

MEDIA RELEASE

28 October 2007

FAMILY TRAUMATISED BY SMACKING LAW
Dobbed in by school to CYF's and referred to
Foster Care Agency for Light Smacks of Defiant Child

Below is the full text of a testimony given to Family First NZ in October 2007 – as featured on front page story *Sunday Star Times* 28 October 2007

(All references to specific date, location, age and gender of children, names, and school have been removed. The family are petrified that by going public, they will be targeted by CYF and their family split up. However, they also believe that their experience must be heard – as a warning to other parents.)

Dear Bob,

I would like to inform families of the potential repercussions of Sue Bradford's bill. I wish to do this by sharing with you our own family's traumatic experience, since this bill has been approved.

During recent school holidays, I arrived home around 5.30pm after a fun filled day with my children to notice a card left by Child Youth and Family, asking me to get in contact with them ASAP. There was no detail as to the reason. We received no official letter from CYF. After leaving six messages, over a period of four days, I was finally able to contact the Care and Protection officer.

The Care and Protection officer informed me that they had received a complaint from the school, and that under new policy they were obligated to follow it up. My child (*hereinafter also referred to as X*) had shown aggressive behavior towards another student. When questioned by the teacher as to why, X answered that they had been smacked that morning.

The Care and Protection officer also explained that under new policy, teachers were required to report all smacking incidences directly to Child Youth and Family Services and that this was now just standard procedure.

The Care and Protection officer went on to ask me questions relating to *X*'s behaviour, and whether they needed help in any way, eg medication, special needs etc. I replied, not that I was aware of - just a normal every day child having a bad day.

She also enquired about my family and when she was satisfied, she assured me that she would not take this any further and could I please ask the school to contact me directly if this sort of thing happened again.

Later when my husband and I questioned our child, **X** explained that they had thrown a ball and that it bounced and accidentally hit a class mate.

X had woken up in a bad mood that particular day and was very reluctant and unhelpful at getting ready for school. I told **X** to hurry up – **X** was refusing and throwing a wobbly, so I ended up smacking **X** on the hand. I also gave **X** a bit of a push into the room to get my child moving (this was probably wrong of me, and done in the heat of the moment). **X** responded by more yelling and giving me an evil look. It wasn't a good morning. (This sort of thing doesn't happen very often, but it does happen.)

I usually never let my children go to school angry with me, but that morning we were in a hurry.

The teacher seemed to ask questions about **X**'s behaviour and why **X** was behaving like this. The teacher seemed to ask leading questions like, how was it at home etc. **X** never told her what the issue was - only that they had been smacked that morning. Apparently the teacher said to **X**, I will see to that and then asked if there were any marks. **X** said no.

X is worried that they will be taken away, and it is really hard to get **X** to talk about it. **X** can also be a bit of a drama queen, and could have exaggerated to the teacher at the time (especially in **X**'s frame of mind.)

My husband did contact the school, to enquire why we weren't called earlier by the school and that this was just not good enough. He also communicated what the Care and Protection officer had said to us. The school responded that it was new procedure and were sympathetic, but offered us no apology.

This is the first incident of this kind we have had with the school.

In the second incident (over 2 months later), I invited another family around for lunch one weekend. After lunch the fathers decided to take the children for a walk to the dairy and park. After they were gone about five minutes, two of my children came back and explained to me that they were goofing around, and that Dad had sent them home.

They continued to goof around outside on the tramp. **X** got hurt in the rough and tumble, came inside in a huff. When asked what the matter was by our guest, **X** rudely replied, I don't want to talk to you. I kindly asked **X** to apologise and **X** walked outside. I followed and asked **X** to come back inside and apologise.

X walked to the furthest side of the tramp, so that I could not reach **X** and refused to come back inside. My older child who was already on the tramp tried to wrestle the **X** to the other side. There was a lot of yelling, laughing and screaming going on by everyone, as it had turned into a bit of a game. I tried to take control of **X** and pull the child off the tramp, while the child was shouting and resisting. I smacked **X** on the backside with the palm of my hand (**X** was lying on their stomach), pulled **X** towards me and asked **X** to control themselves. Finally **X** came inside and went to the bedroom. I told **X** to stay there until they apologised.

Within 20mins, there were three police officers at my door and they asked me to step outside. (had arrived with lights flashing). They had received a complaint from a neighbour about an incident concerning one of my children. They then asked to question **X** and at the same time questioned me separately about what had happened.

It dawned on me as I was relaying the events that I might be arrested, and asked the officer if that was indeed the case. She said possibly, but needed to speak with the other officer before she could tell me.

After questioning **X**, and getting the details of my guest, to my relief, they decided not to arrest me this time. The officer kindly informed me that since this bill that Sue Bradford had pushed through, that the police have to respond to all complaints concerning families with children. This was new policy and they have to cross their T's and dot their I's.

I wanted to get a good understanding of what she was saying, so I asked the officer, if this was the second visit here and the events were the same, except this time I didn't smack the backside but simply pulled the child off the tramp, would I still be arrested? She replied yes, because I still used physical force and that under the new law no parent is allowed to use any physical force, unless you are protecting your child. The police officers were very kind, but warned me of a possible arrest if this sort of thing happened again. And they left.

These events have traumatised my children, not to mention my husband and myself.

I understand the Police and Child Youth and Family Services were doing their jobs, and I commend them for it. But come on...this is going a bit far don't you think? My children have always had a healthy respect for the police, now sadly that has been altered. I am concerned for the welfare of this country if this sort of thing keeps happening to our families. Our children need security in our system, and shouldn't be fearful of being pulled away from their families.

We have since received a letter from a Foster Care agency contracted to CYF. They had been made aware of the police visiting us and have offered us their services. Their letter informed us that a social worker would call us in the near future. This was very nice of them, only I feel we would only be wasting their time. I am grateful it was this organisation, rather than CYF.

I really am grieved about where our country is heading. We as a family have been made only too aware, that if we tick anyone off for whatever reason, whether a neighbor, a shop keeper or teacher and they call the police, it is their word against ours. Now that we are in the system, it doesn't matter whether we are guilty or not. If the police officer doesn't like us for any reason, they have the power to separate our family. This is a horrible reality!

Again I would like to stress that we are an average NZ family. We have four children – sons and daughters, both teens and younger. We are all law abiding citizens, we don't drink, smoke or do drugs. We have always encouraged our children to respect authority and after this experience, have all been very traumatized.

An assault charge is no small matter. I have been involved in children's work for the last ten years, not to mention all the community work I have done with under privileged children over the years. (the real victims of child abuse.)

If I were to receive an "assault on a child" charge, I couldn't do these things, and I haven't even mentioned paid employment. This is an awful thought.

This new law seems to me, only to be creating insecurity for families that are genuinely trying their best to raise healthy, secure children, that are good law abiding citizens, and a lot of extra work for the organisations that are already over worked and under staffed.

We as parents need to be encouraged and supported by the government, not undermined and stripped of all authority.

Yours sincerely

A kiwi mum.

ENDS

For More Information and Media Interviews, contact Family First:

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