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Pressure to make smacking illegal

EXCLUSIVE

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A coalition of Australian parenting researchers and advocates is pushing for new laws to make it a criminal offence for parents to smack their children.

More than a dozen researchers from the Parenting and Family Research Alliance have argued in a scientific paper, currently under review, that corporal punishment of children is detrimental “on all outcomes”, including mental health, negative parent-child relationship, aggression and anti-social behaviour, and is not an effective method of disciplining a child.

It comes amid recent findings from the first national Australian Child Maltreatment Study that shows 16 to 24-year-olds who were smacked repeatedly by their parents were nearly twice as likely to develop anxiety and depression later in life.

“The challenge for any kind of legislative change in the parenting space is it conflicts with ideology more than anything else,” one head researcher, the director of the Australian Catholic University’s Institute of Child Protection Studies Daryl Higgins, said.

“People see what goes on in the home as being somehow removed, somehow sacrosanct, that you can’t tell parents what to do.”

PAFRA has also launched a wider advocacy campaign for Ending Physical Punishment of Australian Children, which is steered by Professor Higgins, longtime child protection advocate Karen Flanagan AM and Tuning into Kids leader Sophie Havighurst.

Legislative reform would remove the exemption under

existing assault laws that lets parents use “reasonable force” to discipline their child, including smacking, pinching or washing their mouth out with soap.

“If I was standing next to you (an adult), and I was to get annoyed and to hit you, that would be assault,” Professor Higgins said.

“It’s just at the moment, under that same law, if I was a parent standing next to my child, I could say, oh, it was for the purpose of chastisement and it was reasonable. It wasn’t too hard, it wasn’t a punch in the eye, it was a smack on the bottom. And I would not be charged in any state or territory in Australia.”

He likened the legislative reform to choosing a car seat that complied with legal standards.

“We get told what to do in terms of how to safely transport children, and you don’t see riots on the street because of that,” he said.

“We set a safety standard, we say this is what will ensure that children are kept safe, and we say, OK, that’s reasonable.

“It’s still open to interpretation in terms of picking a pink car seat or a blue one, this brand or that brand, but it still has to comply with reasonable standards.”

Sixty-three countries have banned corporal punishment, including New Zealand.

“There’s a lot of cultural things in the history and make-up of Australia that leads us to not question our use of violence,” Professor Higgins said.

“We’re also a country that is relatively socially conservative and (are) unlike many northern European countries that have adopted a very robust welfare state where (they) actually have collective responsibility for the wellbeing of children.”