



## Research Article

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## Corporal Punishment: Effects on Children and the Society (Theological-Ethical Perspective)

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**Abstract:** Rash punishment of innocent children has really become the order of the day in most families and schools in Nigeria. The corporal punishment faced by children has yielded very little or no positive outcome from the children; some of the children experiencing the suffering have rather become more radical than expected. On that strength, they become useful instruments in the fermentation of trouble and promotion of conflicts in the family, school and in the society. The study therefore calls for due respect and strict adherence to the Scriptures and Fundamental Human rights with regard to children's rights. In carrying out this research, secondary sources were duly consulted. Recommendations are proffered on the best way forward in recognizing the rights of children, freeing them from corporal punishments and delivering them from being instruments of conflicts in the family and in the society at large.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; Children; Religions; Punishment; Conflicts.

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## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AND DISCIPLINE

Physical or corporal punishment is the use of force to cause pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control (Straus & Stewart, 1999). What should be noted with regards to physical punishment is unconscious injuries, wounds or deaths that sometimes take place in the course of physical punishment. Although researchers attempt to distinguish between physical punishment and abuse, there is no general agreement about the dividing line between physical punishment and physical abuse. Abusive and non-abusive parents differ mainly in how often and how severely they physically punish their children. Whether that physical punishment is purportedly for correcting children or not, there are accompanied effects.

Discipline is the guidance of children's moral, emotional and physical development, enabling children to take responsibility for themselves when they are older (Wissow, 2002). It involves teaching children the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable and it makes them aware of the values and actions that are acceptable in their family and society.

*Discipline* can be *positive*, for example, praising the child for doing something good or for stopping doing something inappropriate. Discipline can be *negative too*, for example, smacking a child for doing something wrong. Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behavior is unacceptable and other behavior is

acceptable. Negative discipline focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid something unpleasant.

A distinction is often made between "power-assertive" and "inductive" discipline. Power-assertive disciplinary methods involve following a child's inappropriate behavior with a negative consequence (smacking, threats, and withdrawal of privileges) without explanation or justification. Inductive methods involve setting limits, setting up logical consequences, reasoning and explanation (Holden, 2002). Power assertive disciplines have more negative effects than inductive method of discipline.

It is true that physical punishment leads to child aggression. More so, aggressive behavior is one of the causal variables that lead to the parental punishment. That is, noncompliant children elicit more punishment from their parents. However, aggressive behavior and parental punishment may be causal variable for each other.

The research on the effects of corporal punishment achieves a degree of consistency that is rare in social science (Holden, 2002). This research shows that there is a variety of negative long-term consequences of using physical punishment as a method of family discipline.

Gershoff (2002) found that corporal punishment was only associated with one desirable behavior, and this was immediate compliance. However, corporal punishment is also associated with

less compliance. Corporal punishment may only be effective for disobedient and disruptive children. Gershoff points out that most parents are not only interested in immediate compliance, but also want ongoing compliance.

Gershoff's Meta-analyses indicate that parental corporal punishment is associated with the following undesirable behaviors and experiences: decreased moral internalization, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behavior, decreased quality of relationship between parent and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behavior, decreased adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. Corporal punishment was associated with only one desirable behavior - increased immediate compliance (Gershoff, 2002).

Critics of Gershoff (2002) argue that the negative effects of corporal punishment are only associated with harsh, punitive discipline, which is "acknowledged by all experts to be detrimental to children's wellbeing and ethically unacceptable" (Baumrind *et al.*, 2002). These shall be discussed in details.

### **The Problems and Effects of Corporal Punishment**

The outcomes of corporal punishment include antisocial behavior, external behavior problems, low moral internalization, aggression, mental health problems, negative parent-child relationships, impaired cognitive ability, low self-esteem and risk of physical abuse from parents.

### **Physical Punishment Can Leave Psychological Marks**

Physical punishment on children may have adverse effects that may follow them into adulthood. The Psychosocial Trauma Support Service at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH, 2020) explains these effects: If one thinks shoving, caning or hitting a child will not leave a lasting psychological mark on him, he needs to think again (KKH, 2020).

### **The Psychological Impacts of Physical Punishment**

A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* suggests that children subjected to such punishments risk having mental health problems as adults. According to the Canadian researchers, these can show up as mood and anxiety disorders or substance abuse. They analyzed data from thousands of American adults in one of the first studies to look at the long-term effects of physical punishment on children even if the punishment was not major maltreatment or physical abuse (Healthxchange, 2020).

The study defined "harsh physical punishment" as pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping or

hitting by elders. It suggests that even if there is no major maltreatment or physical abuse, these punishments can psychologically affect a child in adulthood. The study found that 2 to 7 per cent of mental problems, including depression, bulimia, personality disorders and intellectual disabilities, were linked to such punishments in childhood. The findings are consistent with those of other studies on the effects of physical punishment on children, said Ms Lynn Soh, Senior Principal Psychologist at the Psychosocial Trauma Support Service, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH, 2020) - a member of the Sing Health group. Commenting on the study, she said as long as discipline involves hitting, slapping or smacking a child, it may increase the likelihood of negatively impacting his mental health as an adult (KKH, 2020).

The message sent to children through corporal punishment is one of aggression. It includes repeatedly telling a child that he is worthless, useless, unloved or unwanted, and threatening to use physical or psychological violence on him. This message of aggression, more than the actual physical punishment, has an important effect on a child's psychological health later in life. Ms Lynn Soh said physical punishment usually occurs with psychological aggression. If this continues over time the child internalizes a message of violence, and may grow up believing that physical aggression is okay in certain social situations. *"It's ironic to use physical punishment to teach a child not to be aggressive. It reduces his understanding of the rules and values being taught"* (KKH, 2020).

### **Physical Punishment Affects Children's Development**

A child may learn to fear punishment, rather than understand why he should follow rules, and so grow up with less ability to stop himself from misbehaving. Some children may interpret spanking as a sign that their parents do not love them, and this could lead to a strained relationship with their parents (Healthxchange, 2020).

A child, who is physically punished, without being told why, may develop poor self-esteem and this can make it difficult for him to adjust socially in school. "Poor self-esteem and low self-confidence can increase the likelihood of poor academic performance. The child may have difficulty concentrating, and this can reduce his potential to excel academically," said Ms Soh (KKH, 2020).

In a worst-case scenario, a child may even contemplate suicide. Parents are responsible for taking care of their children's material needs, and be role models who facilitate the healthy physical, mental, emotional and social growth of their kids (Healthxchange, 2020). Considering the adverse effects of physical punishment, it is important to look for

alternatives, said Ms Soh. "There are many non-violent ways to discipline or punish a child instead of hitting, smacking or spanking him" (KKH, 2020). The alternatives shall be discussed later.

### **Corporal Punishment Can Lead to Conflicts**

It is evident that most of the banditry and thugs are children who have undergone harsh treatments in their families or schools. They develop tough skin as a result of their experiences overtime. They are vulnerable to cultism and witchcraft initiation, since they can easily join gangs that could be detrimental to their spiritual life. More so, children that suffer physical punishment can possibly live a reckless and wayward life.

### **Consequently, As Adults Maltreat Children They Are At Increased Risk For Behavioral, Physical And Mental Health Problems Such As:**

- Perpetrating or being a victim of violence. They constantly involve in violence.
- Depression. They are depressed intellectually, psychologically, socially, physically and otherwise.
- Smoking. Children who went through harsh physical punishment can easily become smokers and drunkards.
- Malnutrition/Obesity. A child suffering from some forms of physical punishment can experience some forms of malnourishment or abnormal fatness.
- High-risk sexual behaviors. They are likely involved in high rate sexual promiscuity.
- Unintended pregnancy. The ladies get pregnant unexpectedly and untimely while the boys get ladies pregnant unprepared.
- Alcohol and drug misuse. Such children are prone to alcohol and drug addiction which continually make them wild.

Physical or corporal punishment may lead to injury, wound and conflict in the family and in the society at large which may also result to being in conflict with the Law. The term 'children in conflict with the law' refers to anyone under 18 who comes into contact with the justice system as a result of committing or being suspected or accused of committing an offence/crime.

## **LONG-TERM EFFECTS**

### **Abnormal Social Behavior**

Corporal punishment is associated with children's aggression and other antisocial behavior (towards peers, siblings and adults). Corporal punishment may legitimize violence for children in interpersonal relationships because they tend to internalize the social relations they experience (Vygotsky, 1978).

Ironically, the behavior that parents are most likely to intend to prevent when they physically punish children is exactly the behavior that they are likely strengthening. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1969) also suggests that physical punishment enables children to learn aggressive behavior through modeling. If parents try to modify their children's behavior through inflicting pain, then those children are likely to do the same to others when they want to influence other people's actions.

Parents spanking their children in the past are related to children's antisocial behavior, regardless of the children's prior levels of antisocial behavior. Low and common levels of spanking are associated with increase in antisocial behavior. This study suggests that the effect of punishment on behavior is not linear, and challenges the assumption that only frequent and severe punishment is associated with harmful effects.

### **Cognitive Effects**

A socio-cultural perspective on development suggests that children's cognitive development emerges out of social interactions. Social relationships such as early attachment to caregivers, friendships and collaborative learning between peers, and relationships between children and teachers, directly and indirectly influence children's learning and motivation to learn. The use of verbal methods of discipline through explanation and reasoning are likely to provide the child with more cognitive stimulation than the use of corporal punishment without induction (Straus, 2001).

Thus, poorer cognitive outcomes may result if parents who physically punish their children make less use of *inductive methods of discipline, such as explanation and reasoning* – procedures that are likely to enhance cognitive growth. It may also be that children who are anxious about being physically punished are inhibited from exploring their physical and social worlds, and therefore less likely to extend their cognitive skills.

Smith located seven studies from seven scholars (Cherian 1994; Jester *et al.*, 1999; Shumow *et al.*, 1998; Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Straus, 2001; Straus & Stewart, 1999) linking aspects of children's cognitive development to family discipline. These seven studies all show an association between harsh discipline and poorer academic achievement and/or cognitive development across a range of ages and ethnic groups. One of the seven studies (Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) focused on verbally punitive behavior and the other six studies focused on physical punishment.

A longitudinal study in Wisconsin public schools by Shumow *et al.* (1998) examined the relationships between parental discipline, children's academic achievement at school and teacher ratings of

behavioral adjustment to schools. He concluded that parental harshness was associated with poorer cognitive achievement (and social adjustment) in the school setting.

### **Defects Parent–Child Relationships**

One concern arising out of attachment theory is that the use of physical punishment can have an adverse effect on the quality of the relationships between children and their parents. Children's secured attachment is fostered by warm, positive parent–child interactions and negatively associated with harshly punitive interactions. Attachment is known to have an important influence on a wide variety of child development outcomes and social competence (Coyl *et al.*, 2002). Attachment security is vital for children's sense of wellbeing and their feelings of safety within and outside the boundaries of the family, and is a vital ingredient in the development of conscience (Laible & Thomson, 2000). Even the Bible instructs that parents should train up a child in the way he/she should go, so that when he/she is old, he/she will not depart from it (Bible, 1991). Corporal punishment is not the right method of disciplining children and therefore, not worth continuing.

Gershoff (2002) reviews 13 studies linking the use of physical punishment with the quality of parent–child relationships. The studies consistently showed that physical punishment was positively associated with poorer child–parent relationships.

Coyl *et al.* (2002) investigated factors that affected infant attachment security, *such as stressful events, maternal depression, negative parent–child interactions and corporal punishment*. The study included a measure of negative mother–child interactions. The study also showed that there was a direct path linking negative interactions and frequency of spanking to insecure infant attachment, but also that there was an indirect effect from maternal depression to insecure infant attachment mediated by negative interactions and frequency of spanking.

*Maternal depression* had the strongest negative effect on attachment security, followed by *negative interactions, frequency of spanking and relationship stress*. The study suggests that physical punishment and negative mother–infant interactions are more likely to take place when mothers are depressed and stressed, and these negative disciplinary techniques have an adverse effect on security of infant attachment.

A qualitative study by Russell of the views of New Zealand parents and parent-educators provides a graphic example of how family discipline can affect parent–child relationships. The study quotes a mother who made a conscious decision never to smack her own children:

*“My parents were very strict. I assumed everyone was being brought up the same. You will do as you're told and you won't question. My mother would use the wooden spoon; my father was more into bare hands. There were other things: go to your room, miss out on something. If you were naughty, they almost took it as a personal affront; they just seemed so offended by it, like you were insulting them. I was basically very good and I was hit frequently. I'm sure through being smacked it made me do so silly things without thinking. It made me go out and do the same thing again, what I'd been smacked for. The message I got from them when they hit me was not “what you're doing is bad, don't do it again”. The message I got was “we don't love you””* (Russell 1996). Corporal punishment and punitive parents' interaction with the children actually establish hatred and lack of love between the children and the parents.

### **Mental Health Problem**

Less visible than externalizing behavior, but equally serious is the development of internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and other mental health concerns. Such problems are often ignored and left untreated, and can have lifelong effects, including influencing the parenting of the next generation. According to Straus, mental health problems are associated with physical punishment due to their being an outcome of the suppression of childhood anger associated with being hit by adults who children depend on for love and nurturance.

Gershoff (2002) reviewed 12 studies of physical punishment and mental health in childhood, and eight studies of physical punishment and mental health in adulthood. He came up with the assertion that there was complete consistency in the findings of these studies that some mental health problems in childhood and adulthood are associated with the application of physical punishment some time ago.

Heaven & Goldstein (2001) surveyed 242 Anglo-Australian and Asian-Australian high school students about their parents' disciplinary style, and their own depression and self-esteem. Depression was significantly related to perceptions of parents' punitive statements and withdrawal of love. Among Anglo students, *low self-esteem was significantly related to low levels of inductiveness and high levels of love withdrawal*.

Students are more depressed, regardless of ethnicity, race or nationality, if they experience punitive and unaffectionate parenting. The effect of parental discipline on depression is mediated by low self-esteem in students. Punitive discipline has a more negative effect on internalizing behavior for girls than for boys.

### **Low Moral Internalization**

Social information processing theory (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994) suggests that the major long-term goal of family discipline is to help children internalize the values and attitudes of society to guide their own behavior. Moral regulation and internalization include sensitivity to wrongdoing and appropriate conduct, and the ability to restrain oneself from misbehavior and to correct damage (Kerr *et al.*, 2004).

Promoting internal control over behavior is an important goal in family discipline, and most experts regard it as much more important than immediate compliance. Many parents want their children to internalize such values, and they do not realize that the excessive use of power-assertive discipline in the absence of induction or explanation may have the opposite effect from what they wish to achieve. The power-assertive methods are not as effective as inductive discipline in promoting moral internalization. This has been shown in many studies discussed so far.

Gershoff's (2020) review supports the view that the use of physical punishment tends to lessen the chances that children will internalize parental rules and values. The use of physical punishment lowers the level of moral internalization.

Kochanska *et al.* (2001) carried out a longitudinal study of the development of self-regulation in children below four years of age. In the study, there were several significant negative correlations between the maternal use of power and children's committed compliance, as well as between the maternal use of power and children's independent compliance (when alone). The scholars argue that committed compliance is the first step towards internal control. It represents the conflict between children's wish to comply and their desire to be autonomous. Power-assertive disciplinary techniques do not support moral internalization.

### **Culture and Ethnicity influence on Corporal Punishment**

There has been considerable research into the relationship between culture and ethnicity, aspects of the parenting and disciplinary environment, and outcomes for children (Marshall, 2005). Several authors suggest that the effects of harsh disciplinary strategies, in particular physical punishment, may vary across social and cultural contexts (Horn *et al.*, 2004).

Deater-Deckard & Dodge (1997) argue that punishment has different meanings for some cultural groups, such as African-Americans, and that parent-child relationships are another important mediating factor. They contend that where physical punishment is a predominant and normative mode of discipline and where it is used in a controlled fashion in the context of a nurturing relationship, it is looked on as culturally

acceptable, and as a sign of good parenting, and that therefore the effects can be positive. Indeed, there are some studies supporting this view (Horn *et al.*, 2004).

However, different researchers concur that any moderating effects of ethnicity are only at ordinary or moderate levels of physical punishment. Extremely harsh discipline that shades into physical abuse is equally deleterious (harmful) for all children, regardless of culture. The negative consequences of severe physical punishment have been replicated across cultures (Marshall, 2005).

A recent study tested the hypothesis that in cultures where physical punishment is normative, the effects of it is less negative (Lansford *et al.*, 2005). Culture normalizing physical punishment refers to the extent to which family members within a culture perceive physical punishment as normal for their culture, and the extent to which families actually use it in that culture. Perceived normative status of corporal punishment moderates the association between punishment and child aggression and anxiety when applied.

That is, in cultural groups where physical punishment is more frequently used, adjustment problem is less severe. To put it another way, in countries where physical punishment is less common, children experience more harmful effects from physical punishment. Nevertheless, children who experienced physical punishment regardless of whether it was perceived as normative or not, is aggressive and anxious.

Even if a practice is sanctioned by a cultural group, it does not mean that the practice is necessarily acceptable. Regardless of where they live, children have rights and parents have responsibilities towards children. There are times where it may be necessary to apply a global standard to protect children from serious long-term harm. Thus, it is important not to take an extreme position on cultural relativism (Lansford *et al.*, 2005).

Corporal or physical punishment and abuse are ethically wrong and should be rejected by all culture, ethnic, society and Nations. Religious and hermeneutical approaches and teachings with regards to physical punishment on especially children should be redressed and modified. By so doing, the present and upcoming children shall be free of both the short and long term effects of this type of punishment in our society

## **CONCLUSION**

This research has established that there is little evidence to recommend retaining physical punishment

in the parental repertoire (acts) of discipline. Only one desirable outcome for child behavior has been associated with physical punishment – in some, but not all and this outcome is immediate compliance.

Even those who argue in favor of the use of physical punishment as a backup to other disciplinary strategies, such as reasoning and time out, suggest that it is only effective under severely limited conditions depending also on the age of the child, severity, timing and context among other things. When compliance is just as easily and effectively achieved with alternative inductive and positive methods of child rearing and milder forms of punishment, it is unnecessary, risky and unethical to use physical punishment.

Research on the long-term effects of physical punishment is consistent and overwhelmingly negative over a wide variety of child development outcomes. The use of physical punishment has been associated with many negative social outcomes, including aggression, disruptive behavior in school, and lack of acceptance by peers, crime and delinquency. Children's cognitive and intellectual developments are also adversely affected by parental use of physical punishment. Corporal punishment is linked to insecure attachment and poorer relationships between children and parents, and to a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

The overall goals of family discipline for most families are for children to internalize the values and attitudes that will lead to appropriate behavior, rather than relying on external monitoring and control. Research suggests that the use of physical punishment does the reverse, and inhibits the development of moral internalization. While the effects of physical punishment may be a little less severe when it is normative in a culture, the effects are still negative.

The use of physical punishment is deeply embedded in our culture and history, but it is a clear and preventable health risk for children. One very frequently used everyday argument in favor of corporal punishment is from people who say "I was spanked and I am okay".

The people who say this may be among the lucky ones who were not adversely affected by corporal punishment and perhaps the understanding of then wasn't as it is today with regards to the subject. Corporal punishment may not guarantee a harmful effect, but the more children experience corporal punishment and the more frequent and severe it is, the more they are at risk for problems like aggression and depression, regardless of their cultural background. The use of corporal punishment as a method of family discipline is a health risk for children – a risk to which parents might not expose their children if they understand the effects and harmful consequences.

However, the alternatives to corporal punishment amongst others are counseling, cautioning, teaching and guidance in love to effect inward reasoning, conviction, moral internalization and positive change in children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents, care-givers, school teachers are advised to apply the following disciplinary methods:

- Use inductive discipline method: Let the child understand and promise to change.
- Maintain parental consistency: Let the child know your expectations and consequences.
- Increase warmth parent-child relationship: Be friendly with the child.
- Apply soft and reasonable chastisement: Let your discipline be full of love.
- Parents may consult Psychologists for help: Psychologists or helpers may be consulted.
- Change your mind-set about physical punishment on children: Change mentality on this.

Parents, guardians, care-givers and all those who claim to be elderly to some other persons must desist from maltreating their juniors. They must think about the future of those young ones. They must save the children from future physical, mental, psychological, cognitive and social problems. Due discipline and respect must be accorded to children at all levels.

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