Smacking of young children ‘affects social development’

Kathleen Nutt

Children smacked before the age of 2 are twice as likely to have emotional and behavioural problems by the time they start school than those who have never been physically disciplined, a new research project has found.

The study analysed 1,600 Scottish children at about the age of 46 months, including 327 who had received corporal punishment before they were 22 months old. Adjustments were made to take account of socio-economic background, the child’s gender and number of siblings, to reduce known influences.

More than 13 per cent of those who had been smacked scored poorly on a standardised questionnaire used by doctors and health visitors to assess social development. Of the children who had never been smacked, 6 per cent had “abnormal results”. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) covered aspects such as ability to get on with peers, hyperactivity and conduct.

The link was also evident when measured by parent-reported SDQ scores, with 13.4 per cent of smacked children having abnormal scores compared with 5.9 per cent of children who had never been smacked, reported the study published in the journal Child: Care, Health and Development.

Sonya Scott, a public health specialist at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde who was lead researcher on the project, called for a ban on smacking.