

**Speech delivered by Marta Santos Pais**  
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**for the launch of the Innocenti Report Card #5**  
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It is a great honour for me to launch today in Berlin the latest study of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre on the situation of children in industrialized countries.

The present Study is the fifth in this series and addresses the reality of child maltreatment deaths. The report reaffirms UNICEF's commitment to advocate for children's rights everywhere in the world, including in rich nations. We are therefore extremely pleased to launch this report with the German Committee for UNICEF, a critical ally of our research and a decisive supporter of UNICEF worldwide.

We are also delighted to have with us Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro. Dr. Pinheiro has been appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations to carry out a global study on Violence against Children. The study being developed under Mr. Pinheiro's leadership will undoubtedly play a decisive role in breaking the silence around child ill-treatment, neglect and abuse. We are therefore confident that the report we are launching here today will constitute a strong pillar to such an effort!

The early days of humanism in Florence were marked by an emotional debate around the development of a free and liberal system of education, guided by persuasion, gentleness and love for children. At that time, there were many who argued against such an approach. In their view, children "are to listen in humility and to sit passive and silent before their teachers. They are to be flogged frequently by their masters and parents, whether it is necessary or otherwise, whether the punishment is deserved or not, because a good beating never did anyone any harm. Flogging at school or at home is always useful: if deserved, it is an act of justice; if undeserved, it develops in the child a sense of patience and forbearance; and when it is administered regularly it is a great aid to character formation".

The emotional debate of the fifteenth century has only partially changed since. Around the world, including in industrialised societies, there is still a largely accepted belief that

hitting children or otherwise using some form of physical violence to discipline and chastise them, is a required dimension of child upbringing and education, or at least an accepted expression of childrearing. This is a critical question which the Innocenti Report Card addresses.

1. Our Study focuses on **child maltreatment deaths**. It is the **first ever attempt to draw a comparative picture** of the physical abuse of children in rich nations.

Why such a theme?

First, **because violence against children remains largely undocumented**; and yet it has a dramatic impact on the life and development of the child, with very high rates of child deaths in many of our societies.

Secondly, **because violence against children is a clear breach of human rights**, a disrespect for the child's dignity and physical integrity; yet, it often remains perceived as a non-issue ..... or is otherwise accepted as necessary to ensure the responsible development of the child.

Thirdly, **because it is urgent to recall and respect the commitments undertaken by the international community** to ensure that all children are effectively protected from any form of violence. Such is the imperative set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child; such also was the pledge reaffirmed at the Special Session on Children in May 2002!

Finally, because there are **important initiatives being undertaken** and they deserve being better known and considered as positive examples in the process of building societies that are free of violence for all children.

## 2. What does the Study tell?

- I. The Study presents the first ever attempt to draw a comparative picture of the physical abuse of children in OECD countries. And it **provides a dramatic picture**:

Every year, in the industrialized world **almost 3,500 children under 15 years die from maltreatment.**

- Two children die from abuse and neglect every week in Germany and the United Kingdom;
- three a week in France;
- four a week in Japan;
- 27 a week in the US.

**Younger children are particularly at risk** both as a natural consequence of their special vulnerability and inability to complain, and as a result of the strong pressure and challenging responsibilities young parents face. **For children below 1 year, there is a risk of death three times greater** than for those between 1 and 4; the latter group faces double the risk than those aged 5 to 14.

- A small group of countries appear to have an exceptionally low incidence of child maltreatment deaths (Spain, Greece, Italy, Ireland and Norway).
- Most nations have levels of child maltreatment deaths that are at least three times higher than the average for the leading countries.
- Three countries, **United States, Mexico and Portugal**, have particularly higher levels – between 10 and 15 times higher than the average for the leading countries.

II. The report highlights the **challenges faced by researchers** in measuring abuse and stresses **how child maltreatment deaths are a tiny, tragic tip of the iceberg of abuse.**

- On the one hand, there is **lack of an agreed definition** of maltreatment, including non fatal abuse or neglect. There are **no agreed methods** of assembling the data and a **diversity of approaches** to reporting them; this reality together with the social perception that **child abuse is a minor issue**, if at all an issue deserving distinct statistical consideration, strongly compromises our ability to obtain a full, accurate and objective picture of the violence that children face.

- On the other hand, the weak culture of protection of children from violence explains generally weak reporting and creates a risk for statistics to “**punish**” **particularly those countries** where there is greater awareness about this question, and stronger commitment exists to address it.

III. The good news is that, as the report indicates, there has been a **general decline in the number of child deaths** from maltreatment in the majority of industrialized countries; but

- behind data on child deaths from maltreatment, **there is “an ocean of statistical uncertainty”**
- cases not leading to death are hardly addressed, and
- in those countries where relevant surveys have been conducted, substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect have confirmed that **child deaths are just the tip of the iceberg**.
- As an illustration, in Australia cases of child maltreatment were found to be 150 times the level of abuse deaths; and in France 300 cases of child abuse and neglect have been found for every child death.

All this calls for a particular caution in dealing with existing statistics on child maltreatment.

#### IV. Risk factors of child maltreatment

The Report Card presents an analysis of most common factors associated with child maltreatment.

- While acknowledging that many circumstances lead to the ill-treatment of children,
- the study recognizes how often they overlap and interact,
- and need to be considered in their cumulative effect, more than through the autonomous assessment of each individual risk factor.

In any case, the analysis of these risk factors is necessary to ensure the effective protection of children from maltreatment, and in particular:

- to understand and **address the circumstances** leading to child maltreatment,
- to **identify children** at greater risk and prevent their victimization,
- and to promote the development of protective systems and services for the safeguard of children's rights.

Of all risk factors identified by the research, drug and alcohol abuse is clearly one of the most common and serious. According to a survey conducted in the US,

- substance abuse causes or contributes to **at least half of all causes of maltreatment**
- **and in nearly all of States in the country substance abuse is one of the two leading problems (along with poverty) in families reported for child maltreatment.**

**Domestic violence** between adults with whom the child lives is another important problem. As the research confirms, **violence towards children is more common in violent homes**, where children not only often witness violence, but themselves experience severe forms of physical abuse.

**Poverty and stress** are also closely associated with child maltreatment.

- As a recent Swedish report has confirmed, “a weak family economy stands out as the background factor most closely associated with child abuse, sexual abuse and bullying; **the worse the family economy, the greater the risk of abuse.**”
- In Canada, recent research has further highlighted how stress leads to 2/3 of child abuse cases – including as a result of lack of social support.
- Other studies indicate that when the **child is growing up with only one parent**, the risk of maltreatment doubles as a result of a combination of low income, stress and social isolation which frequently accompanies single parenthood.

Whatever the cause or combination of risk factors may be, **the real bill is presented to the child** – a bill that is paid in **pain, humiliation and bewilderment, in mental and emotional turmoil, in the impairment of the joy and purpose of childhood** itself.

- These challenges are certainly not less relevant **within the family** environment. In fact, contrary to common perception, the most frequent form of violence against children in the industrialized world remains **the hitting of children by parents or care givers** for the alleged purpose of chastisement and discipline. And this takes place from a very early stage in the child's life!
- According to a survey conducted in the UK, 2/3 of mothers admitted smacking their children before their first birthday, and 25% of children were found to be hit regularly with straps or canes.
- In the US, a similar survey indicated that 97% of four year olds were subject to physical punishment, almost half of them more often than once a week.

**This is the reality portrayed by the report. This is also the reason for its urgent call for an effective culture of non-violence in the upbringing of children everywhere!**

- V. The good news is that **this same vision is indeed shared by an increasing number of countries**, in Europe and beyond! The Innocenti Report Card has therefore captured some of the important initiatives taken in this regard.

It acknowledges the encouraging process of behaviour and policy change set in motion over the recent years, as well as the landmark judgments condemning the physical punishment of children both by national courts and European human rights institutions.

It presents new research on the current legal framework in OECD countries:

- **All have banned the use of physical punishment within the justice system**,
- and most of them have made it illegal within schools (with the exception of Australia, Canada, Mexico and the US).
- At the same time, it recognizes a **much less encouraging situation when it comes to maltreatment within the home**, or the introduction of an **explicit legal ban on the use of physical punishment** – so far, only 7 European OECD countries have followed this path, Sweden having been the first in 1979.

Germany is amongst this group of leading nations. The law adopted in 2000, with its recognition that children have the right to a non-violent upbringing, is an inspiring reference for all other countries where such a process has not yet taken place. The fact that since then not a single prosecution of parents has taken place is a further indication that an important process of behaviour change is also taking place. In Europe and elsewhere other countries are following a similar path.

This is why this Report is launched with a strong sense of hope. Hope that the promising process of law reform it briefly captures may be replicated across nations; hope that children may be treated with respect for their person, dignity and individuality in all circumstances; hope that the imperative arising from the Convention and reaffirmed at the Special Session on Children to end all forms of violence against children will be soon translated into tangible reality everywhere.

The dramatic rate of child deaths from maltreatment we are making public today are only one undeniable reminder that... it is already too late to do it!