

Are we teaching our kids to be violent?

In the wake of another two child deaths in our city, I feel compelled to put pen to paper.

The debates I've listened to so far fail to address the reasons why we are deliberately killing our children at the rate of 10 a year, the third highest figure per population out of the 30 listed 'rich' nations, not to mention our appalling rate of 53,000 notifications of child abuse and neglect a year to Child, Youth and Family Services. We are a violent country, let's face it, where attitudes of hitting children prevail, where it's easier to get a prosecution for hitting or neglecting your dog than your child, and where children, as the most vulnerable group in our society are not valued in the way that they ought to be. Our tragic figures don't reflect a society that protects its young very well, and haven't for some time.

I recently travelled by taxi with a somewhat erratic driver who proudly and lovingly displayed the photo of his three year old son in the front. He talked with fondness of his close bond with his son and how he looked forward to seeing him that night. We talked of child development and potty training and sleepless nights. He oozed love for this child until we talked about discipline and obedience. "I punch him in the trapezius (a large muscle in the neck/shoulder/back area) when he's not behaving in a way I like" he stated without any shame.

THAT is precisely the reason why we are breeding a violent society- it's all too normal these days to lash out .It's far too normal to hit kids. Too normal, too acceptable, too easy and they are too vulnerable to be able to do anything about it. I gladly got out of the car and pondered on his possible reaction had I punched him in his trapezius for his erratic driving. Chances are he would have called the police; chances are he would have felt angry and confused, and would have wondered what he had done to provoke such a violent reaction. Chances are our relationship would have been damaged quite a bit and his anxiety raised the next time he spotted me looking displeased with him... just ponder on how a small child must feel .

Our attitudes towards children and our acceptance of violence is the problem, sometimes mixed in with a lot of alcohol and ever escalating doses of P which in turn both distort our perceptions and severely affect the mental health of our society.

The S.K.I.P (Strategies with Kids/Information for Parents) initiative which is working with New Zealand communities and parents to promote positive and effective discipline practices that don't use physical punishment is a great pro active initiative that is trying to offer some alternative disciplinary practices for parents to use. We need to start re educating families that have been raised with harsh discipline and authoritarian parenting styles to not repeat their patterns, but to be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of childhood and to learn some new ways to discipline their kids.

Take some time to check out the website www.familyservices.govt.nz/skip/ and take some time to ponder on whether we are the very people who are teaching our kids to be violent.

By Jean Ellerby, Barnardos New Zealand's SKIP Project Manager