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# Don't make parenting even harder

Disciplining children has been in the news in one context or another lately. Two weeks ago, Hindustan Times carried an article highlighting the concerns of teachers over the proposed inequitable amendments to the Juvenile Justice Act, banning corporal punishment in schools and imposing a jail term for even the slightest injury caused to a child.



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**While framing laws on juvenile justice, the government should differentiate between occasional, necessary punishment and child abuse.**

This article made me ponder the critical issue of parent rights, as did the recent incident of a father in Mysore who made his 13-year old daughter beg so that she would take her studies more seriously. The man was arrested under the Juvenile Justice Act, which states that whoever causes any juvenile or child to beg shall be punishable with imprisonment for up to three years, and shall also be liable to a fine.

In this case, the father hadn't exploited his daughter and made her beg to earn money for him, which is what that law actually seeks to punish.

That incident revived memories of consoling a friend who was upset about whacking her 17-year-old daughter for lolling in front of the TV instead of studying for her Class 12 exams. My friend later apologised to her daughter. The girl understood that her mother's actions had stemmed from her concern for her future. Things were soon back to normal.

This set me thinking: What if the neighbours had reported the corporal punishment to the police? How would the experience of being shamed in public have affected my friend? How would the humiliation of her mother have affected the girl, her performance in the exams, and her future?

These days, children are exposed to dangers of all kinds, both in the real world and in cyberspace. Do parents deserve to be arrested if they err on the side of caution while raising, disciplining and preparing their children?

Recently, The Daily Mail quoted a British MP representing London's Tottenham area as saying that many parents told him they were scared to smack their children following the introduction of the Children Act of 2004 that interpreted even a small bruise as assault.

When laws framed to protect children from emotional and physical abuse are instead used to undermine parental authority, the consequences can only be detrimental to children and to society at large.

While framing a law on domestic disciplining of adolescents, the government should differentiate between occasional, necessary punishment and child abuse. There is no point in blindly following the West's lopsided paradigm.

Commenting on the Mysore incident, Sadia Raval, founder and chief psychologist of Inner Space, Mumbai, said that the father acted out of frustration. He didn't mean to emotionally abuse his child. She recommended counselling, adding that the glare of publicity would undoubtedly leave the family emotionally scarred.

Dr Rochelle Suri, a Mumbai-based marriage and family therapist, suggested including parents' rights in our child welfare system, something that is missing in the Western model.

Having lived in the US, Dr Suri observed that greater awareness through the internet is making older children in the West use the child welfare system to their advantage.

Consequently, the lack of control by wary parents has led to a surge in disastrous teenage behaviours there.

Let's face it — parenting is a far more complicated ball game today. Which is why the rules of the game need to be tweaked to protect the rights of children and of parents.



Governments should ensure that parents, who have an important role to play in the lives of their children, do not have to jump through hoops to defend their rights to discipline their children, thus allowing them to protect the youngsters from harming themselves and others (Veena Gomes-Patwardhan is a Mumbai-based freelance writer and science journalist)

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