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Love must come first but caning works, says head

By Tim King

NICHOLAS Debenham, headmaster of an independent secondary school for boys, is a staunch defender of corporal punishment.

In independent schools, unlike state schools, the cane is still legal, although most have abandoned the practice. But at St James, in Twickenham, west London, Mr Debenham is one of the few headmasters who still uses corporal punishment. Although he has not caned anyone this academic year, he estimated that up to last summer he caned six boys a year.

The boys would be caned on the rear with "one to three strokes", Mr Debenham said. "In a really serious case it would be five."

He added: "You have to have love first and discipline second but given that you have an appropriate relationship between teacher and pupil based on respect and love, then where someone steps over the line and does something really wrong, corporal punishment is appropriate."

Mr Debenham, who has been headmaster of St James since it was founded 22 years ago, said he would cane a boy for telling deliberate and repeated lies to get out of trouble, serious cruelty to another boy, or repeated disobedience. Mr Debenham asked parents for their consent to corporal punishment when their child was admitted to the school.

He said: "It is no use getting permission after the offence because the punishment should be prompt. Some parents deny consent and I sometimes still take the boy if I think the boy is most unlikely to get into trouble." He said some of his staff supported caning and some were opposed. St James has an associated girls' school but Mr Debenham said caning was inappropriate for girls. They would respond to a rebuke whereas boys would shrug off a telling off.

He said: "When I started teaching, the cane was in frequent use. Everyone else has given it up, not because of any new-found principle, only because it was outlawed in Parliament."

He said that because the legislation forbade caning of boys on Government-funded assisted places, most headmasters in independent schools, faced with two categories of pupils, did away with corporal punishment altogether. But his school was too small to qualify for the Assisted Places Scheme and he was unaffected.

Mr Debenham said the character of his school would be largely unchanged if caning were abolished, although he "might occasionally have to expel a chap instead of caning him".

'I do feel lots of teachers and parents agree with the restoration of corporal punishment'

"The reason I keep it is not primarily because I need it but because I think someone should hang on to an appropriate punishment." It was state schools with a discipline problem that needed corporal punishment but they were the schools prevented by law from using it, he said.

"It is an ironical situation. There is a school closed because a 10- year-old cannot be controlled - that is mad," he added. Mr Debenham said he thought public opinion was swinging back "in favour of a genuine sanction".

John Burn, principal of a comprehensive in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, advocated the reintroduction of corporal punishment in state schools in a lecture and pamphlet published last month.

He said a few other head teachers had since told him privately that they supported his argument but he believed that most did not say anything publicly because of worries about how their local authorities and the leaders of the teaching unions might respond. "I do feel lots of teachers and parents agree with the restoration of corporal punishment," he said.

Mr Burn said one of the reasons why expulsions from school were proliferating was because schools had few options for punishment between a ticking off and expulsion.

He said he supported corporal punishment for a youngster who was "verbally attacking and abusing" a teacher. "The young person should know very quickly that such behaviour is severely disapproved of. Corporal punishment should not be done in a vindictive way but quickly, soon after the offence has been committed."

Mr Burn is principal of Emmanuel, a Christian city technology college which has 1,100 pupils, aged 11-18. He began teaching in 1966 when corporal punishment was commonly used and last administered it in 1980, with a belt to the pupil's hand. He said that beyond the age of 14 corporal punishment was generally unproductive.