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Slippers, canes and hospitalisations: adult to child violence in 1970s UK comics

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ABSTRACT

UK comics in the 1970s had an ambiguous relationship with violence. Whilst portrayals of children who committed violent acts were deemed dangerous and provocative, adult to child violence was permissible. Using a range of comics and stories from the time period but focusing particularly on *Dennis the Menace*, the star of the popular pre-teen humour title, the *Beano*, this article argues that the social acceptability of parental physical chastisement in particular rendered any potential harm to the child invisible. The wider context in which physical abuse was being conceptualised in the UK at this time is presented, and how what happened in comics was in stark contrast to real events such as the terrible murder of seven-year-old Maria Colwell in 1973. Maria's death led to changes in the law and provoked the artist Sonia Lawson to produce a striking and distressing cartoon reflecting the incident. Whilst physical chastisement remained part of the *Beano* well into the late 1980s, nevertheless it is argued that the *Beano's* decision to eradicate smacking in its pages pre-empted wider cultural views.

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A returning reader might not recognise a 2023 *Beano*¹ compared to one published in the 1970s. Enduring stars Dennis and Gnasher remain, though Dennis is a less mischievous figure no longer guaranteed the coveted cover page. Significantly he is no longer 'the menace', his nemesis Walter not, for many reasons, 'the softy',² and his father, who has morphed into a grown-up version of Dennis of yore,³ would never contemplate wielding a slipper to admonish his son in the once ubiquitous way. The 1970's readers expected Dennis' roguish misadventures to be leavened by a subsequent chastisement. A journalist writing in the late 2010s reminisced:

My over-riding memory of *Dennis the Menace* is the final cartoon picture which shows him perched, face down, over his father's lap. His dad is holding aloft a carpet slipper which is poised to descend on to his son's posterior. (Mortimer 2018)

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Whilst comics were more commonplace in the 1970s playground, so were depictions of adult to child violence. This article examines this situation, with specific reflection on wider time-related social concerns about childhood and child protection. As well as considering prevailing societal views of the child in mid- to late 20th century regarding authority figures and discipline, the lasting impact of one child's murder in 1973 will be explored, including how a subsequent cartoon depiction of this differs qualitatively from depictions of adult to child violence recurring in the nation's most popular comics.

The child is a danger

Historically, childhood in Britain was a time of hardship and deprivation (Pollock 2017), with many children working outside the home or domestically for long hours and experiencing greater vulnerability to harm (Olafson, Corwin, and Summit 1993). Over the past two centuries, children have increasingly become perceived as innocents needing protection (Pollock 2017; Wyness 2018). When a child transgressed innocent status, they became the 'knowing child,' holding understandings inappropriate to their age. For Wyness, this primarily relates to sex, but the knowing child is also one whose knowledge threatens the social equilibrium. Stories and folk tales perpetuate the notion that children's actions should be feared, the best children being those whose behaviour is so benign that their presence becomes invisible or absent (Tribunella 2017). These fears reflect 'pedophobia', a child-hatred implying the child's capacity for rebelliousness risks overthrowing the existing social order.

For 1970's comics, this anxiety reached its apotheosis with the withdrawal in 1976 by IPC⁴ of its anti-authoritarian punk adjacent comic, *Action* (Lawley 1999), following a media outcry about its violent and provocative content. The edition cover dated 18 September 1976⁵ was the tipping point. The cover was drawn by Spanish artist, Carlos Ezquerra, and featured the apocalyptic *Lord of the flies* inspired survival strip, *Kids rule ok*. The cover depicted an aggressive, angry teenager waving a chain and about to unleash a potentially fatal lashing upon a helpless man, crouched beside a discarded police helmet.⁶ Inside, in the strip *Look out for Lefty*, a sympathetic character, Angie, girlfriend of footballer, Kenny 'Lefty' Lampton, deliberately hurled a bottle from the stands at another player. This appeared to advocate football hooliganism. Hooliganism was considered a serious public threat and when there were no negative repercussions,⁷ authority figures in the Football Association were appalled (Steeple 1976), adding fuel to the fire that young people were anti-social and dangerous.⁸

Action stoked adult fears about unruly children that had been feeding the popular imagination in the post-war years. Whilst UK comics were not initially targeted at children (Chapman 2011; Nixon 2019; Pursall 2021; Roach 2020), as the medium became more popular with younger readers, discrete titles aimed at that market developed. When the *Beano*, and its popular companion title, the *Dandy*, were first published in the late 1930s, they were 'funnies' (Nixon 2019), in other words, humour comics aimed at children up to the age of 12⁹ and replicated what was contemporaneously popular to UK audiences (Chapman 2011¹⁰). By contrast, *Action* was the latest in a parade of boys' adventure comics, where the readership was slightly older, from around 10 years into the early teens (Edwards 1996; Hayes 2019), Orwell (1940) estimating that boys would stop reading adventure weeklies at

adolescence. Despite strikingly different content, there is overlap in the suggested readership ages, indicating that readers could have simultaneously picked up titles in both categories.

In adventure comics, violence is used to communicate action, distress, and current affairs, but in the ‘funnies’, it is used as slapstick with laughter and joy being the intended response from the reader (Hague et al. 2019). The thinking seemed to be that the more over the top the violence was, the more it appealed. Some comics walked a tightrope between what was acceptable for younger readers and content directed towards adults, and in the second half of the 20th century, comics were frequently condemned by concerned adults urging censorship in order to protect young minds (Millard and Marsh 2001).

Early anti-comic rhetoric was typified by the American critic, John Mason Brown describing comics in 1948 as the ‘marijuana of the nursery’ (Tilley 2012, 388). Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham (1948) claimed that child murderers were inspired by comics, which encouraged criminal ideas and promoted an ‘atmosphere of deceit, trickery and cruelty’ (p58). Wertham went on to write *Seduction of the innocent* (1954), suggesting links between comics and juvenile delinquency. This led directly to the establishment of the censorious Comics Code Authority in the United States (Condis and Stanfill 2022). As US horror comics, the target of Wertham’s wrath, were regularly imported to the UK, his ideas whipped up anxiety about lawless adolescents (Staats 2018), and led to protests from an unlikely alliance of teachers, clergy and Communists (Chapman 2011). By contrast British comics were often perceived as harmless (Chapman 2011), though some children were still denied any comic due to parental disapproval (Gibson 2008).

Despite Wertham’s influence, later academics found his research methods less than rigorous, noting manipulation, misuse and even fabrication (Tan and Scruggs 1980; Tilley 2012). Tilley argued that Wertham underappreciated the wider social contexts of his book’s subjects, embedded as they were in deprivation, violence and poverty, and rather simplistically, attributed presenting delinquency to being explained by exposure to violent comics. Whilst fear grew about children’s potential to cause chaos and disorder, there was underappreciation of how a child’s own disruptive behaviour was probably not due to their reading material but had evolved from their own experiences of violence conducted by parents and other adults (Browne and Hamilton 1998).

Wertham’s sway was also apparent in the introduction of the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955¹¹ in the UK that acted as a watchdog over comics (Thompson 2020). Amongst other things, this forbade corrupting works of ‘stories told in pictures’ including ‘acts of violence and cruelty’, which immediately reduced the UK distribution of horror comics. It also legitimised outrage and increased scrutiny of later titles like *Action*, viewed by news media as being brutal, exploitative and irresponsible towards its young readership (Greenwood 1976¹²; Jenkins 1976; Steeples 1976). Simultaneously, ‘funnies’ were regarded as wholesome and inoffensive. Violence in these comics, characterised as chastisement to keep children in line, was delivered by parents and authority figures and was socially acceptable. The illustration of these acts was further legitimised by there neither being a lack of sustained distress for protagonists nor explicit injury detail (Chapman 2011). These actions were not perceived as dangerous to wider society, rather discipline was part of the solution. When concerned teacher and critic, George Pumphrey undertook an analysis of comics in the

early 1960s, he concluded that funnies like the *Beano* were largely banal and harmless, whilst criticising US titles for their suggestibility (Thompson 2020): to Pumphrey, the consequence-free violence of the funnies was invisible. However, Thompson argues that comics like the *Beano* are a paradox, where violence is off limits yet also a powerful narrative driving force.

The *Beano* may be sweet-natured and filled with larger-than-life characters, gags and punchlines (Pursall 2021) but not every aspect ages well. When the *Beano* was celebrated with an art exhibition at Somerville House in London in 2021/22, the display's accompanying narrative did not shy away from content now considered racist or offensive (Jeffries 2021). The comic reflected its times, and in the 1970s, this was exemplified by the ongoing physical chastisement of its much-loved cover star, *Dennis the Menace*.

The *Beano* was (and remains) published by DC Thomson, a family-owned Scottish company sometimes regarded as strict, conservative and puritanical (Jenkins 2020; McRobbie 1982). Dennis' regular spankings illustrates the parental punishments familiar to contemporaneous readers. A contributor to a (2011) online forum discussion on punishment in these comics, Raven, carried out their own analysis of cartoon violence in one 1970 edition of the *Beano*.

In the Easter issue. . . , Roger is slippered (. . . so hard he needs three cushions!) for a minor prank, the Bash Street kids are all caned for accidentally causing a bit of mayhem. . . , Minnie is about to be slippered ('a maxi-whacking') at the end of her strip for pea-shooting and water-squirting, and Dennis has been beaten so hard he needs an ice pack on his bum.

'Slippering', the activity where a child is hit usually on their backside with a slipper or cane, often comes at the comic strip's denouement and is delivered in various ways. Most typically, the child is smacked across the lap of their father or bent over in front of them. More elaborate slipperings involve punishments being delivered by bizarre contraptions, e.g. the slipper being shot out of a cannon. There is also variation in the fathers or teachers delivering punishments: sometimes they are jubilant, having thwarted their child, at other times frustrated or angry. Both are equally played for laughs.

In a DC Thomson produced companion comic, the *Topper*, Beryl the Peril, a female equal to Dennis, had similar experiences. Beryl was a *Topper* regular from its first issue, published in 1953, 11 months after Dennis' first appearance in the *Beano*, DC Thomson alighting on Dennis' growing popularity. The reader empathises with these child characters and their anarchic adventures (Barker 1989), the risks to which are amplified by the authoritarian parental threat ominously waiting at the strip's end. Beryl is an anti-authoritarian disruptor but also kept under control via spankings from her dad's slipper (Shail 2014). Shail (2014) notes that approximately one third of tales in the 1973 *Beryl the Peril* annual conclude with this trope.¹³ These comics revelled in a regular narrative arc whereby the unruly child creates enjoyable mayhem but is reined in by their parent, a figure ordained to maintain order in line with nuclear family objectives.

Building on G Stanley Hall's ideas that adolescence marked the transition from (childhood) savagery to (adult) civilisation, Shail (2014) notes that educationalists perceived discipline and punishment as essential in ensuring structure and order. Discipline taught children to identify with parents' or other authority figures' values and became a process through which the child adopted societal, community or family rules (Flegel and Parkes 2018). Discipline at a micro-level ensured the development of responsible citizens from childhood.

Parents therefore had a strong rationale to use physical chastisement to keep the likes of Dennis and Beryl from straying. Schools, too, needed protection from disruptive children. MacLeod (1982) describes how the 1960s saw a rise in fears about the delinquent child, who threatened the authority of both the family and the state, liable to become involved in anti-social gangs, perhaps exemplified in a more benign, yet still rebellious, manner in the *Beano* by the *Bash Street Kids*. Physical chastisement at school, often by the cane, was rationalised as being ‘in loco parentis’ (Burchell 2018). When this was absent in an anti-disciplinarian approach at a north London school, the William Tyndale School in the early 1970s, with the intention of giving pupils more choice and control, the public and media became outraged at the subsequent permissive and chaotic environment (Davis 2002). As *Action*’s first issues hit the shelves in February 1976, a public enquiry into this school concluded with teachers being dismissed, illustrating how the appearance of *Kids rule ok* later that year amplified bubbling tensions. The public mood indicated that not only parents but others with authority must use all means possible to prevent disorder and anarchy.

In the law too, the Children and Young Persons Act 1969 in England maintained the ruling that children as young as ten were liable to criminal proceedings. In the 1970s, justice represented children being sent to Borstal or other detention centres. Ideas that children may be ‘inherently’ cruel or evil, rather than reacting to negative, neglectful or abusive childhood experiences, maintained a foothold (Flegel and Parkes 2018). Children were dangerous, and when a child is evil and not one experiencing abusive or neglectful care, it becomes much easier to strip the child of its rights. However, others recognised that the child was not so much a danger as in danger.

The child is in danger

In their study examining violence in American comics, Tan and Scruggs (1980, 583) hypothesise that comic book violence may not be ‘sufficiently involving and motivating’ for children to subsequently adopt violent behaviours, and this may be especially so if the violence in question is fantastical in nature.¹⁴ The creative team behind *2000AD*, which commenced publication in 1977, a few months after *Action*’s initial withdrawal, sensed this too, creating a more fantastical narrative wherein more violence could be displayed (Gibson 2008; Welch 2007). *2000AD* diverged from previous boys’ comics not just in terms of the style of the comic, the larger splash panels and its violence but because it used humour to mock, caricature and satirise (Little 2011).

This was prevalent in the ninth episode of *Flesh*, a story appearing in *2000AD* in April 1977 involving time travelling cowboys herding dinosaurs for meat. The reader is introduced to Orville Wainwright, an obnoxious child from the 23rd century, who has travelled to the age of dinosaurs for a safari-type holiday (Black 2013). Orville is ungrateful and spoilt, his antipathy to a holiday of dinosaur watching resulting in his father losing his temper and striking the boy in the face. In response, Orville’s mother rebukes her husband, ‘We don’t chastise children in the twenty-third century.’ Subsequent events in the story give this a satirical edge. Young Orville becomes the first human to be eaten by the strip’s antagonist, the Tyrannosaurus Rex, ‘Old One Eye’. Reflecting the comic’s subversive tone, Orville’s gruesome death is played for laughs. As

the dinosaur bites down on him, Orville comments, ‘You can’t kill me ... I’m an intelligent kid from the twenty-third century! And you got a brain the size of a pea!’

Still nervous of what happened with *Action*, the image is censored. The impossible event of a dinosaur eating a child is obscured whilst over in DC Thomson’s funnies, the very real experience of fathers smacking their children is displayed without censure. Whilst Orville is a child, his unsympathetic introduction, displaying common antagonist traits familiar to humour comics, the reader may cheer rather than feel horrified at his fate. Orville does not deserve protection.

From Victorian times, children were subject to contradictory messages that they were, on the one hand, ‘savage, sinful and in need of constant correction’ (Flegel and Parkes 2018, 3) but, on the other, vulnerable and in need of protection (Tribunella 2017). Whilst the family home was perceived as a sacred arena that should be free from scrutiny (Crane 2015), abuse of children in Britain was increasingly taken seriously from the late 19th century onwards, steered in large part by the foundation of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC¹⁵). In the early decades of the 20th century, the focus of maltreatment was upon neglect, particularly impoverished housing conditions and child labour (Housden 1955). By contrast, harm from potential physical abuse was downplayed: in the inter-war years, UK newspapers advocated for corporal punishment as a response to ‘unruly’ children (King 2015). After World War II, a 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Principle 6) prioritised children to be raised ‘in the care and under the responsibility of [their] parents’ (Wyness 2018) with the family regarded as the ‘naturally accepted pattern for safeguarding and protecting the growth and physical health of the child through the strength of the affections which binds its members together’ (Spence, 1954, cited by MacLeod 1982, 20). The strength of these ‘natural bonds’ was amplified by the death of Dennis O’Neill in 1945 at the hands of a foster carer. This tragedy led directly to the Children Act 1948, which legislated for more rigorous supervision of looked after children’s boarded out arrangements (Prentice 2016).

That abuse might occur within apparently stable nuclear family structures was considered more fanciful. Physical abuse of children was viewed as unexpected and disturbing (Delap 2018) and parents who abused children labelled ‘deplorable’ (Fisher, 1958, cited by Lynch 1985, 13; also; Hacking 1991). The British Medical Journal concluded in the late 1960s that professionals had been unlikely to overrule parents regarding how they chastised children due to disbelief that they could be so malicious (Crane 2015). In the mid-20th century, writing on parental abuse reflected this could only occur if there were significant and sustained parental deficits. Child cruelty expert, Leslie Housden (1955) concluded that parents visiting physical abuse on children was likely due to alcohol misuse and intoxicated moral lapses. Housden also blamed feckless fathers who were unwilling to work for child cruelty, and paradoxically, mothers neglecting their children by working outside the home. Physical cruelty was extreme, relating to excessive beatings, punching, being struck by boots, and being left in cold water. Whilst Housden concluded that violent acts by parents must be taken seriously and investigated to prevent potential child deaths, he did not object to the use of slipper or cane by a sober parent or teacher.

In the US, Surgeon General Henry Kempe started using the term ‘battered baby syndrome’ in the early 1960s to promote the idea that young children were not always protected from violence in their own homes (Prentice 2016). Kempe initially focused on

examining child deaths in hospitals as well as incidents of children attaining permanent brain damage due to being ‘battered’ (Kempe et al. 1962). Although Kempe noted that children could be ‘any age’, his enquiry primarily concerned children aged three or younger. In contrast with Housden, Kempe did not pathologise physical abuse to children as being explained only by specific psychiatric disorders or due to impoverishment but indicated abuse occurred ‘among people with good education and stable financial and social background’. Kempe recognised that parents could be intentionally cruel and viewed child maltreatment as a violation of human rights (Chaiyachati and Leventhal 2015). Kempe noted that certain parents (usually fathers) were unequivocal about hitting their children and might even hit them harder if children did not respond positively. He also recognised that physicians often disbelieved that parents would attack their children so maliciously and subsequently underassessed potential harm.

Whilst Kempe believed that parental physical abuse was real, initially this primarily related to concerns about infants. Responses to Kempe’s studies were sympathetic about parents who injured pre-school children being reprehensible but were less willing to acknowledge abuse at other points during childhood (Garbarino 2013). For example, British doctors Griffiths and Moynihan’s (1963) study in the *British Medical Journal* focused exclusively on physical injuries in babies. Older children were more likely seen as complicit in abuse received and deserved it due to poor presenting behaviours requiring correction by long-suffering parents. Housden (1955) reported on a 1919 case where a father was charged with assaulting his children, aged 14 and 10, who had sustained visible facial injuries. The judge dismissed the case, citing that parents were ‘too frequently criticized for chastising their children’.¹⁶ In summary, by the early 1970s, there was little concern about older children experiencing physical chastisement and especially that which did not leave a mark, with a presumption that this did not lead to long-term damage.

The messages comics gave were ambiguous. Thompson’s (2020) survey of the *Dennis the Menace* strip in the 1970s resulted in the finding that roughly one third of the strips involved parent to child violence.¹⁷ In more serious and teen/adult-oriented comics, the child at risk is someone in need of rescue (Greenblatt 2009). However, in the *Beano* and its companion papers, the child may be perceived, from a 21st century perspective, to be at risk, and yet, in line with contemporaneous cultural morality, protected within the family unit, where beatings and punishment had a disciplinary purpose, which did not harm but ensured safety. This is apparent when Dennis or Beryl continue their escapades each week; even if in the preceding issue, they ended up being whacked across the laps of their fathers. If an environment produced warmth and consistent care, as appeared to be the case for Dennis or Beryl, then the effects of physical chastisement are modified and long-term harm unlikely to occur. The *Beano* and *Topper* here reinforce cultural messages about the home being a safe place, and about one’s father not being motivated by undue sadism when issuing physical chastisement (despite the glee sometimes displayed by fathers).

What is allowed regarding physical chastisement today remains blurred. UK legislation, especially the Human Rights Act 1998, speaks about proportionality in parents’ actions and families having a right to private lives, without undue state interference. Kempe maintained the view that risks to the child had to be balanced against strengths within the family (Chaiyachati and Leventhal 2015) and was not opposed to smacking,

believing there to be a qualitative difference between this and ‘a fist to the face’ (Roberts, 2000, cited by Taylor and Redman 2004, 317). Goupillot and Keenan (1995) recognised that parents who smack children ‘are not necessarily bad people’ but rather parents with limited options and capabilities in terms of finding ways to direct their children’s behaviour. Smacking was seen as ‘reasonable physical force’ and physical punishment must be ‘extreme’ to be unacceptable (Browne and Hamilton 1998, 60). Fréchette et al. (2015) note that parental anger and loss of control were factors where chastisement could tip over into abuse, though the tipping point between appropriate chastisement and that which leads to abuse is cloudy, escalating fears that any smacking could be abusive (Gershoff 2002).

Whilst Taylor and Redman (2004) imply that smacking is some way from gross physical abuse, they highlight that the Victoria Climbié¹⁸ enquiry recommended that smacking be made illegal to protect children from abuse. At time of writing, physical chastisement is not illegal in England, though in Scotland, the *Beano*’s own homeland, this was outlawed in 2020 under the Children (Equal protection under assault) (Scotland) Act 2019. Similar legislation was enacted in Wales in 2022. Research too reflects a sea change in social attitudes. Increasingly there are calls to ban physical chastisement altogether (e.g. NSPCC 2022; Rowland, Gerry, and Stanton 2017). Li and Gong (2022) define harsh parenting as entailing behaviours including slapping, smacking and verbal abuse: a long way from what Kempe and others considered concerning in the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore Dennis’ father administering a smacking in the pages of the *Beano* today would not only be displaying an illegal act in the nation of publication but appear dissonant to the readership in a way it most markedly wasn’t to 1970s readers. Then Dennis’ father’s actions were culturally appropriate, justified and (perhaps) proportionate.

Whilst smacking occurred regularly for these 1970s comic characters, some stories did stretch the boundaries of what was acceptable. Even in the *Beano*, one *Dennis the Menace* tale from 1976 ends with Dennis receiving an unironic and sinister pounding from an adult boxer (Thompson 2020). In IPC’s *Buster* comic, Billy Farmer, the protagonist in the *Leopard from Lime Street*, which first appeared in 1976, received regular slaps in the face from his uncle Charlie, a bully, who also exerted what would now be recognised as coercive control over his wife, Joan (Tully, Western, and Bradbury 2017). A few years earlier, another soon-to-be *Buster* legend *Faceache* first appeared in *Jet* comic, written by Ken Reid.¹⁹ In Rebellion publishing’s collection of early *Faceache* tales (Reid 2017), the stories are marked repeatedly by slapstick comic book violence, including the protagonist being thrown through a television set, being mauled by a badger and hit over the head with an umbrella by an older woman. Like Dennis, *Faceache* endures a punch in the face from a random adult (with the accompanying final caption stating: ‘More fun next week!’) and, on 4 September 1971, in one of *Jet*’s final issues, the boy is beaten so badly by his father that not only is he hospitalised, but his father is imprisoned. *Faceache* exemplifies that comics were not just reflecting cultural ideas about parental discipline but that other adult to child violence could be played for laughs as well as recognising serious consequences to violence, though not so much that the reader wasn’t returned to the status quo the following week.

Parental physical chastisement reflected what children were experiencing in their own lives but this survey has also identified that other forms of violence were used to evoke

laughter from their young audience. At the same time, a real-life event would cause a sea change in the UK around how physical chastisement was viewed and produce a stunning and genuinely chilling cartoon that highlighted the failures of dominant cultural presumptions of care.

Maria Colwell and the chastised child

In January 1973, seven-year-old Maria Colwell was beaten to death by her stepfather. This tragedy obtained substantial media attention because Maria was known to Social Services, receiving regular visits not only from a social worker, but also an education welfare officer, the police and the NSPCC. The public was shocked by her death and the apparent impotence of the structures around her that should have saved her life (MacLeod 1982).

Maria was born in March 1965 and initially lived with her mother and stepfather. That there were significant concerns about the care Maria was receiving was evidenced by the how she lived with extended family in the early 1970s. Maria did however return home to her birth mother and stepfather and the family home received over 50 home visits by professionals in the last nine months of 1972. She was horribly physically abused and neglected during this time. Maria died on 7 January 1973 from severe bruising and internal injuries delivered by her stepfather (Timmins 1994).

Prior to Maria's death, there was little guidance on how to address physical abuse (Parton 1991). This vile event provoked much soul searching about children's protection, leading to a circular, 'Non-accidental injury to children,' being produced by the UK's Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) in 1974 on protocols involving non-accidental injuries in children (Parton 2014). In turn, this informed key childcare legislation such as the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales, as well as being a forerunner to serious case reviews, a process that scrutinised what occurred in child deaths or serious injuries (Leigh, Beddoe, and Keddell 2019).

Whilst the protocols were being developed, an organisation called the 'Friends of Maria Colwell' was formed to appeal for justice. Assisting their call, the artist Sonia Lawson produced a striking and provocative cartoon, 'Coming out of her shell' (Lawson 1974) highlighting apparent injustices and shortcomings of agencies and professionals involved (see Figure 1). Here the 'child welfare officer' is visiting a family home (not necessarily Maria's), where the woman who answers the door, possibly a child's mother, is telling the officer that the child she has come to see is 'out again. She's coming out of her shell now.' Both women smile, the professional appeased by the explanation, the sun shining behind her, two other children happy and contented on the doorstep. This contrasts with a deliberately darkened room on the left where the reader is taken inside the home to an adult male viciously assaulting a young girl, balled up on the floor, seemingly disfigured. To the right, a car with an NSPCC logo drives past oblivious, a doctor surreally sitting on the roof, a dunce cap shielding his eyes. That professionals were not communicating adequately was identified as a significant failing in the subsequent enquiry (Parton 2004). Underneath the welfare officer's knee length boots, the court supervision order, authorising the officer to see the child, is trampled underfoot. Lawson's image is not subtle; its meaning abundantly and shockingly clear. The parent



Figure 1. Coming out of her shell, 1973. © Sonia Lawson R.A.

here appears agreeable but evades or deliberately misleads a too easily satisfied professional. Lawson indicates that ‘natural assumptions’ about care at home, discussed earlier, are inadequate. Maria Colwell’s death revealed that ‘natural family life was a risky affair needing scrutiny because of the damage parents could do to their children’ (MacLeod 1982, 8).

Maria’s death was significant enough to introduce legislation and also led to a lowering of the threshold for professional intervention (Cooper 2014) but a deliberately horrific murder like this did not immediately change views on proportionate parental physical chastisement. Goupillot and Keenan (1995) reported that in the mid-90s there remained academic voices supporting physical chastisement and the British Medical Journal in 2000 advocated that the evidence for banning smacking was weak (Larzelere 2000). A Scottish survey in 1992 revealed that over 80% of respondents felt that smacking a three-year-old for doing something naughty was acceptable, whilst a 1997 British survey concluded that three quarters of parents used physical chastisement (Taylor and Redman 2004). Redman and Taylor (2006) found that it was rare for British newspapers to discuss parental physical chastisement prior to the mid-1990s, and when articles began to emerge, Scottish newspapers were more likely to provide coverage than UK-wide titles.

It is not surprising that these grim goings-on took time to filter through to the funnies. For example, the slipper is still present, inevitably in the final panel, in the first *Dennis the Menace* story in the *Beano Book 1985*. One (2011) online discussion forum estimates that it was not until 1988 that the *Beano* finally put the slipper away for good. A contributor ‘Niblett’ believes the final whacking appeared in No2385, cover dated 2 April 1988 and notes:

It is Walter, rather than Dennis' dad who administers the punishment. Perhaps this was intentional, the fact that this last original appearance denoted a drawing to a close of spanking as an acceptable form of chastisement from parents, Dennis' dad, in effect, passing on the baton.

Discussion: navigating real and imagined dangers

Parent to child violence and especially physical chastisement in 1970s UK comics was aligned with social norms observed to maintain order. Flegel and Parkes (2018) recognise that society operates on the basis that if there appears to be an order to violence, or a good intention, it may be excusable. Permission for chastisement is justified due to the child being in a state of 'becoming' (Uprichard 2008) and needing protection, discipline and guidance. The child receives correction so that they remain within the bounds of socially acceptable behaviour, and children at the time normalised smacking and did not regard this as abusive (Bower and Knutson 1996). These norms did not account for children's potential psychological harm, and the emotional maltreatment of children did not receive serious consideration internationally until the late 1970s (Garbarino 2013). Whilst Kirsh and Olczak (2000) argue that physical punishment is used in families where there is little emotional warmth elsewhere, this is not indicative of stories like *Dennis the Menace*. In these comics, parents are authoritarian in punishment, and benign in how they maintain warmth and boundaries within their family. If, as Housden (1955) stated, 'any child who is frequently unhappy is the victim of cruelty,' then Dennis, Beryl and others were plainly not evidencing cruelty. If the child is unaffected by parental physical chastisement, then parental force is not draconian but justified by dint that there are no long-term negative effects. The use of a slipper, a soft shoe more associated with the comfort of home, amplifies the notion of safe chastisement. Yet studies in recent decades have found that children who experienced physical chastisement from their parental caregivers were more likely to report poorer mental health, anxiety and depression and also exhibit higher levels of aggression (Gershoff 2002²⁰; Rodriguez 2003).

Smacking provides immediate control and provokes a moral internalisation in the receiver about what are socially acceptable behaviours (Gershoff 2002). As such physical chastisement is conceptualised as being an effective, educative social good that acts as a trigger to avoid future misbehaving (Goupillot and Keenan 1995). It produces social learning. That is clearly not the case in *Dennis the Menace*, where the characters return to the status quo week after week. Dennis is naughty and is punished. In the real world the perceived effect would be that deviance is controlled and Dennis changes his behaviour. In the comics world, Dennis does not change his behaviour. In each succeeding issue, he is mischievous once again, subsequently punished and the cyclical loop continues.

Smacking has been criticised as merely informing the child as to what behaviour is unacceptable with no direct guidance as to what good behaviour looks like (Goupillot and Keenan 1995). These authors' counter view was that smacking ultimately produces violent children and adults. A child encountering smacking or other forms of physical chastisement learns that this is an acceptable and effective way of dealing with frustration or anger (Browne and Hamilton 1998). However, when children act this way, they are seen by concerned adults as innately dangerous. The violence of children in stories like *Kids rule ok* was powerful and provoked fear in a citizenry, who had been glued to the

enquiry about what had occurred very publicly in an anti-disciplinarian failed educational experiment at the William Tyndale School. As Barker (1990) noted, it was not violence itself, but anti-authoritarian violence, which was threatening.

The comics are clear on who is authorised to carry out chastisement, embedded in patriarchal understandings within the nuclear family. Whilst studies indicate that mothers were more common in issuing chastisement in real life²¹ (Gershoff 2002; King 2015; Nobes et al. 1999), in comics it was fathers who doled out physical punishment. Fathers were authoritarian in ways mothers were not, and when male figures had a heritable relationship with the child, this violence was condonable and socially acceptable. Fathers' actions in these strips are within the context of responding to misbehaviour and within a safe environment, evidenced when the reader picks up the comic the following week and sees that all is well. Yet in real life, fathers are more likely than mothers (and men more likely than women) to inflict serious physical harm to children, including head trauma and fractures (Chaiyachati and Leventhal 2015). Another study concluded that parents resorted to smacking when frustrated or losing control (Taylor and Redman 2004) and, as noted earlier, different comics display different parental motivations, including glee, sadism, anger and frustration, with little reflection on any long-term damage. At its extremity, tragic deaths like Maria Colwell occur.

Children's understanding of forms of comic book violence was an important concern in the post-war years and into the 1970s. Whilst (child as a danger) violence in *Action* was shocking and merited a response, the (child is in danger) violence in humour comics was invisible, due to its normalised status within society and being depicted as safe and proportionate in pre-teen funnies. When it exceeded this, as in *Faceache* and at least one *Dennis the Menace* story in 1976, children understood this to be exaggerated and unreal. When a 1970s child watched a cartoon and saw Wile E Coyote fall to his apparent doom, they were reassured when he reappeared, hatching a new plan to catch the Road Runner seconds later. War comics too allowed children to experience the thrill of conflict without exposure to its very real dangers (Chapman 2011). It has been argued that younger children have greater difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality (Eastman 2003) and will struggle to see death as permanent (Longbottom and Slaughter 2018) or inevitable (Nagy 1948). Events such as pet deaths may be their first exposure to its brutality (Toray 2010). In contrast it was thought that older children understand death's finality and its consequences more readily (Nagy 1948; Rabenstein 2017). However, when Greenwood (1976) published his report in the *Sun* apparently damning *Action's* violence, the journalist concluded by citing a child psychologist, Glen Smith, who indicated that children were capable of separating fact from fantasy, knowing better than their anxious parents about what was real or not. When reading about how Roger the Dodger, for example, required the heft of three cushions to recover from a spanking, in this analysis the reader knows if this were real, if this were visited upon him with the force of a parent as cruel as Maria Colwell's stepfather, the injuries would be horrific and outcome chilling. Yet, it could be assumed that the child is reassured by Roger's continuing presence and resumption of mischief making in the following week's comic. The same is true with *Faceache's* hospitalisation. That *Faceache's* father is jailed (albeit apparently for one week) implies that the comic writers felt that their readers understood the repercussions of extreme parent to child violence, whilst simultaneously feeling comfortable playing it for laughs. Like death in the mind of a young child, violence in these comics is

impermanent and without lasting psychological effects. It is the very lack of consequence that allows humour comics to display exaggerated violence (Mickwitz et al., 2020) and renders its impact as effectively invisible and meaningless. By contrast, if the child were to see Sonia Lawlor's more fractured and unnerving cartoon, they would see a different language communicating what occurred, in a way that might leave the child disturbed and anxious.

Lawson's image would align with Hague et al.'s (2019) identification of real-world violence, often used by creators like Marianne Satrapi or Joe Sacco to draw attention to social and global injustices. The use of violence therefore is in stark contrast to that in comics aimed at children. Nevertheless, there is a tension between the *Beano's* clash of anarchy and order within the mischief making and subsequent disciplining in *Dennis the Menace*, and real-life events that depict parental discipline as tipping over into horrifying tragic abuse and disrupting the notion that (step)fathers' intentions are safe.

Political correctness has been cited as a reason that smacking was eventually removed from the *Beano* (Hitchens 2018, also; Thompson 2020). It also highlights that the *Beano* editorial was healthily sensitive to cultural changes in children's daily experiences. The *Beano* has made remarkable changes in recent years, reflecting the times, ensuring there is greater representation of female characters,²² those from Black and Asian backgrounds, and those with disabilities, as well as changing the names of characters to remove terms now considered offensive (Freeman 2021a). Smacking would make little sense to children in today's comics. Whilst the *Beano's* decision to retire the slipper and smacking occurred some 15 years after Maria Colwell's death, the comic still pre-empted the Children Act 1989 in England and Wales.²³ Two important events in the UK preceded DC Thomson's actions prior to this: firstly, a national telephone hotline service, Childline was initiated in 1986 and caused public shock when it was inundated with calls from children about the abuse they had endured (Hacking 1991). Secondly, corporal punishment was abolished in schools during the Education Act of the same year (Burchell 2018), ensuring the *Bash Street Kids* no longer had to fear the cane. Nevertheless, smacking remained acceptable to many parents privately following this (Taylor and Redman 2004), so the emerging editorial dissonance in the *Beano* remained somewhat ahead of the cultural curve.

There remains ambivalence about what is and what is not communicated about physical chastisement in 1970s comics. The presumption inferred by the comic's repetition of characters returning to the status quo suggests that a key factor here is the lack of apparent physical injury, rendering violence acceptable (Thompson 2020). Readers see physical chastisement as relatively benign, blindsided to the intent of those delivering it. Redman and Taylor (2006) noted a difference between beliefs and behaviour of parents in their study: some believed it was wrong to use physical chastisement, yet resorted to it anyway. This implies a lack of control and thus danger is heightened. Whilst the violent intent of children in stories like *Kids rule ok* remains alarming and anti-social, the danger to children by parents in 1970s comics was underestimated and accepted.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a dichotomy existed in how children were perceived: either as vulnerable and in need of protection or as dangerous and uncomfortably holding (or

being exposed to) knowledge beyond their years. In the former case, physical chastisement was used to maintain order and this was socially acceptable, with any depictions in comics deemed acceptable and even supported. Depictions of children instigating violence and promoting disorder and lawlessness upset the natural order of things and was therefore unacceptable. This tight framing of authority in comics did not consider the real-life threats that some children were exposed to in their own homes by truly violent and dangerous parents and other adults, something exposed to hugely tragic effect by the Maria Colwell case. Whilst contemporaneous research and expertise did recognise violence at home as dangerous to children, this was limited to infants or extreme forms of abuse, which were explained by factors such as fecklessness and alcohol abuse and therefore not perceived to represent the average nuclear family.

Child abuse is not static but is mutable and dependent on changes in cultural expectations and values (Hacking 1991): what was once acceptable becomes regarded as vicious maltreatment. In the UK today, parental physical chastisement is at best frowned upon and may be illegal. It is more difficult to tune in to the 1970s. Where whilst there was concern about physical abuse directed towards children, this was conceptualised predominantly in two ways: firstly to reflect extreme forms of punishment and secondly, to protect infants from ‘battering’. The parent’s ability to physically discipline their child was not only socially acceptable but also a social good, with the child not suffering unduly long-term effects. This measure was thought to prevent the juvenile delinquency that led to the child being a social danger, an explicit social fear in the decades immediately preceding the 1970s. Parents, and particularly fathers, acted as agents of the state by maintaining appropriate social order. That their actions could be dangerous was hidden, and the comics largely swerved any consideration of this in line with wider social norms. By contrast, were Dennis’ father to resort to physical chastising his son in this week’s *Beano*, it would be considered shocking, abusive and inappropriate. In the same way that the *Beano* has moved from racial stereotypes, under-representation of girls and become more attuned to messages about obesity and bullying, smacking has been removed and is now a distant, yet resounding, echo in the comic’s history.

Notes

1. The *Beano* is one of only a few titles, such as *2000AD* and *Commando*, as well as the recently revived *Monster Fun*, still on sale in the UK both now and in the 1970s.
2. See Thompson (2020) for discussion on this.
3. Which is exactly who he is: see Rundle (2015).
4. International Publishing Company: a comic and magazine publisher who were the main rivals of DC Thomson in the 1970s UK comics market.
5. Cover dates do not denote the date the comic was published or made available but rather the date the newsagent could remove it from the stands and return to the publisher (Freeman 2021b). For weekly comics in the UK, the comic itself was probably available in shops one week earlier than the indicated cover date.
6. For further analysis, see Barker (1990).
7. Lefty’s own response is ‘Good old Angie’ (Barker 1990)
8. In the issues just prior to Action’s withdrawal, there appears to be a deliberate intention to qualify this incident. In the issue cover dated 9 October, Lefty is nearly struck with a bottle thrown from the crowd and goes to hurl it back, when one of his team mates stops him,

saying they are meant to set an example. Lefty goes on to agree that these sorts of things should be left to the authorities to sort out (see Barker 1989).

9. At time of writing, the Beano's own website states that the comic is pitched at children aged six to 12.
10. And in contrast to the older content in American comics at the same time with their focus on superheroes and crime fighters.
11. Still a live piece of legislation at the time of writing.
12. Greenwood reports that Mary Whitehouse, a reactive cultural watchdog who formed the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, threatened to use the 1955 Act to take action against *Action*.
13. In the 1981 annual, this reduced to just three occasions. If the fears of children reflected wider social anxieties, there may be a link between a rise in physical chastisement and fears about the permissive society growing in the late 1960s. For both these annuals, the stories largely would have been constructed from reprints that had appeared in the *Topper* in the preceding years (with probably a gap of five years or so between publication). As such, physical chastisement would certainly not have seemed unusual in the late 60s/early 70s, but even by the mid/late 70s, there is notably more caution shown by creators and editorial regarding slipper whacking. In the 64 stories, reprinted from the early 1960s, in the 1969 *Beryl the Peril* annual, physical chastisement is slightly less pronounced. Here, eight end in spankings from Beryl's dad and one a caning from her teacher.
14. In this study, the 'violent' comic chosen for analysis was the Marvel comic, *Daredevil*, with 53% of the comic's panels rated to be violent in nature.
15. Initially founded in 1884 as the London Society for Protection of Cruelty to Children and becoming the NSPCC in 1889.
16. King (2015) reports that courts did sometimes take punitive action in cases in the mid-20th century when chastisement by fathers was perceived to tip into cruelty: it was not entirely ignored or condoned.
17. Thompson's findings were based on a sample of 84% of the Beano comics published between January 1971 and January 1979.
18. A notorious case in the UK, where the girl in question was tortured and murdered by her carers.
19. Reid's work has been described (positively) as 'coarse, off-colour . . . , knowing, satirical hilarity' (Parkinson 2018, 7) and as full of 'dazzling inventiveness and energy' (Moore 2017, 6).
20. Gershoff also concluded in their meta-analysis of studies mainly from the 1990s that parental physical chastisement was probably present in most homes at that time and so must not have had an overly negative effect on most children.
21. Gershoff notes that this may have be due to mothers being primary carers and spending more time with children. King counters that fathers then became more distant figures and associated with the 'last resort' for punishment. The chapter that discusses this in King's book is entitled 'Wait til your father gets home' evoking how fathers could be perceived as figures to fear in the family household.
22. In No1768, cover dated 5 June 1976, included in the celebration package for 80 years of the Beano (Beano Studios 2018), there are 31 male protagonists (counting the Bash Street Kids and Pup Parade) and five female protagonists. This, despite the Beano being marketed at both boys and girls.
23. In terms of the homeland of the *Beano*, the equivalent Scottish legislation would not be enacted until 1995.

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