

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 16 October 1994

From: Research Department

Physical Discipline of Children

In its letter dated 17 July 1994 to the Universal House of Justice, the Local Spiritual Assembly of ... seeks an explanation of the Bahá'í position concerning the physical disciplining of children. The Assembly indicates that, while it understands that "the Faith condones the physical punishment of children", it is not clear about what is meant by the term "physical punishment". We provide the following comment.

Punishment

Before addressing the Assembly's questions about physical discipline and the nature of physical punishment, it is useful to reflect briefly on the Bahá'í concept of punishment. It is suggested that it is helpful to consider the notion of punishment within the overall context of the Bahá'í Teachings on justice and world order. For example, Bahá'u'lláh links "Justice" to the training and development of "the world". He states:

O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world.¹

He indicates that the "basis of world order hath been firmly established" upon the "twin principles" of "reward" and "punishment".² And, He describes the operation of these important principles and the role of justice in ensuring "world stability and order":

The Great Being saith: The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment. And in another connection He hath uttered the following ...: Justice hath a mighty force at its command. It is none other than reward and punishment for the deeds of men. By the power of this force the tabernacle of order is established throughout the world, causing the wicked to restrain their natures for fear of punishment.³

Given the emphasis contained in the Bahá'í Writings on fostering the "progress of the world" and preserving the "tranquillity of peoples" and world order,⁴ it is interesting to note that Bahá'u'lláh sets out two means for protecting social order, namely, the provision of penalties associated with the violation of specific laws which serve to restrain man from "committing vile and contemptible deeds", and an emphasis on the "fear of God" which taps into man's intrinsic motivation. He states:

¹ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 27.

² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴ *Ibid.* See, for example, pp. 129-130.

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God. It is man's true protector and his spiritual guardian. It behoveth him to cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the appearance of this supreme bounty....⁵

In one of His Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the motivation for punishment exacted by society on those who commit serious crimes.⁶ "Far from being an act of vengeance", He affirms, the punishment

is like the requital by a father who punisheth his son for the son's wrongdoing: seemingly infliction, but truly benediction.... [It] proceedeth from the father's tender and pitying heart, warding off from his child all that is base, driving him on to all excellence; and from it, step by step, will the cherished son be led into perfections and all good ways of life.

In the following extracts from this same Tablet, it can be seen that the Master also stresses the right of the community "to defend and protect its rights", the supreme importance of education to the transformation of the individual and society and the prospect that, in the long term, the need for physical punishment may well be greatly reduced:

The community of man hath the right to defend and protect its rights. Furthermore, this is defined as the imposition of a legal punishment, not as the wreaking of vengeance.... It is incumbent upon human society to expend all its forces on the education of the people, and to copiously water men's hearts with the sacred streams that pour down from the Realm of the All-Merciful, and to teach them the manners of Heaven and spiritual ways of life, until every member of the community of man will be schooled, refined, and exalted to such a degree of perfection that the very committing of a shameful act will seem in itself the direst infliction and most agonizing of punishments, and man will fly in terror and seek refuge in his God from the very idea of crime, as something far harsher and more grievous than the punishment assigned to it....

At whatever time the heavenly Teachings are spread abroad, and their pillars are set firm and deep, and their walls raised up, and their rule is well established over the hearts, it is certain that man will not raise his hand against man to the point where such punishments as imprisonment, flogging, torment or the forfeiture of life would ever be called for. "And God sufficeth the believers in their fight".⁷ This verily is peace for all mankind, and complete tranquillity, and the highest perfection destined by God for man.

⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶ Tablet recently translated from the Arabic.

⁷ Qur'án 33:25.

Physical Discipline of Children

Reward and Punishment

It is clear from the following extract from a Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the twin principles of reward and punishment have application in the context of child-rearing:

Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance. Let them put forth every effort in this regard, for when the bough is green and tender it will grow in whatever way ye train it. Therefore is it incumbent upon the mothers to rear their little ones even as a gardener tendeth his young plants. Let them strive by day and by night to establish within their children faith and certitude, the fear of God, the love of the Beloved of the worlds, and all good qualities and traits. Whosoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary. It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.⁸

Hence, a vital component of the education of children is the exercise of discipline. In this regard, it should also be recognized that, in a letter dated 29 April 1933 written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi states that a parent ought to express both love and justice in his attitude towards his children, and he observes that:

If we ponder a while, we will see that our welfare can be ensured only when both of these divine attributes are equally emphasized and practised.

Right of Parents to Discipline Children

It is important to note that, just as a society has the right to impose "legal punishment" on an individual who infringes the law of the land, and a Spiritual Assembly acts as "the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock" by its constant encouragement to individuals and families "to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation",⁹ the Bahá'í Writings specify that Bahá'í parents are not only responsible for the training and education of their children but they also have the right to undertake this important function.

In fact Bahá'í education, just like any other system of education, is based on the assumption that there are certain natural deficiencies in every child, no matter how gifted, which his educators, whether his parents, schoolmasters, or his spiritual guides and preceptors, should endeavour to remedy. Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element. The child when born is far from being perfect. It is not only helpless, but actually is imperfect, and even is naturally inclined towards evil. He should be trained, his natural inclinations harmonized, adjusted and controlled, and if

⁸ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), sec. 95, p. 125.

⁹ Naw-Rúz 1974 letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'is of the World.

necessary suppressed or regulated, so as to ensure his healthy physical and moral development. Bahá'í parents cannot simply adopt an attitude of non-resistance towards their children, particularly those who are unruly and violent by nature. It is not even sufficient that they should pray on their behalf. Rather they should endeavour to inculcate, gently and patiently, into their youthful minds such principles of moral conduct and initiate them into the principles and teachings of the Cause with such tactful and loving care as would enable them to become "true sons of God" and develop into loyal and intelligent citizens of His Kingdom. This is the high purpose which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has clearly defined as the chief goal of every education.

(9 July 1939, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Given the right conferred on Bahá'í parents by the Teachings of the Faith to endeavour to remedy "certain natural deficiencies" in their child, it is evident that, when executed in the careful and loving manner described above, their efforts are neither abusive nor do they constitute a violation of the rights of the child.

Forms of Discipline

The Bahá'í Teachings call attention to a number of possible forms of discipline—"physical, moral or intellectual". While physical discipline is one of the available alternatives, it should be noted that the Bahá'í Teachings do not require that physical discipline be used. The following extract from a letter dated 7 January 1981 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice provides the following general guidance concerning child-rearing:

Love, understanding, patience, along with the steady inculcation of moral principles and discipline are keys to the nurture of the young.

The parent's choice of a particular disciplinary approach would, no doubt, depend on such factors as the age and character of the individual child—whether it was "unruly and violent by nature" or exceedingly sensitive—the details of the situation, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the nature of the infraction or the kind of deficiency in need of correction. And the approach selected may change from situation to situation. The following extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi illustrate the importance of considering the nature of the particular child and the need to avoid rigidity in selecting a means of discipline and training:

Concerning the education of ..., Shoghi Effendi believes that you should avoid too rigid a discipline. Certain boys die in spirit if they are put under pressure and strict regulations. Our object is to help him develop those powers that God has laid in him.

(3 March 1932 to an individual believer)

The Guardian would advise you, therefore, not to take any drastic action with regard to your daughter's attendance at the meetings, and for the present not to prevent her from working in the Bureau. For in this way there is much greater chance to reform her character than through force or any other drastic method. Love and kindness have far greater influence than punishment upon the improvement of human character.

The Guardian, therefore, trusts that by this means you will succeed in gradually introducing a fundamental change in your daughter's life, and also in making of her a

better and truer believer. He is fervently praying on her behalf that she may fully attain this station.

(26 January 1935 to an individual believer)

He is sorry to hear your little boy is not developing satisfactorily; very few children are really bad. They do, however, sometimes have complicated personalities and need very wise handling to enable them to grow into normal, moral, happy adults.

(30 May 1947 to an individual believer)

Physical Discipline

A letter dated 24 January 1993 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice addressed the important issue of violence and sexual abuse of women and children.¹⁰ In this letter, the House of Justice explains, in brief, the Bahá'í perspective on physical discipline and underlines the distinction between this and the forms of violent and physically abusive behaviour that prevail in society:

While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out "gently and patiently" and with "loving care", far removed from the anger and violence with which children are beaten and abused in some parts of the world. To treat children in such an abhorrent manner is a denial of their human rights, and a betrayal of the trust which the weak should have in the strong in a Bahá'í community.

Indeed, unless carried out in the patient and loving manner described above, it is suggested that all forms of discipline could have deleterious results on the development of the child.

Physical Punishment

The Research Department has not been able to locate specific statements in the Writings which provide a precise definition of the kinds of physical punishment Bahá'í parents are permitted to use nor any indication concerning when such approaches should be employed. The Spiritual Assembly might, however, be interested in the following extract from a letter of 12 August 1975 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in response to a question about the advisability of using this type of punishment:

As to your question about the use of physical punishment in child training, although there is a Tablet of the Master which considers beating as not permissible, this does not necessarily include every form of corporal punishment. In order to have a full grasp of the Master's attitude towards punishment, one has to study all His Tablets in this respect. For the time being, no hard and fast rule can be laid down, and parents must use their own wise discretion in these matters until the time is ripe for the principles of Bahá'í education of children to be more clearly elucidated and applied.

In light of the foregoing, we wish to call attention to the following:

- While violent and abusive "beating" is forbidden, there would appear to be a range of actions that could constitute acceptable forms of physical punishment. For example, in

¹⁰ *Canadian Bahá'í News*, July 1993, pp. 41-43.

addition to hitting a child (in a non-abusive manner), might not such techniques as physically holding or restraining the child, temporarily removing the child from the scene ("time-out"), confining the child to home ("grounding"), and the deprivation of certain privileges be possibly regarded as acceptable forms of physical punishment?

- The House of Justice cautions that, for the present, "no hard and fast rule can be laid down", and it allows for parental discretion in deciding on the means of discipline that best fits their particular situation.
- The exercise of parental discipline and the punishment of children need to take into consideration the whole range of valuable approaches to the training of children that are mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings. The compilation *Bahá'í Education* will serve as a useful source of relevant guidelines on this subject.