

An Open Letter to President Obama From Children's Rights Advocates

Dear President Obama:

Your election to the presidency represents a long-awaited victory in the struggle against inequality and injustice. Your achievement is an inspiration to the world, and all eyes are on you. Not since the elections of Lincoln and F.D.R has so heavy a responsibility rested on the shoulders of a U. S. president, nor have such golden opportunities to do good for mankind been within grasp!

The purpose of this letter is to highlight one very serious, long-neglected issue. It is, in our opinion, the final and perhaps the most important rung in the ladder of human rights: the human rights of children.

It seems that only after children are injured or killed by their caretakers, do consciences begin to stir. But that process rarely goes beyond shifting blame, groping for excuses, and hoping that it doesn't happen again.

Lawmakers have traditionally insisted that crimes against children are a rare anomaly; that children do not need the same human rights guarantees adults take for granted; that children are essentially possessions of their parents, who can be trusted to treat them reasonably; and that designated parental surrogates, such as school teachers, can be expected to do likewise. Indeed, most caretakers live up to that standard. But many do not. We have witnessed children being treated in ways that would provoke a spontaneous public outcry were the identical treatment meted out to family pets.

This letter focuses on the routine mistreatment of children in schools. Because teachers are trained, licensed professionals, they are perceived as experts, and the effects of their example are multiplied throughout the community. *If teachers are doing it, it must be okay. Right?*

Consider the facts:

1. Corporal punishment of schoolchildren is legal in 21 states. It occurs approximately 1/4 million times per school year. The United States is the only Western industrialized democracy that permits the practice.

2. The term "corporal punishment," as it applies to schools in the United States, is a euphemism for assault and battery with a dangerous weapon. Typically, the child is required to assume a rump-presentation posture so as to facilitate being battered on his or her buttocks with a wooden board. In fact, this offers the punisher an unpatrolled avenue for sexual exploitation. When done to a non-consenting adult, it constitutes sexual battery. Its long-term effect on a child can be sexual dysfunction in adulthood. The prostitution and pornography industries do a thriving business catering to the needs of people who have been damaged this way. Some abuse survivors are afflicted by a life-long compulsion to engage in similar acts toward others. When they become parents, they tend to mistreat their children exactly as they were mistreated. Sometimes they pursue teaching careers in one of the 21 states that allow them to "administer discipline."

3. There is not one accredited teacher-training program in the United States that instructs undergraduates in the "correct method" for physically punishing a student. Clearly, teachers who hit children are not teaching as they were trained to teach.

4. The monetary cost of allowing schoolchildren to be assaulted and battered is incalculable. The extent of their mistreatment by teachers directly correlates with the rate at which they drop out of school. For more than a few, dropping out is the first step on a path marked by failures, including: unemployment, addiction, unplanned pregnancy, crime and incarceration. It is no mystery why the most socially and economically depressed regions of the country are also bastions of child beating.

5. The monetary cost of eliminating teachers' right to assault and batter schoolchildren is \$0.

In conclusion, we ask you, Mr. President, to lead the nation onto that final rung of the human rights ladder. Extend to each and every precious schoolchild the same protection against assault and battery that you would expect and demand for your own precious children.

Sincerely,

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The authors urge readers to send this page to friends, colleagues, the media, professionals in child-related fields, representatives in government and others.

Thank you!

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