

# To cane or not to cane...

**Many parents here still use the cane, but is it a good way to punish kids? Experts weigh in**



Shuhli Sudderuddin

**Q**uality control inspector S. Poopathy used to cane his daughter Ashnee when she was about eight.

Using a cane, he would hit her in a controlled manner on the palm or below her knees when she had done something naughty.

Now 15, Ashnee has a good relationship with her parents, and is a disciplined child.

"We would use just one or two strokes, just to make her aware that what she did was punishable. But we must not abuse it," he said.

Mr Poopathy, 45, holds the views of many parents in Singapore today.

While experts say that caning as a form of punishment for children is becoming less acceptable among young parents in the face of awareness and education, many Singaporean parents still cane their children.

Of 100 parents surveyed by The Sunday Times, 57 said that caning was an acceptable form of punishment and they had used it on their children.

They listed stubbornness, refusal to listen and dangerous or harmful acts as reasons for caning their children.

But how many parents actually cane their children "in a controlled manner"?

Last week, a 39-year-old woman was charged with handing her husband two canes with which he used to hit his stepson.

He hit the boy about 100 times on the buttocks, arms and back in September 2007 and the child spent eight days in the hospital following the two-hour beating.

The man was jailed for nine months in November last year. He could have been jailed for up to four years and fined up to \$4,000.

And therein lies the problem with resorting to corporal punishment.

Child experts told The Sunday Times that abuse was one of the dangers of caning or beating children.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, director of youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, said that she still sees children who are abused by furious parents with hangers, belts and bamboo poles.

"There is a fine line between caning for discipline and abuse. If parents do it on impulse, it shows a loss of control and a loss of respect for the child," she said.

Parents, after all, are only human and they are much stronger than a child.

Said Dr Brian Yeo, consultant psychiatrist with Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre: "Caning can be used as a short, sharp stop to dangerous behaviour.

"However, the problem is that parents do it when angry and are not consistent about delivering it. Also, the child has no power over the level of pain.

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**Explain first, then do it in a calm manner**

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will be punished."

Parents and those who were previously caned as children agree, and say that it can be an effective deterrent to bad behaviour.

Said lawyer John Lee, 29: "Caning was effective with me when I was young because I didn't want to be caned again and stopped doing naughty things."

Customer service representative Sam Adams, 29, had the same experience.

"I once shoplifted and my father hit me with his belt. I never shoplifted again and I don't think I've been damaged by it," he said. "Being caned made me who I am today."

Ms Marian Leong, 46, a pre-school teacher, has two children and uses the cane a few times a year.

"Just mentioning it is enough to get my kids to behave," she said.

But research has shown that corporal punishment may not be as effective a deterrent as believed.

A small study conducted in 2004 by Dr Daniel Fung, chief of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health, showed that parents who used caning as the sole disciplinary method reported the most behavioural and emotional problems in their children.

In a letter to The Straits Times Forum in 2004, he suggested that corporal punishment alone should be discouraged.

Mr Anthony Yeo, a consultant therapist with the Counselling and Care Centre, said hitting a child just teaches him that violence is an acceptable way of correcting behaviour.

"Children are affected as they suffer pain and shame, and their self-esteem can be affected since such punishment is often made known to others," he said.

"I am not convinced that such treatment is long-lasting as that can instil resentment, with ingrained hurt and psychological damage."

This was the experience of barrista Mizah Azmi, 20, who used to be beaten with a belt by her parents.

She found that it made her more rebellious and caused her to leave the house.

"I got used to the pain after a while and I would just rebel after getting hit by shouting and even shoving my parents. Violence begets violence," she said.

Ms Mizah and her parents found a better way. They started to talk things out and their relationship has since improved, she said.

Her parents are also much more communicative with her brother, Haziq, nine.

In Asian cultures, not caning children is seen as being soft on them, and not instilling proper discipline.

But the signs are that things are changing, as more parents shun caning for a more communicative way of disciplining.

Nearly half of the parents polled by The Sunday Times do not cane their children.

Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, a sociologist with the National University of Singapore, said: "More parents are now inclined towards reasoning with children. Corporal punishment used to involve things like caning or humiliating activities like pulling one's ears.

"Now, parents are more likely to hit a child with a hand than a cane. Years ago, there were canes in every household. This is now hard to find."

Schools have also cut down on the use of corporal punishment substantially.

Where public caning used to be common, the Ministry of Education has ruled that only the school's senior management may now sanction such punishment.

Schools The Sunday Times spoke to said that while caning was a punishment option, they preferred not to use it and had not used it in a long time.

Said Madam Tang Wai Peng, principal of Corporation Primary School: "Punishment is meant to help a child and address certain areas of his character. Caning does not do that effectively."

Instead, she chooses to recog-



nise and reward good behaviour, and said that discipline at the school remains good.

Psychologist Frances Yeo with the Psychology Service of KK Women's and Children's Hospital said that punishment is not a key part of discipline.

Rather, the goal of disciplining a child is to teach him or her how to behave so that he or she can mature emotionally and successfully integrate into society, she said.

"Punishment is not disciplining. Punishment merely shows how the parent feels about the problem," she said.

And parents who do not hit their children say it does not mean they are soft on them.

Telemarketer Jamilah Abdul Rahim, 44, sees no need to cane her daughter, Nur Ain, 11.

She said: "I use religious teachings instead, and she understands the reasoning behind them, so she behaves.

"I don't treat my daughter as a friend, so there is discipline, but I don't have to hit her to make her listen either."

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**Should naughty children be  
caned? Send your comments to  
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