

**CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES WITH,  
AND CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARD,  
CORPORAL PUNISHMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present study was to determine, in a Canadian sample, the extent to which corporal or physical punishment use continues, personal experiences, and current attitudes. Of the 436 participants, 75% reported receiving physical punishment as children. Approximately 40% of participants agreed that corporal punishment is necessary as a means of discipline. Since parental attitude toward physical punishment has been determined to be an important predictor in its use with children, the authors recommend that parent education programming must include information related to its risks.

**INTRODUCTION**

In Canada, the practice of physical punishment as a strategy to control or correct the behaviour of children has a long history. Section 43 of the Canadian Criminal Code is a modified version of an eighteenth century British law (Lindfield, 1994/95) where physical force (such as physical punishment) by parents, or persons acting in place of parents, is allowed "within reason" for purposes of correction. Physical or corporal punishment has been defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviour" (Straus, 1994, p. 75). Under this definition, the parent's motivation in using physical punishment is to manage the child's behaviour, not to cause injury. However, it is acknowledged that this definition remains problematic because injury cannot always be assessed, for example, in retrospective reports, parental reports, and surveys.

In recent years the practice of physical punishment has been questioned as to its effectiveness and, perhaps more importantly, its potential harmfulness. Its use with children has been linked to many negative developmental outcomes, such as aggression (Azrin & Holz, 1966; Crick & Dodge, 1996; Parke & Slaby, 1983; Steinmetz, 1979), anti-social and criminal behaviour (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Rodgers, Rowe, & Chengchang, 1994; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997), negative effects on the parent-child relationship (Crockenberg, 1987; Feshbach, 1987; Redd, Morris, & Martin, 1975; Van Houten, 1983), and negative mental health effects such as depression and alcoholism (Holmes & Robins, 1988; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). In particular, concern has been raised regarding the role that physical punishment plays in

the emergence of child physical abuse and its related morbidity and mortality (Gil, 1979; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, 1994; Wolfe, 1991). According to an incidence study of child maltreatment in Canada (Trocme et al., 2001), 69% of substantiated physical abuse cases were the result of inappropriate punishment. Very young children are particularly vulnerable to physical injury because they do not have the physical capability to withstand the force that might be associated with physical punishment. Gelles and Straus (1979) determined that children aged 3 to 4 years comprise one of the peak age ranges for violent victimization because parents find verbal control, such as reasoning or ordering, to be ineffective. Since punishment is unlikely to be effective in modifying behaviour that is not under a child's control due to immature development, parental anger and further punishment are likely to occur (Reid, Patterson, & Loeber, 1982). As the intensity of physical punishment increases, so does the risk of injury to the child. Escalation of "ordinary" corporal punishment to abuse may occur because of the relatively ineffective and temporary effects of methods such as spanking, where the intensity of the punishment must be increased in order to obtain the desired behaviour. This increasingly intense response may lead to an injurious level of parental punishment (Parke, 1977).

Despite such findings, the use of physical punishment with children is not uncommon. An estimated 71% to 75% of Canadian parents (Durrant, 1994; Durrant, Rose-Krasnor, & Broberg, 1997) have used physical punishment with their children. Parent factors (such as childhood experience in receiving corporal punishment and attitudes about physical punishment) have been found to be associated with their use of physical punishment.

#### **Personal History of Physical Punishment.**

The intergenerational transmission of parenting practices, or influence of parents' own childhood experiences on their childrearing practices and attitudes, can be purposeful or unintentional (Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). The frequency of physical punishment received by parents in their own upbringing has been found to be a determinant of their approval (Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, & Babonis, 1994; Durrant, 1994; Ringwalt, Brown, Rosenbloom, Evans, & Kotch, 1989) and actual use of physical punishment (Buntain-Ricklefs et al., 1994; Graziano, Hamblen, & Plante, 1996; Holden & Zambarano, 1992; Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999; Socolar & Stein, 1995; Statin, Janson, Klackenberg-Larsson, & Magnusson, 1995; Straus, 1990). In addition, the frequency of spankings which parents received as children has been positively correlated with the frequency with which parents spank their own children (Hemenway, Solnick, & Carter, 1994).

In addition to the frequency of physical punishment, the specific types of discipline experienced in childhood can influence parents' approval of those disciplinary actions, including actions that can be considered abusive in nature (Belsky, 1978, 1980; Herzberger & Tennen, 1985; Kempe & Kempe, 1978; Parke & Collmer, 1975). In a survey of 679 college students regarding their childhood experiences with corporal punishment, 93% of the students reported that they were spanked as children, 87% of those spanked agreed that parents should have the right to spank children, and 83% indicated that they intended to spank their own future children. However, those who reported never having been spanked as children were significantly less accepting of spanking than those who reported having been spanked. The study's authors con-

cluded that the experience of being spanked as a child is associated with the greater acceptance of this practice (Graziano & Namaste, 1990).

However, in two Canadian studies (Ateah & Durrant, 2001; Durrant et al., 1997) although attitude toward physical punishment predicted its use, having experienced it in childhood did not. Therefore, a childhood history of receiving physical punishment does not necessarily translate into a parental use of physical punishment—perhaps because of the increasing public awareness of the potential risks of physical punishment use, of alternatives to physical punishment, and of the role of more proximal factors related to child misbehaviour incidents (such as parental anger and the type of behavioural transgression).

### **Approval of Physical Punishment**

It seems reasonable to assume that a positive or negative attitude toward physical punishment use would affect its utilization. For some childhood transgressions, such as continuing to misbehave after being told to stop or endangering self or others, the parental response of hitting children is a norm, even an expectation (Straus, 1994). According to Wauchope and Straus (1990), corporal punishment is so prevalent, particularly for preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years, that it is difficult to determine the role that approval plays in its use. For example, Straus (1994) concluded that almost all parents hit their four year old children, whether or not they “believe” in corporal punishment.

Other research has clearly demonstrated a positive relationship between the approval and use of physical punishment by parents. Holden and Zambarano (1992), for example, found strong intercorrelations between attitudes, intentions, and practices of physical punishment. Although a positive attitude toward physical punishment does not determine the rate of physical punishment use on its own, it has been found to be a significant predictor (Jackson et al., 1999; Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). Indeed, in two Canadian studies (Ateah & Durrant, 2001; Durrant et al., 1997), a positive attitude toward physical punishment was found to be the best predictor of its use. Socolar and Stein (1995) also found a strong correlation between the approval and practice of spanking and a weak correlation between anger and the practice of spanking, and suggest that approval may be more important than affect or impulse in explaining parental use of physical punishment.

### **Purpose**

Since many experts in child development (Gil, 1979; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, 1994) have argued that the societal sanctioning and prevalent use of physical punishment are primary causes of child physical abuse, the need to reduce its use in order to decrease rates of abuse has been identified. As discussed, the experience with and attitude toward physical punishment have both been associated with its use. In recent years, the issue of physical punishment use has been questioned and discussed more openly than in previous times; however, few studies have examined Canadians' attitudes toward physical punishment (Durrant, 1993-94; Durrant et al., 1997). It may indeed be that societal values are becoming less supportive toward the acceptance and practice of physical punishment. The purposes of this study, therefore, are: (a) to determine the extent to which physical punishment use continues in Canada, and (b) to examine personal experiences with and current attitudes towards physical punishment.

## METHOD

### Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used for this study. Data were collected in Spring, 2000 through the completion of questionnaires. Participants were undergraduate students at the Universities of Manitoba and British Columbia, and community members from British Columbia. Permission was secured by the investigator/author from each province. Professors were asked permission for class time to invite students to participate in a study on physical discipline involving the completion of a questionnaire which was anticipated to take approximately 10 minutes. Potential participants were informed that study participation was voluntary and anonymous. Student participants in British Columbia received one half-credit for filling out a questionnaire and a second half-credit for having a community member (non student) fill out a second questionnaire. In all other respects, collection procedures were similar in both provinces.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Ethics Review Committees at the Universities of Manitoba and British Columbia prior to contacting any departments, professors, or potential participants. The purpose of the study, its relevance, and the expectations of the subjects were explained verbally and in writing to participants. Respondents were informed that they could refuse to answer any question on the questionnaire and could withdraw from the study at any time. However, it is acknowledged that students who were given academic credits for participating may have experienced some pressure to participate. Participants were informed that, by completing and handing in the questionnaire, they were agreeing to take part in the study. Participants were assured that, since no names were requested on the questionnaire, all responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Respondents who desired a copy of the summary of the research report were invited to complete an address form, detach it, and hand it in to the individual who was collecting the questionnaires.

To maintain the anonymity of participants, no names appeared on the questionnaires. Only the researchers and research assistants had access to the original questionnaires. Address forms from respondents who requested a summary of the final research report were kept separate from the questionnaires. No perceived harmful effects of the study were anticipated, although participants were informed that there was a risk that the recall of childhood disciplinary experiences had the potential to cause some discomfort or anxiety. Subjects were informed that, if this did happen, they could access counselling services.

### Instrument

The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire developed by Hyman (Grant, Parkin, Ateah, & Hyman, 2000) as part of an international, cross-cultural study of college and university students which compared their experiences and attitudes in relation to physical punishment. The 32-item questionnaire was primarily made up

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of multiple choice questions focusing on demographics and childhood experiences with/current attitudes toward physical punishment. Further questions on attitudes toward physical punishment included responses on a 5 point Likert-type scale. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

**Sample Characteristics**

The final sample consisted of 436 participants, approximately equal numbers from each province. Table 1 summarizes sample characteristics. Approximately two thirds of respondents were aged 21 years or less, and the majority of respondents were female (70%). Regarding financial background, most respondents (92.7%) indicated that they were raised in homes that were about the same or better off than most other households. Most respondents (84.6%) were raised by both biological parents.

**TABLE 1**  
**Sample Characteristics of Participants (N = 436)**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Province		
Manitoba	217	49.8
British Columbia	219	50.2
Age		
Under 18 years	18	4.2
18 to 19 years	175	40.4
20 to 21 years	86	19.9
22 to 30 years	68	15.7
Over 30 years	86	19.9
Missing	3	.7
Gender		
Male	132	30.4
Female	302	69.6
Missing	2	.5
Childhood Family Home Income Compared to Most Other Households		
Better off	225	51.6
About the same	179	41.1
Worse off	32	7.3
Raised Primarily by		
Both biological parents	368	84.6
One biological parent	34	7.8
One biological and one step parent	19	4.4
Other	14	3.2
Missing	1	.2

**Analysis**

This study is concerned with childhood experiences with and current attitudes toward the use of physical punishment. Respondents' childhood experiences with and level of support for the use of physical punishment were analyzed to determine: (a) the

relationship between them, and (b) the relationship between them and a number of demographic factors.

## RESULTS

### Experience with Receiving Physical Punishment

Seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents reported having received physical punishment as children (Table 2). Almost 60% of those respondents who had experienced physical punishment indicated that it had been administered by both parents; the remaining 40% of respondents were divided fairly equally between those who had received the physical punishment from their mothers and those whose fathers had physically punished them. Over half of those who had received physical punishment as a child recalled first receiving it under 6 years of age, while just over 40% recalled first receiving physical punishment between the ages of 6 and 10 years. Almost two-thirds of respondents who had received physical punishment recalled receiving the most physical punishment between 6 and 10 years of age.

Of the 327 respondents who indicated that they received physical punishment as children, most (84%) reported being spanked, while 63% reported being slapped on the body, 37% reported being slapped on the head, 12% reported receiving shaking, 18% reported being whipped, and 34% reported being hit with an object.

### Group Differences

The sample was divided between those respondents who reported receiving physical punishment in childhood and those who did not. The following characteristics did not differ between the two groups: (a) age ( $U = 15872$ ,  $p = .16$ ); (b) gender ( $X^2 = .33$ ,  $p = .57$ ); and (c) family income ( $U = 15904$ ,  $p = .10$ ).

### Attitude toward Physical Punishment

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with a number of statements related to physical punishment use with children, according to a 5 point Likert-type scale (strongly agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, strongly disagree). For the purposes of analysis, these categories were collapsed to the categories of agree, neutral, and disagree. Due to correlations between responses to the statements, "Corporal punishment is necessary as a means of discipline," "Corporal punishment at home is justified," and "If you spare the rod you spoil the child" ( $r$ 's ranged from .47 to .66,  $p = .000$  in all cases), only the first statement was used in subsequent analyses. Approximately forty percent (40.4%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "Corporal punishment is necessary as a means of discipline," while 43.8% disagreed and 15.1% neither disagreed nor agreed (Table 3).

### Group Differences

There were a number of demographic variables for which there were no differences between those individuals who indicated agreement, neutrality, or disagreement with the statement indicating the necessity of using corporal punishment with children. These are: (a) age ( $X^2 = 7.64$ ,  $p = .47$ ); (b) gender ( $X^2 = 1.02$ ,  $p = .60$ ); and (c) family income ( $X^2 = 2.63$ ,  $p = .96$ ). In addition, parental childhood ex-

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periences of physical punishment did not result in group differences in current attitude toward the use of physical punishment with children ( $X^2 = 2.29, p = .32$ ). However, the type of physical punishment received appears to influence support for its use. For example, respondents who reported being spanked, which is generally considered to be a mild form of punishment, were more likely to report a positive attitude toward

**TABLE 2**  
**Experience with Receiving Physical Punishment ( $N = 436$ )**

	Frequency	Percent
Received Physical Punishment as a Child		
Yes	327	75.2
No	108	24.8
Missing	1	.2
Who Gave the Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Mother	64	14.7
Father	69	15.8
Both	189	57.8
Other	5	1.5
Age Recalled First Receiving Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Under 6 years	177	54.5
6-10 years	136	41.8
11-15 years	11	3.4
Over 15 years	1	.3
Missing	2	.6
Age Recalled Receiving the Most Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Under 6 years	62	18.9
6-10 years	215	65.7
11-15 years	40	12.2
Over 15 years	3	.9
Missing	7	2.1
Received Spanking as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	275	84.1
No	52	14.9
Received Slapping on Body as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	206	63.0
No	121	37.0
Received Slapping on Head as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	120	36.6
No	207	63.3
Received Shaking as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	38	11.6
No	289	88.4
Received Whipping as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	59	18.0
No	268	81.9
Was Hit with an Object as Physical Punishment ( $n = 327$ )		
Yes	112	34.3

No 215 65.7

physical punishment than those who reported receiving one or more of the other forms of physical punishment listed, most of which may be considered as more harsh in nature than spanking ( $X^2 = 10.10, p = .006$ ). However, there was no group difference in attitude toward physical punishment among those who had been more harshly disciplined such as those who reported being whipped ( $X^2 = 1.12, p = .57$ ).

**TABLE 3**  
**Attitude toward Physical Punishment ( $N = 436$ )**

	Frequency	Percent
Physical Punishment Is Necessary as a Means of Discipline		
Agree	176	40.4
Neither agree nor disagree	66	15.1
Disagree	191	43.8
Missing	3	.7

## DISCUSSION

### Experience with Receiving Physical Punishment

Seventy-five percent (75%) of respondents in this study reported having received physical punishment as children. These findings are somewhat lower than previous studies on Canadians' experiences with receiving physical punishment in childhood: 88% of Durrant's (1993-4) respondents and 91% of Ateah and Durrant's (2001) respondents reported receiving physical punishment as children. This lower percentage may reflect a decreasing trend toward the use of physical punishment in light of increasing public discussion and awareness of the issue.

Regarding the type of physical punishment experienced by those who reported receiving it, the majority reporting being spanked (84%) or slapped (63%), which is consistent with documentation that identified spanking and slapping as the most common form of physical punishment. The reported frequency of two other forms of physical punishment identified, whipping (18%) and being hit with an object (34%), are higher than expected, since these are not usually considered common forms of physical punishment and generally may be more likely than spanking to be considered abusive in nature.

The finding that most respondents recall first receiving physical punishment under the age of six years is convergent with previous research findings. However, the finding that most respondents reported experiencing the most physical punishment between the ages of 6 and 10 years is divergent from previous research, which indi-



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cates that physical punishment is most likely to occur during the preschool years (Jackson et al., 1999; Wauchope & Straus, 1990). However, memories of preschool-age years may not be as clear as memories of school-age years.

### **Attitude toward Physical Punishment**

Approximately 40% of respondents agreed with the statement that "Corporal punishment is necessary as a means of discipline." This finding is convergent with findings by Ateah and Durrant (2001), where 42% of parents agreed with a similar statement. Durrant et al. (1997) also found that approximately 62% of respondents disagreed that physical punishment was never necessary—which suggests that the remainder were either in agreement with or neutral regarding the necessity of physical punishment of children.

Those respondents who had received milder forms of physical punishment, such as spanking, were more likely to have a positive attitude toward physical punishment than those who reported being physically punished, but not spanked. However, there was no difference in support of physical punishment among those who had reported experiencing more severe forms of physical punishment, such as whipping.

## CONCLUSIONS

Attitude toward physical punishment has been demonstrated in many previous studies to be an important predictor in its use with children. Findings from this study have demonstrated that having received physical punishment as a child does not automatically mean that one will develop a positive attitude toward physical punishment with children. Clearly, there are other factors affecting attitudes toward and/or decisions to use physical punishment with children.

The focus of this study was on personal factors related to use of physical punishment, rather than any situational factors. The fact that over half of the respondents either agreed with (40.4%), or were neutral toward (15.1%), the statement that physical punishment is necessary clearly indicates that there continues to be substantial support for its use. In addition to personal background, other factors related to physical punishment use which are more situational in nature (such as maternal anger and the type of behavioural transgression) also have been reported to be predictors of physical punishment in other research (Ateah & Durrant, 2001). Therefore, in order to decrease the use of physical punishment, public education programs ideally should: (a) be multifaceted, (b) include information on the risks of physical punishment, (c) be directed at changing attitudes, and (d) provide content on normal child behaviour and anger-management strategies.

Parent education intervention strategies directed at altering attitudes toward physical punishment and ultimately decreasing its use require research-based program development and evaluation. In addition, health care professionals (nurses, physicians, social workers, and psychologists) who work with parents need to become aware of the harmful effects of using physical punishment and to urge parents to practice non-physical disciplinary strategies with their children.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le but de la présente étude devaient déterminer, dans un échantillon canadien, le point auquel utilisation corporelle de punition continue, des expériences personnelles, et les attitudes courantes. Des 436 participants, 75 % a rapporté recevoir la punition physique comme enfants. Approximativement 40% de participants a convenu que la punition corporelle est nécessaire en tant que des moyens de discipline. Puisque l'attitude parentale envers la punition physique a été déterminée pour être un prédiscur important dans son utilisation avec des enfants, les auteurs recommandent que la programmation d'éducation de parent doit inclure l'information liée à ses risques.

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