

To school without fear

The fear of having to live up to unrealistic expectations, the threat of disapproval and the menace of corporal punishment – when will our children be free of these nightmares?



**Immediate results, long-term damage:
Corporal punishment brings more problems than solutions.**

Would you believe that there could be a school where the students' minds are free of fear? Some would deem it to be an utopian ideal, akin to a nation without boundaries or a home without a wall. Even today, the word school continues to evoke fear in children and the school bell at the end of the day signals freedom.

On the other hand, teachers today are increasingly afraid of being victimised by laws that protect the children. From what do children need protection? From the menace of corporal punishment. Would one believe that corporal punishment continues to be a burning issue in this day and age? One only has to read the daily newspaper to know that it does. Remember nine-year-old Sudali in Tirunelveli? She lost her eyesight after the teacher threw a tumbler at her for being inattentive.

I remember Rajagopal, whom I taught in the early 1980s. He would land up at my place on Sunday mornings under the pretext of some burning doubt. All he needed was a friendly gesture, a smiling word of reassurance and the doubt was gone. It took me a few weeks to discover that Rajagopal's father would beat him with a geyser pipe if his marks dropped. That explained the terror and permanent mistiness in his eyes; the "I am not good enough" slouch of his heavy shoulders and his ungainly gait.

In fear of disapproval

Rajagopal represents hundreds of students who live with the fear of disapproval and punishment if they do not measure up to expected "standards" of behaviour and performance. The encyclopaedia terms corporal punishment as the deliberate infliction of pain and suffering intended to punish a person or change his/her behaviour. Reams of paper have been filled with scores of incidents of corporal punishment in our schools, all with the intention of making the erring child a model student, or goading the student to higher levels of attainment!

By no stretch of imagination would anyone advocate the unconditional use of emotional or physical violence to improve a student's behaviour or performance. Laws and school rules prohibit it and public opinion condemns it. Ask adults whether they subscribe to the view that children should be spanked, caned, pinched, humiliated or be abused with derogatory words, none would agree to be seen as protagonists of any form of corporal punishment. Yet, as a society, we have been unable to do away with this loathsome practice.

To become real, change of rule and law has to coincide with a change of heart. In a literal sense, educators and parents have to believe that students' potential can improve without corporal punishment.

Let's address this paradox first. "Learning and Fear" are antithetical in nature and purpose. For learning to happen, fear or corporal punishment is totally out of place. "The mind is like a parachute, it works when it is open", that is, learning happens when the mind is inquiring, questioning and feeling free, without fear, to explore and to know. The philosopher J. Krishnamurthy says in his lectures on "The Problem of Fear": "And there is no intelligence if there is any form of conflict and conflict must exist as long as there is fear."

Siddharth vividly relives the pain of his school days: the fear of failure in Maths, severe rebukes at home and ridicule in class. "Your marks are so low that you won't be able to do even dhobi accounts when you grow up," the sarcastic voice of Mrs. Koshy and the sniggers and giggles of classmates made Siddharth drop Maths all together. Much later in life he realised he could do Maths quite so well.

A fear of subjects, of examinations, of punishment, of failure, of letting down parents, of being forsaken by friends — there are so many known and unknown, conscious and subconscious fears that students pick up during their school days. My brother Ram, who finally made it to IIT, would run a high temperature before every exam. Ram, like many others, was a victim of some kind of irrational exam phobia.

Well, almost everyone realises that the harm caused by corporal punishment far outweighs the "behaviour modification" it can bring. Yet, it seems that both parents and teachers adopt it by the force of habit.

Fear of unpleasant consequences is used to make the child do what the teacher or the parent wants. The mother tells a toddler: "If you don't finish your food, the demon will take you away." Later it is: "If you don't come first in class, I will send you away to boarding school"; "If you don't complete your homework the vice principal will beat you." Threats and ultimatums evoke irrational fears but the magic, at first, actually seems to work. The job gets done and the trick gets repeated. Losing control

But something else also happens! The magic soon wanes and the threats no longer produce their desired effect. Navin tells Prabhu: "...it won't pain too much. VP will give you four or five beatings on your knuckles but, believe me, the pain will last for exactly four minutes...think about how long you will take to do your English essay?" Pain thresholds grow in step with the teacher's weariness at her loss of control. Panic seizes the helpless teacher, who also has results to deliver and promises to keep. Then, in frustration, limits are crossed and the inevitable happens. Another corporal crime shakes the nation.

One day, a bunch of over-enthusiastic boys broke two new chairs in Class IV. The teacher sent the boys to an empty room to reflect over the matter. They soon came back with an action plan; each would contribute towards replacing the chairs. They even wanted to share their thoughts and feelings about the incident with their classmates.

Children are largely capable of being able to reason the pros and cons of a situation if trained. Rather than numb their senses by instilling fear,

it is wiser to develop their thinking skills, judgement and values. It calls for some more time and effort but the effects are indeed lasting. Why not work towards lasting solutions instead of making ourselves ring masters who crack the whip in barbaric tradition or dead habit?

Ofentimes, it is a pressure-filled school or home environment that turns nervous, irate or frustrated adults into tyrants who inflict pain and sorrow. Vijayan has not spoken to anyone for over a year. He is unable to forgive himself for having struck his eight-year-old son so hard that he died, and all because Parthiban had failed in the final exams. Parents try to achieve their unrealised dreams and aspirations through their children and want quick and high returns for their time, costs and effort in schooling their children. Different pressures

Teachers in overcrowded classrooms with unrealistic work schedules are under great pressure to make their students perform. Sridhar cannot explain why he banged Urmila's head against the wall when she did not complete her homework. How was he going to achieve a cent per cent pass rate in Accountancy? Had Sridhar's fear manifested in a violent outburst that led to Urmila fainting?

Both parents and teachers need to realise and accept that it is unrealistic to expect their wards to automatically perform well in school or to be perfect pictures of obedience and co-operation, with no mood swings or idiosyncrasies. Nor is it sensible to template children and expect adherence to a common code of behaviour. Every child has a stamp of uniqueness and individuality that needs to be respected and cherished.

If parents accepted their children with their strengths and their weaknesses, set realistic goals for their advancement, worked scientifically and systematically towards goals through "adult-adult" negotiations rather than "strict parent-disobedient child" transactions; and if schools promised to provide wholesome learning experiences in nurturing and joy-filled classrooms instead of promising to produce 100 per cent pass results, there will be sea change.

We can then have schools where there is no "fear in the air" and students with nostalgia-filled memories of childhood where there were no threats, and no tears of punishment.