

Northern Ireland must give children equal protection under the law

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Dear Party Leader,

Children in Northern Ireland deserve to grow up in a world where they are loved and protected from harm.

Yet our law still allows a defence of “reasonable punishment”, meaning a parent or guardian physically harming a child can be justified.

This creates a troubling reality: **children have less protection from harm in law than adults.**

Decades of research show that physical punishment can harm children’s wellbeing, damage relationships of trust and increase the risk of behavioural and emotional difficulties later in life. A 2024 report published by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) showed that children who experience physical punishment are up to 2.6 times more likely to experience mental health problems and up to 2.3 times likely to go on to experience significant harm through more serious forms of physical abuse.

It can also send a concerning message to children that violence ‘corrects’ behaviour.

Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have already changed the law so that children have the same protection from assault as adults.

Across the world the direction of travel is clear. 70 countries have now passed laws giving children equal protection from physical punishment.

Northern Ireland now has the opportunity to do the same.

Removing the defence of “reasonable punishment” would bring clarity to the law and support the continued shift towards positive parenting. It would support parents to raise their children with empathy, and it would give professionals the clarity they tell us they want. Most importantly, it would ensure children here are afforded the same legal protection from assault as everyone else – as called for by a long-standing [coalition](#) of organisations and stakeholders.

We urge all political parties to support the tabled equal protection amendment to the Justice Bill. Stormont must act to ensure every child is protected from harm.

Children deserve nothing less.

Copy to: Parties’ Chief Whips