

LETTER OF THE DAY

Affectionate harm in the name of discipline

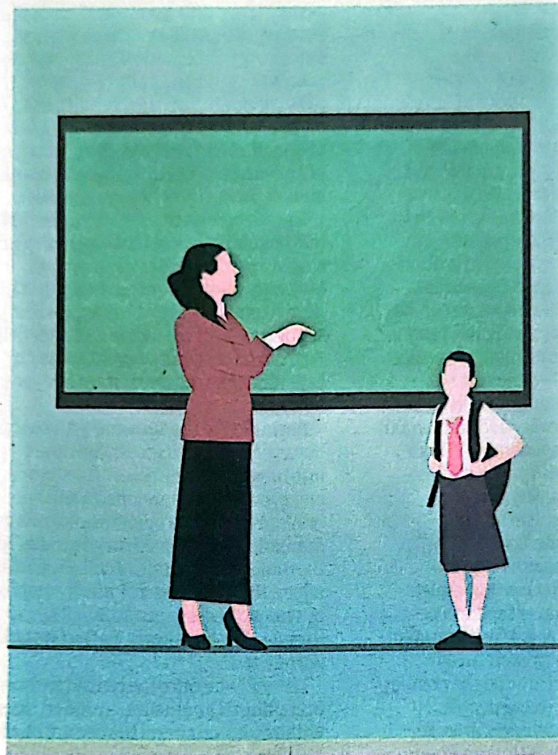
There is a common saying in Thailand: "Love your cows, keep them. Love your children, hurt them!" It reflects how some people show love and affection toward their livestock yet often harm children in the name of discipline.

I understand that parents mean well when they 'punish' children to teach them good behaviour—no parent aims to harm their child. However, some parents and teachers have ended up causing children visible physical harm—leaving bruises, permanent scars, or even broken bones. Not even livestock keepers beat their animals like that!

Common practices used on children—such as caning, pinching, kicking, slapping, yelling, verbal insults, or shaming—are often mistaken for discipline, but they are forms of punishment. It is important to differentiate punishment from discipline. Punishment aims at stopping the behaviour right away but doesn't prevent it from happening in the future while discipline aims at correction and building children's ability to make good judgement.

While many parents and teachers use highlighted methods in what they consider "moderation", and feel confident because they see no physical injuries, research has shown that all children subjected to such disciplinary methods are exposed to multiple health risks. We might not see psychological or emotional injury, but in most cases, its effects can be far more damaging than physical injuries.

As anyone who has spent time around children knows, they imitate what they observe in adults rather than what they are told to do. How do we expect



wrong—violence, beating, yelling, verbal insults—to teach what is right? If we model violent behaviour, children will learn the same—just as we see it reflected in our society today where violence in intimate relationships, verbal insults, and public shaming are common, including on social media where children are increasingly engaging and drawing lots of lessons. This is what we learned, and we continue to pass it on to our children.

To break this cycle, we must reflect on our actions, understand their impact, and embrace non-violent ways of guiding and relating with children.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) 2025 report on corporal punishment indicated that across 49 low and middle-income countries, children exposed to corporal punishment were 24 percent less likely to be developmentally on track than children who were not. It also highlights that health consequences are profound and far-reaching. Beyond immediate injuries, the practice triggers harmful biological responses, including heightened stress hormone reactivity and changes in brain structure and function that can undermine healthy development.

If we think that corporal pun-

ishment is a positive method of disciplining children, why then would it yield us negative results?

Many people argue that children today are becoming "spoilt" due to so-called Western ideas of children's rights. However, this overlooks the idea that corporal punishment itself was introduced by Europeans through formal schooling and prison systems. Traditionally, our great grandparents relied on non-violent methods like storytelling to guide and discipline children.

Although Uganda has outlawed corporal punishment in schools, it remains widely practiced. Last year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Uganda Police issued warning letters that later circulated on WhatsApp, prohibiting its use and directing the arrest and prosecution of any teacher or school administrator who violates the law. Despite these measures, enforcement challenges persist.

This signals that while legislation is a good starting point, it is not enough. It must be complemented by the implementation of proven strategies that promote positive discipline—non-violent methods aimed at helping children learn from their mistakes.

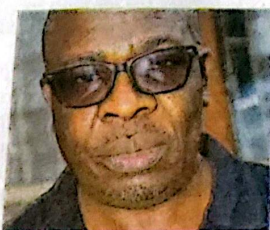
Such methods include having disciplinary talks, making children sign behavioural contracts, encouraging them to reflect on what they did wrong and requiring a written or verbal apology. For infants, rewarding good behaviour can motivate them to do better.

These approaches, rather than inflicting pain and humiliation that harm children's health, will go a long way in reinforcing the law.

Tabitha Suubi is a Public Voices fellow with The OpEd Project

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