

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #4

What is Child Physical Abuse?

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Physical abuse is the deliberate use of force against a child and usually is accompanied by anger and/or parental frustration. This includes “causing injury or harm to a child by the parent or caregiver, for example by hitting, kicking or beating; using a hot object, substance or flame to burn the body; or pushing, punching or inflicting hurt with an object.”²

According to the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (FN/CIS-2019),³ physical abuse is the primary concern in 14% of maltreatment investigations involving First Nations children in 2019.

Most physical abuse investigations are about concerns that a parent may have hit, pushed or grabbed a child in an inappropriate manner. These cases are more likely to arise in the context of a parent trying to discipline a child: 57% of physical abuse investigations involving First Nations children occur in the context of punishment. Just over a third (36%) of physical abuse investigations involving First Nations children are substantiated.

While most cases of physical abuse involve school-aged children, 16% of physical abuse investigations involve children under the age of four. Physical abuse involving younger children is of particular concern because of the increased risk of severe harm (particularly brain injury) at those

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)¹ about child welfare prevention services, written for First Nations developing child and family prevention services as part of the systemic reform underway across Canada.

ages and the decreased likelihood that the abuse of infants and pre-schoolers will be detected.

In most physical abuse investigations involving First Nations children (83%), there was no evidence of physical harm observed or noted by the child welfare worker. When physical harm was noted, it usually (90%) involved bruises, cuts or scrapes and did not require medical intervention. Although much less frequently noted, some investigations involved severe physical abuse. Children had sustained broken bones in 7% of physical abuse investigations, head trauma in 2% and burns or scalds in 4%.

Differential Response to Child Physical Abuse Concerns

As described above, many cases of suspected child abuse involve situations that do not necessarily require intrusive child protection measures. In cases involving school-aged children where there are no severe injuries, preventive parent education interventions may

be most appropriate. However, situations that involve younger children or severe injuries require immediate responses, given the child's vulnerability and the risk of escalation. Some child welfare systems have developed "differential response" approaches, with one service track for parent education and parent support services, and a child protection track in situations where injuries and potentially abusive parenting require a forensic investigation and possibly child protection court and police intervention.

Spanking Doesn't Work

Spanking is not an effective form of discipline. Spanking can make children angry and resentful. Spanking can cause them to lose trust in their parents. It teaches children that hitting others is okay. In the long run, spanking can make children's behaviour worse. For some tips on how to guide children in a positive way, see Health Canada's [What's Wrong with Spanking?](#)⁴ pamphlet.

Prevention and Intervention Programs

Preventing physical abuse calls for a number of strategies. At the broadest level, public

education campaigns must draw attention to the ineffectiveness of spanking as a discipline method and to the dangers of using any type of physical force with young children, particularly shaking. Elders and other community leaders can play a vital role in this regard.

For some, especially new parents, parenting classes and parent support groups are effective methods for helping to develop the skills needed to manage situations that could otherwise escalate to child abuse. These approaches have been found to be effective in a number of evaluations of programs for parents involved with child welfare services.⁵ Some have also been developed by First Nations service providers,⁶ who include curricula that reflect First Nations child-rearing traditions and address issues specific to First Nations parents, whose own experiences of being parented may have included being removed from the family home or dealing with the multi-generational effects of residential schools.

Situations involving more severe behavioural issues or acute child- or teen-parent conflict may require interventions that go beyond general parent education and support. In-home crisis intervention programs have been found to be effective in avoiding out-of-home placement and helping parents manage these behaviours.⁷ At least one such program has been adapted for use with First Nations.⁸

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://cwrp.ca/loving-our-children>
- 2 World Health Organization (2022). *Responding to child maltreatment: A clinical handbook for health professionals*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240048737>
- 3 Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Richard, K., Hélie, S., Montgomery, M., Bennett, M., Joh-Carnella, N., Saint-Girons, M., Filippelli, J., MacLaurin, B., Black, T., Esposito, T., King, B., Collin-Vézina, D., Dallaire, R., Gray, R., Levi, J., Orr, M., ... Soop, S. (2021). *Denouncing the continued overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian child welfare: Findings from the First Nations/Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect-2019*. Ontario: Assembly of First Nations. <https://cwrp.ca/publications/denouncing-continued-overrepresentation-first-nations-children-canadian-child-welfare>
- 4 <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/pamphlet-what-s-wrong-with-spanking.html>
- 5 Vlahovicova, K., Melendez-Torres, G. J., Leijten, P., Knerr, W., & Gardner, F. (2017). Parenting programs for the prevention of child physical abuse recurrence: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 20(3), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-017-0232-7>
- 6 Toombs, E., Dalicandro, L., Schmidt, F., Mushquash, C.J. (2021). A scoping review of parenting programs for Indigenous people in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 40(1), 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7870/cjcmh-2021-007>
- 7 Bezecsky, Z., El-Banna, A., Petrou, S., Kemp, A., Scourfield, J., Forrester, D., & Nurmatov, U. B. (2020). Intensive family preservation services to prevent out-of-home placement of children: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 102, 104394. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104394>
- 8 Napoli, M., & Gonzalez-Santin, E. (2001). Intensive home-based and wellness services to Native American families living on reservations: A model. *Families in Society*, 82(3), 315–324. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.199>

