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A Darn Good Hiding or the Naughty Step? Ideas on child discipline in New Zealand, 1890-2008.

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Helen J. Rayner

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the history of child discipline in New Zealand since 1890, taking into account both trends in child-rearing advice and the common practices of ordinary parents. It explores the common stereotype that children "these days" are ill-disciplined in comparison with their earlier counterparts, and argues that while physical punishment is used less often than in the past, and usually in a milder form, it is still used more frequently and harshly than would be expected from the results of recent opinion polls.

Child discipline has always been about setting a child up to live a happy life. As ideas on how to achieve this goal have changed, so too have the acceptable forms of punishment. During the 1890s-1920s, the difference between good discipline and abuse was simply a matter of frequency, and this idea was shared by both parenting advisors and the general public. Since the 1930s, however, parenting experts were frequently out of step with the parents they were trying to teach, and that their influence on parenting practice was at best delayed, and at worst entirely contradictory to that which they intended. Letters, magazine and newspaper articles and contemporary studies on attitudes to discipline are used to show that parenting practice was often very different to that promoted by parenting advisors. Finally, this thesis concludes that a contextualist approach best suits the history of child-rearing advice in New Zealand, while an evolutionist approach is more appropriate in terms of common practice.