

Corporal punishment of children in various cultural settings

M Maldonado MD

Topeka, Ks.



Aspects of physical discipline

- Definition
- Frequency in different societies/cultures
- Parental beliefs (societal beliefs) underlying the discipline
- Meaning and purpose of practice
- How is it practiced?




Aspects of physical discipline 2

- Factors associated with physical discipline
- Who is punished?
- Who punishes?
- Effects on children of various cultures?
- Intergenerational transmission
- Alternatives?




What is corporal punishment?

- Corporal punishment vs. physical maltreatment or abuse
- Physical contact with the intent of modifying the behavior of the child, by producing an unpleasant, painful sensation



Corporal punishment

- Focus on the “normative” use of physical discipline as opposed to frank physical maltreatment (i.e. no bruises, blows, injuries, etc.
- Commonly practiced in most societies studied




How common or prevalent is physical abuse?

- In “Westernized” societies, it is fairly common
- In “traditional societies” controversial evidence

Prevalence of corporal punishment

- In US several surveys have shown that the great majority of parents practice and endorse spanking (as well as family physicians and pediatricians)
- E.g. Survey showed 94 % of parents had already practiced corporal discipline by the child's age of 4 (Strauss and Stewart, 1999)



Prevalence, non industrialized societies

- Survey in Alexandria, Egypt,
- School children
- 37.47% of children reported their parents use physical punishments

Prevalence former “Eastern Bloc” countries

- Survey (Latvia, Letonia, Moldova, Macedonia, Lituania) (Sebre et al, 2004)
- School children , approx. 300 in each country
- 18 to 30% reported corporal punishments (spanking, slapping)
- Cultural barriers to “speak bad about one’s parents”?

Latinamerica

- Surveys Chile, Costa Rica, 30% of parents report corporal punishment should be given to children if need be (Lopez Stewart et al, 2000)
- Jamaica 60% of mothers report using physical punishment (Smith and Mosby, 2003)
- 50% of Jamaican adolescents report being beaten (Walker et al, 1998)



Social and economic factors

- In US correlation between higher levels of physical punishment and
- Lower socioeconomic status
- Higher level of psychosocial stress

(Smith and Brooks-Gunn, 1997)

More tax on parent's patience and ability to cope with difficult behavior?



Social and economic factors

- In some non-industrialized countries
- Physical discipline more association with poverty, crowding, higher levels of psychosocial stress, quarreling between family members) (e.g. Youself and Kamel, 1998)

Parental beliefs leading to physical disciplined (and justifications for it)

- In US and UK parents readily endorse belief in the necessity of physical discipline of children, particularly if young
- In US some Christian-based parenting endorses use of physical discipline in order to correct misbehavior and teach self control (Bible-based))

Parental beliefs leading to physical disciplined

- Christian based: physical discipline even of infants (e.g. squeeze wrist, spank legs)
 - (Ellison, 1996)
 - “spare rod, spoil child”
- Children are parental property and can be molded to their beliefs.

Beliefs, Latinamerica

- Parents “admit” to physical punishment but readily say they should not do it, except in some circumstances
- Parents are more indulgent with young children, as they “do not understand”
- Engage in corporal discipline but regret it and feel they should do something else
(Aronson Fontes, 2000)

Parental beliefs and reasons for punishment

- Survey in Egypt: lying, disrespect, disobedience, low performance in school and destroying property (Youseff and Kamel, 1998)
- Latinamerica: children should learn their place in the world so they can fit in society, being respectful of elders, not to be *malcriado* (Delgado Gaitan, 1994)

Parental beliefs

- In survey in Jamaica parents punish children physically for :
 - Not eating, not completing chores
 - Disrespect, crying too much, disobedience
- (Walker et al, 1998)

Who is punished physically?

- Boys are more often punished than girls and more severely
- Younger children more than adolescents
- (in US 30% adolescents are physically disciplined still)
- Peak of frequency in preschool age

Adolescents

- (National Family Violence Surveys, 1975, 1985) USA (6002 families)
- 58% of boys, 44% of girls
- 13-15 year old.
- Average 7.9 times in preceding year
- (Stauss and Kaufman Kantor, 1994)



Who is punished?

- “difficult children” may elicit more negative discipline from parents
- What is the effect of the child on the discipline he/she receives?
- Cumulative negative effects of mutually coercive interactions



How are children punished?

- Most parents in US believe in “open hand” i.e. spanking or producing discomfort
- In Jamaica mothers readily acknowledge using instruments (spoons, etc.)

Short and Long term effects and mechanisms

- Coercive mutual training (G.R. Patterson)
- If child complies due to threats and fear, reinforces parents to employ these methods
- If child does not comply, he learns that despite threats he can “win” to parents through defiance and intimidation

Effects . Short Term

- Physical discipline leads to increased obedience and compliance in the short term
- Child may pay price of not internalizing values, self-regulation, collaboration, etc. but only external threat (Graziano, 1996)

Effects long term: Factors influencing effect


- Dose- response (severity, frequency, method of physical discipline)
- Whether parent is of same gender or not (worse effect if same gender)
- Cultural meaning of discipline in social context
- Whether there are additional ingredients, loving relationship, empathy, etc. in addition to spanking

Effects Long Term

- In US, Canada , Australia
- Physical punishment is associated with more aggressive and disruptive behavior during school years and adolescence (Gershoff, 2002. Metaanalysis/ Strauss et al, 1997)
- Finding replicated in Taiwanese adolescents (Simons et al, 2000)
- More interpersonal conflicts with peers
- In adult, harsh discipline assoc. with depression anxiety, substance abuse (Canadian adults) (MacMillan et al, 1999)

Effects Long Term

- In Afroamerican children, physical discipline is not associated with disruptive or more aggressive behavior later on (Deater Deckard et al, 1996)
- These children say spanking means parents love them and care about them
- Cultural meaning of discipline strategies?



Effects Long Term. Cultural meaning

Afroamerican children may interpret as protective strategy (prevent from developing negative behaviors)

Whether “everybody does it”

If parent does it angrily or as a protective strategy

Effects long term

- In surveys in Eastern Bloc countries
- Children often say that spankings were good for them
- Macedonia “Punishment comes from heaven”
- Not seem associated with resentment toward parents (if mild)



Effects. Transgenerational transmission violence

- Children have a tendency to replicate the parenting strategies they experience
- Adolescents who have been punished may experience more interest in violent themes and endorse more coercive strategies to deal with problems (Deater Deckard, 2003)

Can physical discipline be eliminated?

- Swedish experience. Outlawed
- Physical discipline banned in about 10 European countries
- Decrease in prevalence of child abuse and of deaths due to abuse (Durrant, 1996, 1999, 2003)



Alternatives

- Shift in public attitudes about accepting physical discipline as universal, optimal, desirable
- If “outlawed” what would take its place?
- Public awareness campaigns, rights of children, emotional life of the child, etc.