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Hitting children is unhealthy, say local advocates

City Council passes motion supporting 'No Hit Zone' public-awareness campaign

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Trust is an essential part of healthy relationships, and corporal punishment by parents of their children violates that dynamic, said Maureen Mahoney, founder of the [Mahoney Family Fund](#), which is dedicated to the wellbeing of children and thriving families.

“ Physical force as a means of discipline and control leads to increased aggression, stress, anxiety for kids and a lack of trust with kids for adults,” Mahoney said. “ It is evidence-based that hitting is an unhealthy parenting practice. The American Academy of Pediatrics has a statement about discipline, which says there is no safe level of hitting, even if it doesn’t leave a mark or bruise.”

Mahoney, a former Tewksbury resident who now lives in Florida, spoke to the City Council via Zoom Tuesday about a public awareness campaign called the “[No Hit Zone](#),” which works to change mindsets about the corporal punishment of children. The concept was developed by Dr. Lolita “ Lolly” McDavid, medical director of child advocacy and protection at Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital, in Cleveland, Ohio. No Hit Zones promote healthy relationships and safe environments across the lifespan through awareness, education and skill- building.



Mahoney’s remarks came during October’s Domestic Violence Prevention and Awareness Month, an annual event that brings attention to partner or family-based violence. She was honored by the Congressional Victims’ Rights Caucus in 2016 for her work on behalf of victims of violence.



The Mahoney Family Fund is a certified advocate agency for No Hit Zone education and policy, and has brought on some early adopters.

“Coalition for a Better Acre was our first nonprofit to become an official No Hit Zone in Lowell,” Mahoney said. “We also have the Lowell Boys and Girls Club, the Greater Lawrence Community Action Council, that serves over 25,000 people, and Lowell City of Learning.

“Chelmsford Pediatrics is also an official No Hit Zone medical practice,” she said. “You can choose to have no hitting in your business or facility, and we’re encouraging organizations to get involved.”

She told the council that No Hit Zone messaging and signage in public and business places was an inexpensive way to promote non-harmful ways of interaction between parents and their children. She encouraged the council to pass a motion to raise awareness through signage in city-owned public buildings and parks.

“We hope that the No Hit Zone public awareness campaign will help to change deep-seated beliefs that many adults have about corporal punishment,” she said.

Pam Larocque, a youth development manager with the CBA, has worked in the child care field for more than 20 years, and has long been a harm-reduction advocate.

She told the council that the nonprofit has deployed the No Hit Zone messaging and methodology throughout its umbrella of services, providing parents with education around alternative behavior to corporal punishment of their children.

“Some parents and caregivers lack the resources and education necessary to properly manage their child’s behavior,” Larocque said. “Through the No Hit Zone materials, we’ve developed workshops and training that we’ve been delivering to our community and after-school organizations to educate parents and caregivers around healthier forms of parenting that don’t involve hitting and spanking.”

Mahoney likened the effort to the no smoking campaign that started in the early 1970s.

“The no smoking campaign grew slowly over decades,” Mahoney said. “The No Hit Zone campaign will work the same way. The wider the message is promoted, the faster the message will be picked up, and awareness will grow.”

But, she said, the campaign needs private and public entities to help get out the message that hitting is not acceptable.

“We’re committed to helping adults nurture kids in their care,” Mahoney said. “But we can’t do this work alone. We hope you will join in our efforts to make our parents better parents, by providing this information free of cost in public spaces.”

The council unanimously passed a motion to have City Manager Tom Golden work with city departments to reach out to businesses and nonprofits to promote awareness, and to post the blue “ No Hit Zone” signs at city facilities including parks and buildings.