

Campaign against physical punishment is launched in Brazil

The launch of the campaign for the eradication of physical punishment against children took place last Friday (6/15), in a ceremony in Palácio do Planalto with the presence of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the children's show host Xuxa Meneghel, who is the main character in the advertising materials. Almost 400 guests attended to the ceremony, including authorities, members of parliament, representatives of organizations that form the network *Educate, Do Not Punish!* (*Rede Não Bata, Eduque!*) – which promotes the campaign –, NGOs and 120 children who take part in social projects in the Federal District.

The core of the ceremony was the need to change the culturally accepted notion that beating children is a legitimate way to educate them. “Those who have ever slapped their kids, please raise your hands. And what about those who were beaten in childhood?” said Xuxa Meneghel to the guests. In face of the large number of raised hands, the host passed her message: “People cannot think that beating an adult is a crime and beating a child is education. We must know that it is a mistake, as much as hitting women, or slavery were in the past.”

President Lula illustrated the host's speech with data about violence against boys and girls. “According to the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, every year 6,6 million children and adolescents – 12% of all people under 14 – are victims of physical violence in Brazil. An average of 18 thousand a day, 720 an hour or 12 a minute. Only 20% of these aggressions are registered. It is necessary to tear this shade of shame and complicity that prevents reporting”, he said.

Lula was followed by vice-president José Alencar, minister of the SEDH (Secretaria Especial de Direitos Humanos, Special Secretariat for Human Rights), Paulo Vannuchi, and the federal congresswoman Maria do Rosário (PT-RS), author of the Bill 2654/2003, which provides for educational work with parents to eradicate physical punishment. The president made a compliment to Xuxa's disposition to take on this cause publicly, and concluded by emphasizing the importance of an action to reduce violence in Brazil. “There is a very strong connection between abused children and violent adults. Most of all, it is necessary to strengthen family bonds so that jail will not be the dwelling of the adult that once was an infant victim of a violent home” said the president.

Xuxa stressed the responsibility of the parents in breaking the culture of violence. “I'm asking the adults that were beaten in childhood to think carefully before they raise their hands to hit a child, to think about what is going to happen to that tiny human being, who cannot defend himself”. In the ceremony, the host was attentively watched by 120 children, all of them assisted by social projects promoted in the Federal District by Cedeca (Centro de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente, Center for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescent), the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls (Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua) and other institutions. Those boys and girls were chosen to participate in workshops about the subject promoted by Promundo and Xuxa Meneghel Foundation as a way to stimulate the leading role of youngsters in the fight against physical punishment. “When an adult raises the hand to you, say ‘I'm just a child, let's talk’”, said the host to the kids.

The ceremony at the Palácio do Planalto was attended by representatives of all entities that integrate the network *Educate, Do Not Punish!*: Promundo, Xuxa Meneghel Foundation, Comunicarte, ANDI, DCA National Forum, Abring Foundation, Project Proteger, Save the Children Sweden and the Parliamentary Group for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Frente Parlamentar em Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente). Members of organizations that support the initiative, as Unesco, OIT, SBP (Sociedade Brasileira de Pediatria, Brazilian Pediatrics Society) and Partners of the Americas also attended the ceremony.

Trading aggression for dialog

Parents are the main target of the campaign. With a 30-second video narrated by Xuxa and the educational folders using her image, the campaign shows the families that small gestures used as a way to correct the children's behavior result in a series of consequences. Slaps, pinches and beatings can evolve into more severe aggressions and compromise the development of the children, reflecting in their adult life. The material also presents tips to parents about how to give up violence without losing their authority. According to Alison Sutton, coordinator of the projects of Unicef (United Nations Children Fund) for the protection of children and adolescents, this is the greatest distinction of the initiative. "The most important thing in the campaign is to sensitize families not only in the sense that they may not beat, but also to show them that it is possible to educate in a calm way, using dialog", she pointed.

Renowned experts in juvenile education and development participated in the elaboration of educational tips for parents. Among those was the pediatrician Raquel Niskier, head of the SBP. "Nobody has ever proved that aggression is effective as educational strategy. But we, professionals from civil society, are supported by international scientific studies which prove that a child subjected to this kind of treatment will resort to violence as a social code in adult life", said the doctor, explaining that girls and boys that were once abused can become violent in the future, including against their own children.

The awareness raising initiative will last indeterminately. The video – created by producer Matos Grey – began to be nationally broadcasted by Rede Globo at the same day. The promotional folders will reach the families through the mobilization of the organizations that integrate the network. Other social actors who can contribute do identify and denounce domestic violence, as the teachers, will also have access to the material.

"The campaign places Brazil in the vanguard, since only 18 countries in the world have created laws to eradicate physical punishment. The aim is not to penalize the parents, but to invite them to a dialog to raise their awareness about the fact that the right to a life without violence starts in childhood", explains Gary Barker, executive director of Promundo, organization that is responsible for the executive office of the network *Educate, Do Not Punish!* Barker reminds that this right is protected by the Brazilian Code for Children and Adolescents (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente) and by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is restated in the *UN Global Report on Violence against Children*.

“We are starting this work as a way to challenge Brazilian society to change the culture of violence and to protect the children”, says Angélica Goulart, director of Xuxa Meneghel Foundation. “The campaign expresses all the beliefs of the Foundation and all that motivated its work in these 18 years for the defense of the human rights of children and adolescents”, she concludes.

An increase in the reporting of cases

Carmen Oliveira, sub secretary for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents in the SEDH, believes that the campaign can empower the tools already available to juvenile protection. The SEDH, which supports the network *Educate, Do Not Punish!*, is the manager of *Disque 100 (National Childline against Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents)*. Most of the occurrences informed to the service are related to physical aggressions against girls and boys. Among 26,444 denunciations received from April 2003 to May 2007, 33,3% are of this type. “From now on, the chances that *Disque 100* be used to denounce physical punishment will increase, whether it comes from the family or the school”, she says. “We have an expressive number of children between 0 and 6 years old that go everyday to emergency rooms in hospitals with fractures or severe burnings caused by the lack of preparation of parents that use violence with the excuse of education”, she adds.

Tiana Sento-Sé, from the National Forum for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Fórum Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente), emphasizes that the awareness raising campaign with the families must be followed by the reinforcement of the networks for the protection of the children. “It is necessary to discuss the budget of programs that offer medical, psychological, educational and legal support to the families”, she states.

Besides, according to the evaluation of congresswoman Maria do Rosário, coordinator of the Parliamentary Group for the Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Frente Parlamentar em Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente) in the Chamber of Deputies, the campaign will allow to change the society conceptions, which favors a change in the legislation to protect the children even further. For some time, her bill (PL 2654/2003), which provides for the eradication of physical punishment, was seen as a proposal to penalize parents that abuse their children, as an interference of the State in the family environment. Now, the Member of Parliament believes that this mistake must be clarified. “The campaign is the basis for a culture of peace. I am studying the possibility to rewrite the project to make it clear that there is no penalty, but instead, there is a network that will make information available to parents about how to educate without beating”, she explained.