Protecting the “good family”

A debate about “family” disguised as an argument about smacking – the New Zealand experience

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Agenda

• How did we get here?
• Talking past each other
• How can we better progress issues relating to family in New Zealand?
The Law

• “Reasonable correction” inherited from the UK

• Rewritten into the Crimes Act 1961 as “reasonable force”

• Campaigns by child advocates since

• Attempts by MPs to change the law

• Government had banned physical discipline in schools and foster homes
The Society

• Considers itself liberal
• Weak Conservative Christian lobby
• Recent changes:
  • Prostitution legalised
  • Civil unions
• Conflict avoiders
The Politics

- Bill taken by a Green MP
- Two-term centre-left government
- Election year, and a real chance of a change of government
- Main centre-right party building alliances with Christian Right
- Citizen Initiated Referendum
Context Summary

• Parliament almost ready to legislate against physical punishment

• Growth of Christian Right as a political force

• Family values rhetoric growing in New Zealand
Good families…

• Good families should not be interfered with by the government

• Good families will not be affected by the repeal of the “reasonable force” defence
Reading between the lines

- Corpus linguistics
- Mutual Information (MI) & T-scores
- Discourse analysis
- Collocates & clusters
- Interviews
Concepts of family:
Anti-smacking discourse

Positive effective parenting:

“Positive parenting is safer and more effective”

Care and control:

“restraint ... is a necessary part of normal parental care and control of a child”
Concepts of family:
Status quo discourse

Family breakdown:

“Drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and the breakdown of marriages and families lead to abuse”

Good parents need protection:

“it penalises good parents doing a great job … with reasonable discipline and boundaries”

Strengthen marriage:

“strengthening of families … encourage stability and best environment for children through marriage and an emphasis on the important role of fathers”
Where did we get to?

- The divisions within New Zealand over the nature and role of family are deeper than before
- Legislation banning physical discipline for the purpose of correction passed 118:3
Redefining the good family

• Participation and consensus
  • Discuss the nature and role of family
• Rhetoric
  • Directly act to change the definition of the “good family”
  • Act indirectly to change the definition of the “good family”
“IT’S NOT OK TO TEACH YOUR KIDS THAT VIOLENCE IS THE WAY TO GET WHAT YOU WANT.”

IT IS OK TO ASK FOR HELP

0800 456 450
www.areyouok.org.nz
“Should a smack as part of good parental correction be a criminal offence in New Zealand?”
Conclusion

- “Family” is a disputed concept in NZ
- The debate is implicit, and overt argument is avoided
- Claims which define a “good family” lead social change
- The state does not (yet) explicitly attempt to define a “good kiwi family”