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‘Ailsa M. Watkinson, Spare the Child: Ending Childhood Corporal Punishment’

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Ailsa M. Watkinson, *Spare the Child: Ending Childhood Corporal Punishment* (University of Regina Press, 2026), 229pp. Paperback. C\$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-7794-0104-5.

In *Spare the Child: Ending Childhood Corporal Punishment*, Ailsa M. Watkinson brings together historical, sociological, and legal perspectives on the issue of corporal punishment in Canada. Since 1892, Section 43 of the Criminal code has granted legal defense for parents and caregivers who use corporal punishment on children for the purpose of ‘correction’. This legalized violence means that children can be hit by parents, guardians, or educators as a form of discipline. A court challenge, led by Watkinson, over twenty years ago resulted in section 43 being upheld in January 2004 by the Supreme Court of Canada, while clarifying the limits of its scope. This book provides excellent insight into Watkins’s experience in challenging section 43, along with a detailed history of corporal punishment in Canada, numerous private members bills aimed at repeal (19 and counting), barriers in overcoming opposition to repealing section 43, and why this issue is so important for a country grappling with the lasting impact of colonialism on Indigenous children.

The problems with allowing corporal punishment as a form of discipline are well-documented both in Canada and globally. Corporal punishment refers to any form of punishment which is intended to cause physical pain to a person. In Canada, it is the most common form of violence against children today. Adults have full protection from violence under the law, yet children do not. Canada has been reviewed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child multiple times and called out each time for failing to end corporal punishment. In their most recent Concluding Observations (2022), the Committee recommended that Canada repeal section 43 of the criminal code and explicitly prohibit all forms of violence against all age groups of children within the family, in schools, and in other institutions where children may be placed; promote positive, non-violent and participatory forms of child-rearing and discipline; and conduct awareness-raising campaigns for parents and professionals working with and for children to promote attitudinal change within the family and the community. The Committee noted that it is extremely important to give high priority and specific attention to ending violence against children, as it is essential to have effective legislation and to fulfill Canada’s duties under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Canada ratified more than thirty years ago.

Furthermore, as Watkinson notes, there is considerable evidence of the harms of child physical punishment as it negatively impacts cognitive development, does not improve behaviour, and that these adverse effects follow children in adulthood. In addition, ending corporal punishment in Canada is in line with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Call to Action 6 which calls upon Canada to repeal section 43. This call to action makes visible a complex and multi-dimensional problem of child violence and wellbeing, as well as an ongoing process toward decolonization and reconciliation.

There are currently 68 other countries around the world that have banned corporal punishment. Watkinson takes us through their experiences to explore some of the possibilities for Canada moving forward. Sweden’s ban, which has been in place for over forty years, does not focus on imposing penalties on parents and has been well-studied by Canadian experts. Similarly, the Aotearoa New Zealand wording was phrased as such to ensure parents would not be criminalized for minor assaults, which is a worry of critics in Canada.

Watkinson concludes her book with a thoughtful look at what else is needed other than legislative change, including public education, which is an important component in changing the narrative around violence against children. There are organizations in Canada ready to help change the conversation around physical punishment and to work with governments to support legislative change, which is possible with brave leadership from elected officials.

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