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Paulo Sergio Pinheiro
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Dear Paulo Sergio Pinheiro,

Please accept the following document as a submission for the United Nation's Study on Violence Against Children. The American College of Pediatricians is willing to assist the Study group in any way it can. Thank you for your interest and efforts to protect the children of all nations in the world.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors

Submission to the United Nations Secretary General's
Study on Violence Against Children

Submissions Cover Page

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Children and Violence in the Family: Scientific Contributions
(A Submission to the UN Global Study on Children and Violence)

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This paper summarizes scientific knowledge about two aspects of violence toward children in the family, namely physical child abuse and milder forms of traditional physical discipline of children. There is universal consensus that physical child abuse is abhorrent and that efforts should be made to reduce such violence against children. Some forms of physical force that may be considered mild violence for the purposes of the UN study do not enjoy a universal consensus. For example, parental spanking is endorsed in some cultures and prohibited in others. Use of other forms of physical force, such as restraint and brief forced confinement in a room, are also considered legitimate options in some cultures and illegitimate in others.

This paper summarizes what is known about reducing physical child abuse and what is known about more debatable forms of physical discipline in the family. The role of science differs for these two cases. With consensus about a desired end, science can inform and evaluate the best means to achieve those ends (e.g., reducing physical child abuse). When consensus is lacking, science can provide information about the relevant points emphasized by the differing points of view. Scientific evaluations of policies and programs to reduce traditional methods of physical discipline can be designed to address the pros and cons of both sides of these cultural debates.

The UN Global Study should be commended for emphasizing scientific input along with other perspectives on violence against children. A concept paper from the study's director includes the following emphases: "special attention to violence against children in the family"; "'state-of-the-art' review of the current knowledge about violence against children;" including best practices in prevention strategies (effective, promising, vs. ineffective); "authoritative academic and scientific research"; and cultural specificities (Pinheiro, 2003). With these emphases in mind, this paper summarizes scientific reviews of programs to prevent child abuse, discusses their implications for combining the strengths of science and advocacy, and then summarizes scientific evidence about physical discipline of children in the family.

Programs to Prevent and Treat Physical Child Abuse

Since 1995 there have been several scientific reviews of the effectiveness of programs to prevent or treat child abuse (Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004; Guterman, 1997, 1999; Kauffman Best Practices Project, 2004; MacMillan, 2000; Roberts, Kramer, & Suissa, 1996; Saunders, Berliner, & Hanson,

2004; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004). The most widely used prevention programs employ early home visitations to link new parents with community support services and to provide education about parenting. Olds' Nurse Family Partnership and Hawaii's Health Start program have attracted the most attention. However, Olds's Nurse Family Partnership is the only program to significantly reduce child abuse allegations in a randomized outcome study and then only 8 years after the home visitation began (Chaffin, 2004). Olds's (2004) program has documented benefits in related outcomes in more recent randomized trials, however. Hawaii's Healthy Start may be the most widely adopted abuse prevention program in North America, yet four randomized outcome studies all failed to detect a significant reduction in child abuse (Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, 1996; Chaffin, 2004). None of the reviews of abuse prevention programs concluded that any program other than Olds's Nurse Family Partnership have demonstrated actual reductions in child abuse in high-risk families, although they do report improvements in related outcomes and in families at lower risk of abuse. (Guterman, 1997; Guterman, 1999; MacMillan, 2000; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004; Geeraert et al., 2004; Roberts, 1996; Chaffin, 2004). As noted by MacMillan (2000), research needs to document the extent to which abuse prevention can deviate from Olds's Nurse Family Partnership without compromising its effectiveness. She notes that few early home visitation programs use the Olds's model, so they are of questionable effectiveness.

The situation seems to be no better for treatments for physically abusive parents. Consequently, an unprecedented collaboration of major American child abuse organizations worked together to identify the few empirically promising treatments and to initiate an effort to disseminate those treatments to front-line practitioners (www.nationalcalltoaction.org). A previous review of empirically supported treatments for abuse found that no treatments for physical abuse met the criteria for "supported and probably efficacious treatment," which required only two studies documenting effectiveness vs. any kind of comparison (Saunders et al., 2004). Building on that effort, the National Call to Action collaboration identified three promising treatments for abuse, two of which have been shown to effectively reduce physical child abuse in one randomized comparison group study (Chaffin et al., 2004; Kauffman Best Practices Project, 2004; Kolko, 1996).

Despite three decades of widespread support for reducing physical child abuse, no prevention or treatment program has documented its effectiveness in two randomized comparison group studies. Leading experts have noted this problem and have begun major initiatives to ensure that programs actually help reduce violence against children. Accordingly, the next section considers lessons about how science and advocacy efforts must work together to ensure the best outcomes for children.

The Need for Both Science and Advocacy

After the most widely used abuse prevention program was found to be ineffective in reducing child abuse in its fourth and most thorough randomized outcome study, Chaffin

(Chaffin, 2004) responded with several insightful comments about the current state of preventing child abuse. He noted that drugs for pets were evaluated for effectiveness and safety more carefully than were programs to prevent child abuse. He also noted that many programs to prevent delinquency were fashionable for some time but were later found to be ineffective or, in the case of Scared Straight program, actually harmful (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000). Chaffin continued, “the relationship with factual knowledge is quite different in advocacy circles than it is in science. Scientific ideals value skepticism and assert the primacy of facts over beliefs. . . . Advocates have a pre-determined agenda to advance, and seek primarily those facts that buttress their agenda or assist in deflecting critics of the agenda” (p. 590). He stressed the profound debts of child abuse prevention to advocacy efforts, but added that there has been a price to pay for social programs that are solely advocacy based. Established, accepted programs then take on a life of their own, with subsequent hard data welcomed only if they are supportive. He concluded, “If child abuse prevention is to become a field where solid, cumulative, incremental scientific progress is made, rather than a field driven by the vicissitudes of advocacy and fashion, prevention interventions need to be treated as experiments, designed to learn what really works with whom. This will require something daring and new – curbing advocacy rhetoric and program promotion, and being frank with funding sources and front-line practitioners that prevention is a work-in-progress and that reliable effectiveness is much more a goal than a current reality. Then, the enthusiasm of the field and its practitioners can be redirected toward developing something more effective” (p. 594). Advancing the best interests of children requires a mutual collaboration of science and advocacy efforts that combines the strengths of both approaches.

Physical Discipline of Children

The scientific issues are more complex when there are substantial cultural differences concerning ends as well as means. This is the case with nonabusive spanking and restraint, which have a long history of wide use in the vast majority of large cultures. Recent advocacy efforts have targeted the elimination of these practices, but there are inter-related sets of issues involving the effectiveness of these traditional methods of discipline, respecting cultural differences, and protecting children. Before getting into the scientific evidence, it will help to discuss these inter-related issues briefly.

What Types of Physical Discipline Should be Targeted for Elimination?

There are several indications that the UN Global study aims to be as inclusive as possible in promoting policies to eliminate all physical discipline of children as well as more severe forms of parental violence. The first objective of the Study listed in the introductory material for “Making a Submission to the Study” is to “assert the right of all children to protection from all forms of violence . . . and to promote mechanisms “to promote and safeguard this right.” The second objective emphasizes “less visible forms” of violence. The initiator of this Global study is the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is known for interpreting Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to require bans of all parental spanking, including its mildest forms.

Although “all forms of violence” sounds absolute, there are obvious exceptions to it. The UN is not promoting a ban on all intentional physical pain or use of physical force administered to children. Otherwise, immunizations and other medical use of shots would be prohibited. The statement is not even absolute against knifing, because that would prohibit all surgery of children under the age of 18. I assume that the UN study does not intend to include physical restraint to prevent harm to self or others in the range of “all forms of violence” to be universally prohibited. These exceptions to prohibiting “all violence” indicate the need for careful definitions, which is another hallmark of science. The only scientific consensus conference on corporal punishment defined spanking as a subset of corporal punishment that is “a. physically non-injurious; b. intended to modify behavior; and c. administered with an opened hand to the extremities or buttocks” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853). This is the type of corporal punishment that is most widely endorsed traditionally across many cultures, is furthest from physical abuse, and is thus the most controversial of the advocacy efforts of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. If scientific evidence indicates that nonabusive spanking is invariably harmful to children (say, to the extent that smoking is), then advocating to overturn this centuries-old parental disciplinary practice may be warranted. Lacking such clear evidence, however, a 100% anti-spanking advocacy position shows a serious lack of cultural sensitivity by imposing one set of Euro-centric disciplinary values on under-represented cultures and subcultures. Moreover, without clear scientific support, spanking bans may inadvertently harm children more than it helps them, which occurred for the widely advocated Scared Straight program to prevent delinquency in the United States (Petrosino et al., 2000).

Competing Values of Sensitivity to Cultural Differences vs. Protecting Children from Physical Harm

When policy efforts are advocated by a few privileged representatives from dominant cultures, who attempt to impose those policies on subcultures and cultures that are under-represented, careful analysis of the competing values of respecting cultural diversity vs. preventing harm to children is essential. When the type of harm to children reaches levels of universal or near-universal cultural consensus, then that level of harm should be prevented regardless of competing cultural values, although cultural differences may dictate differing means to achieve the reduction of physical child abuse. At some point, however, the level of harm (e.g., two open-handed swats to the buttocks) should not automatically outweigh cultural value differences. Perhaps the analogy of red, yellow, and green lights suffices to make the point. Physical child abuse is clearly in the red light region, where the goal of reducing such violence applies across culturally diverse groups (e.g., genital mutilation of female infants). At some point physical force or pain implementation is sufficiently mild that its avoidance does not automatically outweigh respect for culturally diverse values. In such borderline cases ethically, scientific evidence is especially relevant, e.g., to determine the effectiveness of traditional nonabusive spanking compared to alternative disciplinary tactics that parents could use instead.

Contributions of Science to the Physical Discipline Debate

Scientific evidence is potentially useful for several aspects of debatable forms of traditional physical discipline of children. First, scientific evidence can indicate the relative effectiveness of mild spanking vs. alternative forms of parental discipline. Second, the skeptical aspect of scientific inquiry can investigate whether the outcomes associated with mild spanking represent actual causal effects of spanking or have other plausible explanations. Third, scientific evidence can indicate whether such effectiveness varies across cultures and subcultures. Fourth, scientific evidence can make finer discriminations to determine whether milder forms of physical discipline are beneficial to children under a limited set of circumstances (e.g., depending upon its implementation and characteristics of the child, the parent, and the situation). Finally, scientific evidence can indicate whether policy and program innovations actually work as well as intended in improving children's lives. The rest of this paper considers these kinds of evidence in turn.

Effectiveness of nonabusive spanking. The effects of nonabusive spanking have been debated in the scientific literature. There have been five reviews of the relevant literature in recent years (Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere, 1996; Larzelere, 2000; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005, in press; Paolucci & Violato, 2004), and two of the reviews have been contrasted by Benjet and Kazdin (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003). Benjet and Kazdin (2003) noted that these reviews often reach different and sometimes opposite conclusions, differences due to the poor quality of the research studies, not the competency of the reviews. That is, most studies of physical punishment find consistent associations (e.g., between physical punishment and children's aggression), but few studies begin to solve the chicken-and-the-egg problem as to which came first. Did the child misbehavior lead the parent to spank more (along with more frequent use of all disciplinary response tactics), or did parental spanking increase the child's tendency to be aggressive? Benjet and Kazdin summarize three perspectives, two of which have scientific support: the anticorporal punishment position and the conditional physical punishment position. The anticorporal position concludes that all forms of spanking are detrimental regardless of subcultural support or how mild its intensity. The conditional position assumes that spanking may be benign or even beneficial under a limited set of conditions. Benjet and Kazdin summarized the following points of convergence across the reviews: immediate compliance follows physical punishment, the outcome of spanking depends on the child's age, and overly frequent physical punishment is associated with negative outcomes. Major differences between the two major reviews at that time (Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere, 2000) were whether spanking was primarily detrimental or beneficial and whether the methodology of the studies made a difference, particularly differences relevant to whether the child outcomes were caused by physical punishment or not.

Benjet and Kazdin (2003) called for research directly comparing physical punishment with alternative disciplinary tactics. Larzelere and Kuhn (2005, in press) responded with a meta-analysis of all studies in either of the major two reviews that also investigated one or more alternative tactics with similar methods in the same sample. This strategy had

both methodological and substantive advantages. Methodologically, by comparing the child outcomes of multiple disciplinary tactics, it reduced systematic biases that are similar when identical methods are used. For example, if the replicated association between previous spanking and subsequent child aggression is due to a child effect (because the child's higher misbehavior led to more spanking in the first place), studies should show a similar association for any alternative disciplinary tactic (e.g., previous nonphysical punishment should then be associated just as strongly with subsequent child aggression). On the other hand, if the spanking-aggression association occurs because spanking inadvertently increases subsequent aggression, then that association should be larger than the association between nonphysical punishment and subsequent aggression. Substantively, the meta-analysis corresponds with the disciplinary decisions actually faced by parents. At least for persistent, serious misbehavior, parents must choose between one disciplinary response vs. another, e.g., spank vs. privilege removal, not spank vs. doing nothing. This common decision among two or more disciplinary options fits Larzelere and Kuhn's (2005, in press) innovative meta-analysis of studies comparing physical punishment with disciplinary alternatives directly.

In their meta-analytic review of relevant studies, the differences between the outcomes of physical punishment vs. alternative tactics depended upon the type of physical punishment (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005, in press). *Conditional* spanking was associated with significantly less problem behavior (noncompliance and antisocial behavior) than were 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary tactics and had similar outcomes as the remaining three alternative tactics. Conditional spanking was defined as nonabusive spanking used when 2- to 6-year-olds responded defiantly to milder nonphysical disciplinary tactics, provided the parent was not out-of-control due to anger. Conditional spanking was associated with the same level of conscience in children as were alternative tactics.

The child outcomes of *customary* physical punishment did not differ from any alternatives tactics, except for one large retrospective study, which found that childhood spanking reduced substance abuse in young men more than childhood nonphysical punishment did. Child outcomes of physical punishment compared unfavorably to alternative disciplinary tactics only when it was used too severely or used as the predominant disciplinary method.

The meta-analysis explored several differing explanations of the diverse results of previous studies of physical punishment (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005, in press). Better child outcomes from nonabusive spanking compared to alternative tactics were not limited to reducing noncompliance, but applied to reductions in all problem behaviors (but primarily for conditional spanking). The apparent effectiveness of physical punishment vs. alternative tactics did not differ for long term vs. short-term outcomes. One anti-spanking viewpoint was partially supported in that some type of nonphysical punishment was used in two of the three alternative tactics that were equally effective as conditional spanking in reducing problem behavior. However, the outcomes of conditional spanking were significantly better overall than the outcomes of nonphysical punishment across the entire meta-analysis.

Are detrimental associations of nonabusive spanking due to artifacts? As noted by Chaffin (Chaffin, 2004), a distinctive role of science is to be skeptical of superficial interpretations of extant data. Consider the strongest evidence against physical punishment in Gershoff's (2002) thorough meta-analysis of 87 studies during the past 60 years. Her strongest evidence against physical punishment was that children who received more physical punishment in one year displayed more antisocial behavior in a later year. Such children probably misbehaved more frequently or persistently in the first place, resulting in more spankings and more disciplinary tactics in general. As noted by Straus (2001) about Gershoff's results, "Despite the unusually high constancy in the findings of research on corporal punishment, there is a serious problem with all the previous research . . . that these studies do not indicate which is the cause and which is the effect. That is, they do not take into account the fact that aggression and other behavior problems of the child lead parents to spank. . . . To deal with that problem, the research needs to take into account the child's aggression or other antisocial behavior at Time 1 (the time of the spanking)" (195-6).

Consistent with this selection bias, Larzelere et al. (2004) showed that most corrective interventions show similar patterns of associations. Homework assistance, treatment for suicidal tendencies, and hospitalization are all associated with worse subsequent outcomes compared to those who have less need of those corrective interventions. More recently, Larzelere et al. (2005) found that the following corrective interventions were all significantly associated with detrimental outcomes two years later in a large Canadian longitudinal survey: spanking, nonphysical punishment, scolding or yelling, taking a child to a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other therapist, or having a child take Ritalin. Thus the statistical methods used for the strongest evidence against physical punishment in Gershoff (2002) or Straus (2001) yield equally strong evidence of detrimental outcomes for all of these corrective interventions. The most plausible explanation for these results is that parents select these corrective interventions for their children when they see problems that need to be corrected. Children selected for corrective interventions are inherently at risk for detrimental outcomes later, and none of these corrective interventions improved their prognosis to the level enjoyed by children without such perceived problems. The analytic methods used by Gershoff (Gershoff, 2002) do nothing to take this selection bias into account. Straus's statistical controls reduce the selection bias, but they do not eliminate it (thus all the above corrective interventions still appear detrimental using his statistical control procedure). This pattern of results is consistent with the view that the apparently detrimental effects of customary physical punishment are artifacts caused by the initial frequency and severity of misbehavior in children, which causes both more frequent spanking and the full range of problem outcomes summarized by Gershoff (2002) and Straus (2001). A correct evaluation of the causal effects of spanking and alternative disciplinary tactics requires the elimination of selection biases and other confounds.

Variations in the effectiveness of nonabusive spanking by subcultures. Most research on physical punishment by parents has been done with samples of predominantly European

heritage. In the past nine years, a sizable number of studies have investigated the child outcomes of physical punishment in African-American families, sometimes in direct comparison with European-American families. All studies that have used distinctive sources of information for physical punishment and for the child outcome have found significant ethnic differences in the associations of physical punishment with child antisocial behavior (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004; Polaha, Larzelere, Shapiro, & Pettit, 2004). In African-American subsamples, physical punishment predicted *lower* aggression or antisocial behavior, significantly so in three of the five studies.

This replicated finding that customary physical punishment predicts lower aggression in African-Americans challenges the generality of the common finding that physical punishment is associated with higher aggression. It also pertains to the role of sensitivity to cultural differences in making policies about the desirability of nonabusive spanking. At the very least, the replicated findings in African-American families suggest that physical punishment can be used in a way that reduces the development of aggression in children (which in turn will reduce the extent to which children are victims of violence). What we do not know is what distinctions account for this consistent ethnic difference in the outcomes of physical punishment.

Perhaps as Straus et al. (1998) have stated, “‘discipline’ and [corporal punishment] may be practically synonymous” in the African-American culture (p. 306). Although I disagree with that statement, it may be true that the effectiveness of the entire disciplinary approach in some subcultures may depend on nonabusive spanking. If so, eliminating spanking may undermine the effectiveness of parental discipline more generally. I have repeatedly heard this about Hmong refugees from Laos in North America, for example. Without the use of spanking, refugee Hmong parents feel powerless to discipline their children, who are then likely to get involved in gangs. In such subcultures, banning spanking would increase adolescent aggression, much of which would be directed against child victims. On the other hand, dominant European cultures may need to learn how to use physical punishment more effectively from typical African-American usage. This latter possibility reflects an Afro-centric strength perspective, unlike the cultural deviant perspective underlying the other two interpretations above.

The research evidence is admittedly skimpy, but it is sufficient to make the point that unintended effects of restricting traditional forms of physical discipline may prove to be counterproductive in some cultures and subcultural groups. Sensitivity to differences in cultural values requires close attention to such issues.

Rigorous evaluation of policy initiatives. Given the lack of scientific evidence of detrimental child outcomes unique to nonabusive spanking, and given evidence of cultural diversity in the effects of spanking, it is essential to implement scientific evaluations of innovative policies and programs intended to reduce violence against children. Otherwise many years may be lost pursuing well-intentioned programs that

prove to be ineffective like Healthy Start or harmful like Scared Straight (Petrosino et al., 2000). Consider, for example, international efforts to ban parental spanking. After 25 years, there is still no objective evidence that spanking bans have reduced violence against children (Larzelere, 2004; Larzelere & Johnson, 1999). To take one example, Durrant (Durrant, 1999) made the excellent hypothesis that the proportion of perpetrators of violence against minors (aged 7 to 14) would change over time as the first children raised under Sweden's spanking ban grew up. Table 1 shows the results according to her data source (Wittrock, 1995). It shows that perpetration of violence against minors increased by 519% by the age cohort born after the spanking ban, the second largest increase was by the cohort who were under the age of 5 at the time of the spanking ban, whereas older cohorts tended to merely double the number of criminal assaults against minors. If the UN Global Study is genuinely interested in reducing violence against children, it needs an unbiased investigation of why violence against children increased the most among perpetrators born after the Swedish spanking ban.

Table 1

Percentage Change in Swedish Criminal Assaults against Minors by Age of Perpetrator, 1984-1994

Age in 1994	Age at time of spanking ban (1979)	% increase in assault perpetration (1984-1994)
7-14	unborn	519%
15-19	0-4	231%
20-24	5-9	133%
25-29	10-14	53%
30-39	15-24	122%
40-49	25-34	147%
50+	35+	128%

Source: Wittrock (1995), translated into English at <http://people.biola.edu/faculty/paulp/> (equivalent to "SCB, 1995" reference in Durrant, 1999)

A major purpose of spanking bans is to reduce physical child abuse, using a rationale similar to one underlying the 1919 Prohibition Amendment in the United States to prevent alcohol abuse. Durrant's data source indicates that physical child abuse also increased dramatically during the 15 years following the Swedish spanking ban, increasing 489% from 1981 to 1994, according to criminal records of physical assaults by family members against children under the age of 7 (Larzelere, 2004).

By themselves, these outcomes are not definitive, but they raise questions about whether efforts to ban spanking have unintended detrimental affects that ultimately *increase*

violence against children. Therefore, the UN Global Study should require similar policies in the future to implement an objective, unbiased evaluation of whether the intended benefits are actually realized and whether some kinds of violence against children are inadvertently increased by such policies. As Larzelere and Johnson (1999) postulated, “it might be hypothesized that the prohibition of all spanking eliminates a kind of mild spanking that prevents further escalation of aggression within disciplinary incidents (p. 390). Consistent with this possibility, Patterson and Fisher (2002) reported clinic referrals in Norway which “show a surprisingly high prevalence of the permissive parenting form of child coercion. . . . the parents seem often to be immobilized by unreasonable requests made by the child. The parents seem simply unable to say no.” Rigorous evaluations of spanking bans could determine how typical that unintended effect occurs and how such bans could be better implemented to reduce the unintended detrimental effects according to these Scandinavian statistics. I should note that no other country has made data available for the purpose of evaluating their subsequent spanking bans, so Sweden should be commended for their careful tabulation of relevant child outcomes.

Rigorous, objective evaluations of recommended policies are not only consistent with my viewpoint, but are also consistent with cautions by Murray Straus, the leading social scientist advocating spanking bans. In his 2001 book, he “cautions that the effects of even the most desirable social changes are unpredictable.” Even if evidence were “absolutely definitive” that “a change to a society without [corporal punishment] will produce better behaved children,” the choice to end spanking may have unwanted effects, because “adverse effects of desirable social changes tend to occur in ways that neither proponents nor opponents of the change can envision” (pp. xv-xvi). Although Straus (and I) considers it important to strive to improve the human condition, he acknowledges that “The form and direction of the resulting changes are infinitely varied and sometimes disastrous” (p. xvi). Therefore both supporters and critics of spanking bans support unbiased scientific evaluations of the intended and unintended effects of spanking bans. Children should not be victimized by innovative, unproven policies, regardless how well-intentioned they may be.

Conclusion

For the prevention and treatment of physical child abuse and for the more debatable policies about traditional physical discipline, recommended policies and practices must be aligned with the best science to ensure optimal outcomes for children. I challenge the UN Global Study to adhere to the best scientific evidence while considering the well-intentioned concerns of child advocates.

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