applied. Today, I will discuss the role that psychology plays in supporting evidence-based policy making, and how government science policy will affect the profession of psychology.

Interest in psychology – the study of how people act, react and interact – has never been greater, making it one of the most vibrant and successful scientific disciplines. Psychological insights are of value to decision makers in public policy. Psychologists have a distinguished track record as expert advisers supporting the work of parliament and government in the UK. If the public is to benefit from the high professional standards of competence and conduct from psychologists that it deserves, the Society's work in setting and maintaining those standards must be supported and promoted.

Psychology contributes to the achievement of the goals of normal political life, by delivering improvements in core services such as education, health care and criminal justice, and by supporting policy making based on evidence. It also helps explain and ameliorate the stresses placed on people in times of conflict. The psychological profession has a distinguished history of helping those affected by war to recover their ability to lead peaceful and productive lives, and the findings of research are there to assist politicians in developing appropriate and constructive responses to dangerous situations.

Psychology has been one of the many areas that has benefited from the government's increased investment in the science base. After years of poor investment in university infrastructure, the outcome of 1998's comprehensive spending review provided the increased finance needed for extra

resources for research, education and, especially, infrastructure.

Scientists are among our most valuable assets, and they need funding for their research and the tools to do it with. Through the £750 million Joint Infrastructure Fund between the Wellcome Trust and government and the £1 billion Science Research Investment Fund, increased capital investment will ensure that the UK has world-class facilities for world-class research. All the funds from the JIF have now been allocated: over £50 million has been awarded for the study of psychology and closely related sciences.

A key strategic priority of the Medical Research Council is to strengthen a whole range of research relevant to mental health: from studies on biological mechanisms through to work on effective health service delivery. Included in their extensive mental health research portfolio are exciting projects investigating the areas of

schizophrenia and antisocial behaviour. For example, researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry are using motivational interviewing to investigate methods to improve drug compliance in chronic functional psychoses. Another project is looking at two mechanisms of antisocial and risk-taking behaviour – impulsivity and lack of empathy. This group and others are using state-of-the-art imaging techniques to gain novel insight into the complexities of the brain.

So there is much to celebrate at the conclusion of the Society's first 100 years of achievement. An increased understanding of psychology brings benefits that can permeate every area of society, and I would like to wish the BPS every success as they look forward to the next 100 years of bringing psychology to society.

Lord Sainsbury

parliament

scientific meeting on illegal drugs. Our speakers were excellent. Presenting different yet complementary research, each very effectively managed to entertain, inform and provoke the audience. David Best (King's College London) debunked the myths surrounding overdose, and assessed the link between drugs and both crime and mental health. Susan Iversen (University of Oxford) and Leslie Iversen (King's College London) described addiction as a brain disease, and John Davies (University of Strathclyde) presented data showing that drug users talk like 'helpless addicts' in certain settings but not in others. We would like to extend our thanks to Brian Iddon MP (Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drugs Misuse) for admirably chairing this meeting.

Last, but not least, Nicky Edwards

drafted an early day motion, tabled by Ian Gibson, which congratulated the Society on reaching its centenary and promoted the importance of statutory registration. At the time of writing, the EDM had attracted the support of 44 MPs.

The week in parliament was very

successful and has resulted in a number of positive outcomes for psychology in general and the Society in particular. We will build on this positive start through the maintenance and development of contacts that have been made, and we are currently planning a programme of continuing parliamentary events. These include plans for an annual reception and a series of stand-alone subject meetings that will bring expert speakers together with legislators at relevant points in the parliamentary timetable. Alongside these events we will continue to gather information on members' current activities in parliament in order to better co-ordinate the Society's impact on policy makers.

■ *Judi Ellis (BPS Parliamentary Representative)*

The psychologist's view

IT is a rare delight to celebrate a centenary, particularly when the subject of the birthday is so clearly flourishing. We have more than 34,000 members. By 1939 there were just six chairs of psychology in Britain – there are now several hundred. In 1972 A-level psychology was launched with just 275 candidates – last year some 40,000 sat the exam.

We are no longer seen as a fringe subject or a pseudo-science. We continue to surprise generations of students who arrive wanting to learn about people only to discover that they must also master statistics, neurophysiology and computational modelling. In fact, our discipline has been recognised within the mainstream of science for many years. In 1899 C. Lloyd Morgan became the first psychologist Fellow of the Royal Society, and by 1920 psychology had a separate section of the BAAS. Our establishment has always been accompanied by

emancipation, however. The founders of the Society included one woman (Sophie Bryant), and we elected our first woman president, Beatrice Edgell, as early as 1930.

In this centenary year we have celebrated our many contributions to science and professional practice through a number of events, summarising the rapid inroads that psychological science has made into society – often in response to the demands of war. In 1915 Charles Myers coined the term 'shell shock' in an article in *The Lancet*. By the end of the Great War the army had dealt with over 80,000 cases of what would now be termed post-traumatic stress disorder. By 1943 psychology had made major advances in the military – and military psychology stimulated some of the most important conceptual developments in my own field of cognitive psychology during the past century. In the current world situation we will continue to need

psychologists to help understand and ameliorate the consequences of psychological conditions that may be provoked by fear, trauma or the consequences of economic recession, and to help us to train people to respond to new military and civilian challenges.

However, psychologists contribute across the spectrum of public policy areas at all times. Psychologists help crime reduction through their work on parenting training and home visits to parents, demonstrated to be effective in reducing offending behaviour. The first psychologist was appointed to a British industrial company, Rowntree, in 1922. Since that time occupational psychology has helped increase productivity through improvements to work practices, and has reduced losses to industry by improvements in health, safety and welfare. There are real financial benefits for psychological treatments for mental health problems – cognitive

behaviour therapy has proven benefits to patients suffering from depression and other conditions without recourse to expensive drug treatments. Psychological research into car drivers' attitudes to risk informs safety features in traffic planning and car design.

Our presence here is particularly timely, since for some years now we have been pressing government to help us protect the public by ensuring that people cannot call themselves psychologists unless they have recognised training and demonstrated competence. We ask assembled politicians here to give a sympathetic hearing to our case for the statutory registration of psychologists. We are delighted so many people have been able to join this reception tonight – and I would like to convey the Society's warm thanks to Dr Ian Gibson, for sponsoring it.

Professor Vicki Bruce

You can't beat psychological input

PENELOPE LEACH reports on the consultation process that preceded the recent government decision not to change the law on the physical punishment of children.

IN November the government published an analysis of responses to its consultation document on smacking (Department of Health, 2000) and announced that it would do nothing to change the legal status quo in England and Wales. As psychologists, have we missed an opportunity to 'bring psychology to society' and make a real difference to the welfare of children at the same time?

The background

The government was forced to act when, in a case where a young boy had been caned by his stepfather, the European Court of Human Rights found unanimously that UK law failed to provide children with adequate protection from inhuman or degrading punishment (*A v UK*, 1998; see www.echr.coe.int). The stepfather had originally been prosecuted for assault, but using the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' was found not guilty.

The government is required to accept European Court judgements and agreed that the law must be changed to increase children's protection. It made it clear that it did not intend to outlaw parental physical punishment altogether, but set out possible modifications to 'reasonable chastisement', including a checklist of factors to be used by courts in determining 'reasonableness', and a ban on the use of implements and blows to the head.

Following devolution, a separate consultation was held in Scotland. In September 2001 the Scottish Executive announced plans to prohibit all corporal punishment of children up to their third birthdays, to ban the use of implements of any kind on children of any age, and to prohibit blows to the head and shaking.

Why has the government decided not to act?

The government has two arguments against change; in my view, neither of them powerful. First, the government says the

Human Rights Act (which came into force after the consultation process began) increases the protection offered to children. In fact it merely requires courts deciding on 'reasonableness' to consider factors that most already take into account: the punishment's nature, context, duration and effects (physical and mental), and in some instances the sex, age and health of the victim. In the year that the Act has been in force, UK courts have acquitted several parents who injured children with blows, sometimes to the face. Just as in the earlier

'Most child psychologists regard corporal punishment as unacceptable and ineffective'

case of the acquitted stepfather it had been noted that the boy was very young, an asthmatic and therefore especially vulnerable, yet still the canings were found to be 'reasonable chastisement'.

Second, the government consultation revealed that 70 per cent of the responding public were not in favour of making smacking unlawful. However, the government's own public opinion poll, published in the consultation document, found that over 90 per cent believed using an implement to hit a child should be illegal; that almost all believed that punishment leaving red marks or bruising was, by definition, unreasonable; and that 76 per cent believed smacking children under two years old should be banned. Furthermore, almost every responding organisation supported a complete ban – including more than 300 that make up the Children Are Unbeatable! alliance (CAU), the biggest-ever formed to campaign on a single issue affecting children (www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk).

It may be the case that those in favour

of the status quo may have been primarily concerned about the possibility of prosecutions of loving parents. A poll of 1000 adults commissioned by the CAU alliance in 1999 found that 'if they could be sure that parents would not be prosecuted for trivial smacks' 73 per cent of all adults and 78 per cent of those with dependent children would support a ban on parental smacking.

It's also doubtful whether the consultation process addressed all the right people – a government consulting on decisions concerning domestic violence against women would not canvass only the views of men. Yet despite the government's stated intention to listen to children as well as adults in formulating 'family friendly' policies (Home Office, 1998), British children (in contrast to those in Scotland and Ireland) have not been consulted on smacking, an issue which must concern them even more than it concerns parents.

Psychologists' input

The Royal Colleges representing psychiatrists, paediatricians and general practitioners are among the CAU alliance's supporting organisations; the BPS is not. Most child psychologists regard corporal punishment as unacceptable and ineffective compared with other disciplinary approaches and tactics; however, some research psychologists are rightly reluctant to lend professional support to an outright ban on parental physical punishment (or indeed almost any majority behaviour!) unless data convincingly demonstrate that it is harmful.

Prior to 1997 many studies of parental corporal punishment suffered from chicken-and-egg problems. More corporal punishment had been shown to be associated with more misbehaviour in a range of large samples of children, but without baseline measures of child behaviour the causative direction was not certain. That crucial problem has now been

addressed, and several large longitudinal studies controlling for baseline child misbehaviour (Brezina, 1999; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Simons *et al.*, 1998; Strauss & Paschall, 1998) have reported overall harmful effect for parental corporal punishment, including: a five-fold increase in toddler non-compliance; a four-fold increase in assaults on siblings by children under 10; double the rate of physical aggression in school playgrounds among six-year-olds; and an increased likelihood of substance abuse and criminal convictions in adolescence.

However, some psychologists are still reluctant to accept findings that indict spanking or smacking, because this is normal parental practice. Larzelere (2000) carried out an 'updated literature review' to assess whether the evidence supported such a ban, because 'never before have social scientists advocated a total ban on a practice this widespread' (p.199). Last year a study specifically designed to 'test the claim that any spanking was harmful' was reported and widely publicised (Baumrind, 2001). These papers criticise and correct flaws in the methodology of earlier studies, such as using a the same interviewer to report on or score both the parent and the child, whereby any link between their behaviours may be artificially inflated. Their findings suggest that to say corporal punishment is invariably harmful overstates the case: sometimes, with some children, some kinds of corporal punishment have beneficial outcomes.

Despite their careful statistics, the scientific support these papers lend to physical punishment is more theoretical than actual, because beneficial outcomes can only be demonstrated if corporal punishment is administered in an unrealistically controlled and limited way. 'Parents who used physical punishment too severely' (Baumrind, 2001) must first be ruled out. In summarising her own results Baumrind (p.7) says: 'Prior to removing... parents whose use of physical punishment was unusually severe for this population... frequency of physical punishment was associated with detrimental child outcomes as anti-spanking advocates such as Strauss claim.' Concluding his review Larzelere (2000) claims that multiple studies show that spanking is always effective, at least in the short term, if the following guidelines are adhered to:

- not overly severe (i.e. 'two swats to the buttocks with an open hand');
- under control, not in danger of 'losing it';

- between the ages of two and six and phased out soon after;
- used in conjunction with reasoning and eliciting an intermediate rather than a high level of child distress.

But many parents who smack or spank their children do not adhere to such guidelines. In recent government-commissioned research (Nobes & Smith, 1997; Smith, 1995), for example, three quarters of a large sample of English mothers had smacked their babies before the age of one, and a quarter of seven-year-olds had been hit with an implement. Asked why they smacked their children, most parents said it was because they 'lost it' or 'couldn't think what else to do' – responses not indicative of being 'under control'. Furthermore, many parents who hit their children do not consider that doing so is a useful part of discipline. In a MORI poll conducted for the launch of the National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI, 1999) only one in five respondents thought smacking an effective way to teach children right from wrong.

Balancing needs and realities

In announcing the government's decision, Health Minister Jacqui Smith said: 'We need to balance the needs of children with the reality of the difficulties of parenting.' This explanation for government inaction seems wholly inadequate. The assumption underlying it is that smacking the child eases the parent's task. This may be unthinkingly accepted by many members of the public, but by very few parents and, surely, no professional psychologists. We know that families function most comfortably when the aim is co-operation rather than coercion. Discipline (especially

self-discipline, the kind that matters most) depends on authoritative but not authoritarian parenting, and on offering children models of positive behaviour. However good the adult's motive and however bad the child's behaviour, hitting that child is a lesson in bad behaviour.

The government's announcement of new money to the NFPI for the promulgation of 'positive parenting' is to be welcomed, but the sum involved is derisory. Every country that has outlawed all physical punishment of children has instigated legal change in the face of substantial majority opposition in the polls. And they all prepared for it with widespread government-supported public education campaigns. What is needed here is public education on a scale comparable to the ongoing drink-driving campaigns.

But there is also a *moral* dimension to this debate which no sifting of statistics can resolve. Professional attitudes and responses to the argument need to be underpinned by commitment to this aspect of it. That, of course, is the importance of the alliance of 300-plus organisations and of the BPS's failure to join them. The moral argument for abolishing the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' is that it stands between children and their equal protection under the law. The Minister's words restate the longstanding and outrageous view that because parenting is difficult, parents' protection from the law of assault should take priority over children's protection under it.

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