

## HEALTH AND THE POLITICS OF PUNISHMENT

It is surely an obvious truth that the health and wellbeing of society requires each generation of children and young people to enter adulthood equipped to take on the responsibilities of adult life and to address the needs of the next generation. It seems an equally obvious truth that if punishment worked with young people we would have no bad behaviour, no underachievement, no poor mental or sexual health and no crime.

These axioms have little current resonance however and we have to ask ourselves what it is about the nature of the political decision making behind the constant policy and media onslaught on young people. Everyday we hear about “yob culture”, the terror of teenage sexuality, binge drinking, and the lack of respect for parental and educational authority. This prevailing view defines young people as a problem and that they need to be tamed and brought into line. The development of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) is a significant piece of public policy making which seeks to reinforce this understanding of young people and to justify the application of punitive measures especially to boys.

Whilst it is obvious that some young people do display bad behaviour, there exist a number of very important paradoxes that need to be considered. The first of these is that adult behaviour is often much worse – young people do not start wars for example or create other conditions of conflict and abuse. Secondly, the expectation of acceptable masculinity still supports a view of male superiority, male violence and a lack of emotional maturity. Thirdly, there is the problem that repeated ridicule and belittlement of young people will be humiliating and counterproductive.

For this generation of young people to become the next generation of physically and psychologically healthy adults we surely need to turn the politics of punishment on its head. The development of the Children’s Rights agenda is an important one for public health and the Politics of Health Group advocates that more attention is paid by policy makers at national and local level to its implications for health, education, and criminal justice.

If you wish to work with the Politics of Health Group on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie at [contact@pohg.org.uk](mailto:contact@pohg.org.uk)