

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Day of General Discussion

Friday, 28 September 2001 – OHCHR (Palais Wilson, Geneva)

Violence Against Children within the Family and in Schools

Submission by **Toivo Rönkä**

TO: The Secretariat, Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

UNOG-OHCHR, CH-1211 GENEVA 10, SWITZERLAND

Subject: **Violence against Children within the Family and in Schools.** (-Day of General Discussion, 28 September, GENEVA.)

TOIVO RÖNKÄ⁺: IT IS TIME TO RE-ESTABLISH PEOPLE'S TRUST ON THEMSELVES AND BELIEF IN EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATION

(WITHOUT USING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN)

MOTTO: Let's all make (as parents, teachers, educators and citizens) a personal decision to refrain completely from corporal punishment of children and let's work together against all kind of violence in schools!

1. Congratulations!

On the basis of the 35 year's experience on the field of child welfare (as Program Director, as Family Therapist, Family Life Educator, Community Worker, Writer, Researcher etc): I (as a subscriber of the Global initiative) warmly congratulate The Committee on the Rights of the Child on the clear lead it has given that corporal punishment breaches children's human rights. We recommend, moreover, that all UN and UN-related agencies and international and national NGOs will make ending all corporal punishment through prohibition and public education a priority.

2. Positive methods of education can be found and instructed

On the basis of long Nordic experiences (where all corporal punishment - including less severe forms such as pulling hair or slapping children - are prohibited) we can assure that prohibiting all corporal punishment promotes children's rights effectively in daily contexts. This is possible on the condition that - in addition to prohibition - one at the same time promotes positive methods for bringing up children by using effective information campaigns and with the help of parent education/ family life education at schools, day care centers, maternity clinics.. - In recent years parents and educators in general have found more positive methods of bringing up children (Rönkä-86). In the 60s, for instance, two Finnish parents in three and one Swedish parent in two found corporal punishment acceptable. Studies conducted in the 1990s, however, show that public support for corporal punishment has declined markedly; in Sweden, for instance, only about 10% of parents (in general 11 % but only 6% of young generation) support the use of corporal punishment (Durrant-99).

In 1994, in the requested statement to The Geneva Committee on the Rights of the Child I wrote following (supported by the s.c. Activating Team): "I propose, that the U N and its organizations, as a continuation of the IYF 1994, initiate a campaign to reduce and eliminate the corporal punishment of children."

- This proposal was based, for instance, on the 20 year's experience of developing a Finnish Activation program for education. I myself worked in charge of numeral continued educational field-projects starting in 1975, that were carried out together with parents, pupils (peer counselors) and other lay people. (More than 15.000 small group leaders (trained with activating methods) helped us when we worked with tens of thousands of parents and children (especially peer counselors) in collaboration with schools, day care centers, maternity and child health clinics, citizen's institutes,

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adult education teaching centres...

One of the most important central ideas of this big experiment was the integrating of expert and lay viewpoints in the educative and guidance work with children. This was mainly possible with the help of the s.c. principle education. It means that in small groups parents could often be easily helped to learn some new practical guiding general principles of other (lay) educators and experts (in order to guide children and prevent problems and solve them, too). An example of an expert principle is following: (perspective of power): Start with yourself in conflict situations and don't blame others! (It is not always somebody else's fault.) - One can accept the child in conflict situations, too, even if one cannot accept the child's behavior. (In this way one can more easily start negotiations with the child.)

Our field-experiments were also a part of the OECD/CERI -project: The educational role of the family. Several extensive reports have been made on the OECD-project and the activating method (Inkinen et al.-97, Rönkä T.-80,-83,-86-93-97, Rönkä M.& T.-92, Rönkä A. & T.-94, Rönkä et. al-97, Vierros A.-97). According to studies the method is effective (e.g. Bibiceanu-94 found, using control group (home observ.method): the group-trained parents had better child care habits than control parents.)

* The most important message from the before-mentioned long activation-project is, that (even if you use simple small group teaching methods) ordinary parents can learn quite quickly some new positive ways to handle problem situations and bring up children. Once they have learned new positive methods, they even don't think at all to use negative methods (such as spanking).

3. Successful trials and methods for child abuse prevention

Based on the 20 year's experience in family therapy and on the extensive literature (study) analysis we presented (Rönkä -86) an "integrative theory" on the main reasons for child abuse and the means to prevent it. (We have made a new literature analysis recently, Rönkä T. 2001). According to our activating family resource model, based on the integration on several theories, the main reasons for child abuse can be summarized as following:

1. The approval of violence as a solution
2. Structural stress and the sudden crisis situation.
3. Disrupted interaction in the family and outside.

- According to this model one can work effectively against child abuse if one works preventively on all three levels. The simultaneous occurrence of all three of above-mentioned factors (the approval of violence, difficulties in interaction and structural stress/ sudden crisis) within the family are a necessary and frequently sufficient cause of child abuse (Rönkä-86).

*** The approval of violence as a solution**

Child abuse usually involves approval of the use of violence within family (Straus-80). This reflects the use of violence, for example of physical punishment, in neighborhoods and also in society at large where it is an open secret. Idealization of the use of violence in resolving problems in our society may, for example, justify the power felt by a depressive parent when abusing his/her child. This powerful feeling in turn increases the likelihood of recurrent abuse.

Longitudinal studies have shown that those parents who defend most strongly physical punishment for preschool aged children are among the 25% of the parents who have the most serious problems with their children at the age of 16 (Newson-83).

*** Structural stress and the sudden crisis situation**

Parents are many times unable to cope with crises in everyday life when there is a background of debilitating, long term structural stress, for example hard financial difficulties, failure on the job or unemployment.

*** Disrupted interaction within family and outward (isolation)**

Interaction between parent and child must be disrupted before structural stress combined with a

sudden crisis can lead to child abuse. Such disruption is most often present when an adult is unable to show emotional approval to the child. The child may be really different in some visible way or the parent may only consider him different because of his/her poor knowledge of child's development. He/she is also isolated from other family members and from his/her surroundings.

Putting into practice the b-m. principles concerning the family as a small group are not enough to prevent child abuse (and provide treatment for cases of abuse). Measures aimed at preventing e.g. isolation of the family are also necessary.- Parent schools for parents of children of a certain age (held at maternal/child health clinics, day care centres, schools and citizen's institutes) are one example, that one of the most important aims of the schools is to acquaint parents with each other and to encourage them to learn more and to take initiative in their lives.

- For cases of child abuse families is needed intensive long-term resource and solution focused family work and joint responsibility education or community work in order to prevent new child abuse cases and to support the treatment of child abuse families. Parents who commit child abuse usually find it difficult to control sudden crisis situations and their impulsive behavior in them. In such cases the child is such a source of stress in the parent's life that they react physiologically to a smile in the same negative way as parents do to crying (Frodi& Lamb -80).

4. Some practical aspects for the future campaign

I maybe is good to emphasize the same ideas as I did in my before-mentioned initiative to the Committee (Rönkä, -94). The future campaign should be as simple and straightforward as possible.

Ten aspects for the planning of the future campaign:

1) The principal practical aims on the campaign could be

a) to initiate worldwide discussion on punishment of children and on positive methods of upbringing and

b) to bring family policy to the attention of decision makers and politicians. This is extremely important as positive upbringing requires material resources and acceptable living conditions.

Bringing up children is not only a matter of attitudes but also of means.

2) The possible international campaign should seek to activate people and foster positive educational attitudes and stress resource- and solution-focused methods in education and problem situations.

Therefore it is important, that the campaign aims at encouraging as many parents and educators as possible to accept the campaign's ideas. Moreover, because no child or family can live in isolation every child (and adult) needs friends of his/her own age and adult friends, too.- In our new "More trust-project" we try to arrange for every child: 1) an adult-friend outside the home (substitute parent) and 2) an interesting hobby with an adult leader. (With an adult one become an adult.)

General talk about networks is not enough, because nowadays "It takes a child to raise a whole village". - It is unrealistic to think, that in big urban areas all residents like to be educators. That is why: we must in advance guarantee for every child some adults, who outside the home promise to support this child. 3) Thanks to the campaign's simple theme, it would suit all societies and cultures. One of the most important practical tools for achieving the aims of the campaign would be a personal decision by parents and educators to refrain completely from corporal punishment. (It is easy to inform other participants and in public e.g. how many adults have already made this decision!)

4) Corporal punishment, including less severe forms such as pulling hair, is adverse to the development of a child. Even the smallest, continually given spanks does harm the development of a small child (it shows, for example, our Operation family -study with two control groups, Makkonen et al.-80).

5) The adverse effects of corporal punishment are not reduced by the child's awareness of the fact that physical disciplinary measures are acceptable in the culture (e.g. Rohner et al.-91).

(Thus persons moving to a Nordic country are not allowed to engage in corporal punishment of their

children even if it is acceptable in their country of origin.)

6) Studies indicate that mental violence is four times more common at home than physical violence (e.g. Straus-80). Since it is always a part of corporal punishment, it also would be at issue in a campaign directed at corporal punishment.

7) It is claimed that making corporal punishment illegal would subject parents to increased mental violence, but this notion is mainly a mere myth (Rönkä-94). The danger of mental violence replacing corporal punishment may perhaps exist only for parents who strongly believe in corporal punishment and use it frequently (e.g. 10% of Finnish parents; Sariola & Uutela-92) This attitude is largely based on the parent's rather authoritarian belief that they must never reveal their emotions or needs lest they lose authority before their child. If the proposed UN campaign can bring change to this belief, it will become possible to find more positive methods for bringing up children.

8) When a parent or an educator makes a personal decision not to use corporal punishment but cannot keep to it, it is important that she or he is offered support instead of blame. At the same time positive methods should be brought to the fore and a social network should be established to provide support.- Maybe the General International Day of Reconciliation and Forgiving, that we are planning, could help all who have bad conscience.

9) The importance of fathers to how families bring up their children is much greater than it was earlier believed. For example, the justifiable limits a father sets are important to the positive development of a child (e.g. Rönkä & Rönkä -94).

10) A human relationship is not a struggle for power, but for balance (Helena Anhava, poet)

5. VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN WITHIN THE FAMILY AND IN SCHOOLS

Our Activating Bridgebuilders -association has carried out in the 1990s a long project on preventive measures (Rönkä M.-01). It started last year a new preventive project (More trust! (in relationships is needed) together with the city of Helsinki (youth house), a comprehensive school and civic organizations.

There is not enough space to write at length about these projects, but we mention here some experiences:

Ten discoveries from a future campaign's point of view:

1) Our general (western) educational model must be renewed:

- In these days the generally used model of upbringing "with love and restrictions" is already old-fashioned. The model was developed during the 1950s and 1960s based on the theoretical model of support and control. This model was intended to an adult centred authoritarian agricultural society, where development is slow. Today a child needs first of all trusting guidance and negotiation of parents and other adults, that is based on

child's needs and goals and where all kind of violence against child is prohibited. - In the future campaign it is extremely important to defend parent's authority and rights to be in charge of education, but their use of power must always be grounded.

2) Adult-guided, authoritative education seems to be most optimal

- Adult-directed guidance seems to be most optimal for a child's development according to extensive follow-up studies. Steinberg et al., for example, proved with the help of a very large sample (14.000 14-18-old pupils), that the s.c. authoritative, adult-guided parenting had "comparable benefits, regardless of the family's ethnicity, class, or composition" (1996, p. 443).- Steinberg has quite same kind of variables as we have used since 1975 in our experiments with activating counseling and adult-guided (authoritative) education in Finland (Inkinen et al.-97).

3) Growing up together -centred education is needed

- "A child centred -education" is not enough, because it may lead to selfish children and youth problems (e.g. Steinberg et al.-96). Much better seems to be a s.c. "growing up together -centred education". It starts from a child's needs and goals, but is adult-directed, child encouraging and there

a child is also "a giving party" to adults (Rönkä M.-01, Rönkä A. & T.-94).

4) A new integration between expert and lay knowledge is needed

- We developed a special kind of Parent's forum, where the most important thing is the real integration of the viewpoint of parents (laymen) and of the experts. In the practical integration (with the help of (small group) discussions) these viewpoints complement well each other. (The name is: a vital point method).

5) New kind of Parent's (+other) forums are needed for contracts

- In public Parent's forums e.g. at school parents can agree and make contracts concerning education (without use of violence). Pupils make same kind of contracts in the class (e.g. during the skills for life -program) and pupils are represented in the parent's forum, too. In the Parent's forum it is very touching and effective to listen pupils (without name) written expectations to their parents ("Don't force me and use violence!") and parent's (written) expectations to their children ("Try to keep our contract as I try to do, too!"). All contracts will be sent to all homes - regardless of their participation in the forum!

6) Practical new ways to support self-esteem must be developed

- A self-esteem is a crucial factor to both children's and parent's development and behavior especially in stress and problem situations. We have developed a new kind of concept of a healthy self-esteem in addition to the old one (a trait self-esteem, because it is abstract, unpractical and hard to change.)

* This new concept seems to function very well and it can be used also with children (and with parents and professionals in all educational programs and in therapy, too.) Children are very interested to discuss and find ways, what they can do in order to enhance their self-esteem in practice.

* Using a similar concept (state self-esteem), for example, Heatherton & Polivy (-91) could change effectively participants' attitudes and behavior - their method was small group exercises.

7) A healthy self-esteem develops and can be intentionally supported by guiding of group-processes, at home, in schools etc.

- According to this concept an experiential self-esteem develops in daily experiences and is based mainly on the emotional human relations. It develops as a social construction process and depends on the group (especially family) processes. These can be more or less goal-directed, close, flexible and enduring. The quality of a small child's self-esteem depends mainly on these family processes even if later friendships come important, too.

8) Notice: Violently behaving persons have a "good" self-esteem

- According to the newest scientific, extensive analyses violently aggressively behaving persons believe that they have a "good" self-esteem in their own estimation. Even a weak mother, who is battering her child, for instance, thinks in this way to her mind (at least in the moment of battering; Baumeister-99).

- Many studies show (e.g. Salmivalli-98) that also the bullies have a good self-esteem in their own estimation, even if it is unreal, uncertain and depends on their friend's acceptance. The bullies: 1) like to be central figures, 2) believe they are better than others and 3) they cannot bear any critic at all.

- For these reasons in a preventive work against bullying one must always use some kind of group work and also a open handling of social relations at the class and school/ home levels.

9) Resource centred, solution focused approaches are needed

-In the preventive work one must stress more the importance of activating and protecting factors and available resources than risk and problem questions and illness. For example, the general classification of preventive work as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention is unclear, old-fashioned and too much illness-centred; we need more resource-centred approaches (Rönkä-97).

10) Children must be taken along and their opinions heard!

- Even if the Finnish parents and teachers are quite democratic in general, children are still complaining of the misuse of power by adults. In a Finnish study (concerning 27.000 12 year old pupils), for example, the central feature (in written compositions) was the problem of adult's (submitting, not well grounded) power over children (Repo-Kaarento-90). One 12-year old girl, for

example, wrote in this study: "Parents, be awakened to the affairs of children, you must think of us, too!" In this study one could find seven types of pupil's relations to adults (trustful, neutral, blaming, demanding, modest, submissive and defiant) that must be taken into account, for example, when one is planning campaigns against violence in schools and homes. Children themselves, moreover, must be taken with, when adults plan campaigns (in order to reduce and prevent violence against children in schools and within family).

Epilog: "Life is an overwhelming task for the child, that feels that love, too, must be earned. (Helena Anhava, poet)

(This paper was prepared in charge of Toivo Rönkä by The Activating Team: Markku Rönkä and Anne Vierros, June-01)

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