

## Corporal Punishment from the Children's Point of View

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### Abstract

Corporal punishment (CP) is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for purposes of correcting or controlling the child's behavior. Across decades of researches, corporal punishment has been implicated in the etiology of criminal and antisocial behaviors by both children and adults.

**Aim of the study:** The aim of the study was to assess corporal punishment from the children's point of view.

**Methodology:** Descriptive design was used. Non-probability "Quota" sampling was used in order to obtain a representative sample (300 children) from the 3 levels in two intermediate schools. A questionnaire was developed by the researchers after reviewing of literature.

**Results:** Three hundred children participated in the research equally presented by gender and three intermediate educational levels. Fifty-two percent of the participants reported that they experienced corporal punishment; 60.2% of them did not remember the last time while corporal punishment was reported today by 12.8% and last week by 18% of them. About half of the participants were punished by their fathers and around 48.1% of the participants were punished by hands followed by use of stick (43%). Misbehavior, incomplete homework, missing prayer and bad school performance were the reasons for corporal punishment (39.1%, 15.4%, 9% and 7.7% respectively). No statistical significant differences were found in relation to the use of corporal punishment and family size, father's employment or parent's health status. Most of the participants reported that they will not use CP in future with their children.

**Conclusion:** The study revealed that 52% of the participants experienced corporal punishment; about half of the participants were punished by their fathers and around 48.1% of the participants were punished by hands followed by stick (43%).

**Keywords:** Corporal punishment; Physical abuse; Physical injury

### Background

Corporal punishment (CP) is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction or controlling child's behaviors. Examples of CP include spanking, slapping, smacking, or grabbing a child. As compared to physical abuse, by definition, CP does not produce physical injury. Corporal punishment (CP) is probably the most controversial issue in the literature on parental discipline [1]. The debate over the appropriateness of this form of discipline has been detailed extensively in terms of moral, religious, and political foundations. The intensity of the debate is illustrated by the fact that, for some, corporal punishment is a moral imperative for parents and a necessary aspect of parents' obligation to discipline their children; for others, the use of corporal punishment is an act of aggression that should be banned by law [2].

Parental use of corporal punishment (i.e. spanking or hitting a child for a transgression) is a common method of disciplining children. Many parents believe that their children intentionally misbehave and need to learn to respect the parents' authority to avoid long-term behavior problems [3]. The goal of these parents is to stop children

from misbehaving immediately. A meta-analysis by Gershoff [4] confirmed that corporal punishment leads to short-term compliance. Indeed, researchers have reported that over 94% of the parents of toddlers use some form of corporal punishment and that 75% of college students sample reported experiencing some form of corporal punishment in their childhood [2].

A global prospective of Corporal punishment in nine countries; China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States revealed that 54% of girls and 58% of boys had experienced mild corporal punishment. While 13% of girls and 14% of boys had experienced severe corporal punishment by their parents or someone in their household in the last month [5]. Both mothers' and fathers' use of corporal punishment were associated with greater youth externalizing behavior.

Additionally, increases in positive parenting practices, such as parental warmth and family involvement, were met with decreases in youth externalizing behavior when controlling for youth demographics, family socioeconomic status, and parents' use of corporal punishment [6]. Furthermore, a study by Hecker et al. [3] revealed that all types of externalizing problems (current and lifetime aggressive behavior, conduct problems and hyperactivity) correlated positively with corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment has subsequent negative child's outcomes as indicated by the results of many researches. Gershoff[4] indicating that corporal punishment does no good and may even cause harm. Maternal reports of harsh corporal discipline were associated with teacher reports of poor school performance with this cross-informant effect ruling out the sort of rater bias in which a negative mother is not only harsh to her child but also disparages her child's academic ability [7].

Furthermore, corporal punishment could adversely affect cognitive ability. Being slapped or spanked is a frightening and threatening event that children experience as highly stressful. Fright and stress can result in cognitive deficits such as erroneous or limited coding of events and diminished elaboration. There is now evidence that frequent and severe CP is associated with adverse changes in brain structure [8]. The association between corporal punishment and children's aggression is one of the most studied and debated findings in the child-rearing literature. Over the years, several reviews of the literature have concluded that corporal punishment is associated with increases in children's aggressive behaviors. Corporal punishment has been hypothesized to predict increases in children's aggression because it models aggression, promotes hostile attributions, which predict violent behavior, and initiates coercive cycles of aversive behaviors between parent and child. Early experiences with corporal punishment may model and legitimize many types of violence throughout an individual's life, particularly violence in romantic relationships [4].

Across decades of researches, corporal punishment has been implicated in the etiology of criminal and antisocial behaviors by both children and adults. Attribution theory posits that associations between corporal punishment and child delinquent or antisocial behavior result from an inability of corporal punishment to facilitate children's internalization of morals and values. Social control theory suggests that parental corporal punishment erodes the parent-child relationship and in turn decreases children's motivation to internalize parent's values and those of the society, which in turn result in low self-control [4]. For long term effect, corporal punishment can lead to violent behavior to spouse and increase violent behavior in the society [9]. Vittrup and Holden [10] investigated which variables impact children's evaluations of discipline. Age has been found to be an important determinant of children's evaluations. Preschool children viewed spanking as acceptable for any transgression, whereas fifth graders were less willing to accept this form of discipline and only found it acceptable for prudential violations (behaviors that pose a threat or danger to oneself) and moral violations (behaviors that involve harm to others or violate certain rights). Younger children tend to consider reprimands to be an authority figure's affirmation of transcendental, immanent morality and therefore accept punishment more readily across situations. As children's cognitive abilities expand, their reasoning skills increase, their sense of autonomy grows, and they are likely to view adults as less fear evoking and having limitations to their authority. Thus, older children are less likely to consider spanking and other manifestations of coercion to be legitimate and fair forms of discipline.

In countries throughout the world, child rights and safety are a concern. Saudi Arabia is no different and recent developments within the Kingdom have brought about programs which highlight the priority of promoting attention to domestic violence and child abuse or neglect. Recently The National Family Safety Program (NFSP) was established in 2005 by royal decree of the King with the intention to prevent child maltreatment and domestic violence in the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia (KSA) [11]. The aim of the NFSP is to provide a centralized database for child abuse cases all over the kingdom [11,12]. There is no clear prohibition of corporal punishment to children in the objectives or activities of the program.

The final report of the United Nation (UN) Study on Violence against Children in 2006 recommended that violence against children, including all corporal punishment. But the years have also been marked by a delay in taking action. The vast majority of the world's children are still not legally protected from all corporal punishment. Eliminating corporal punishment and all other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment of children requires other sustained educational measures. But without the foundation of clear and explicit prohibition, children's human rights simply cannot be fulfilled [13]. A Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of parenting programs to prevent corporal punishment were done by Santini and Williams [14] using data base from 1994 to 2014. One Brazilian study and eight international studies were selected.

All studies indicated satisfactory results in decreasing aggression by parents against their children. The number of studies aiming to estimate the corporal punishment in a given population has been increasing rapidly over the past decade. Most of the early studies were based on samples from Western nations, particularly the United States. Most of the studies investigate the corporal punishment from parent perspective, few concentrates on children. The use of corporal punishment is the starting point to physical abuse and it is against convention on the rights of children. Furthermore, Islamic rules prohibited use of violence in rearing children. The current study assesses the corporal punishment from children's point of view. The results can be added to the body of knowledge and can be used as evidence to prevention of physical abuse among children.

### **Aim of the study**

The aim of the study was to assess corporal punishment from children's point of view.

### **Specific objectives**

- To identify the prevalence of corporal punishment among children.
- To describe child's perception toward corporal punishment.
- To correlate the relationship between using of corporal punishment and children's demographic variables.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### **Study area/setting**

The study was conducted at 2 intermediate schools (male and female) in Jeddah-Saudi Arabia.

#### **Study subjects**

The sample included children from the three levels of intermediate school.

#### **Inclusion criteria**

Children from the 3 levels in the intermediates schools and were willing to participate in the study.

### Sample size

Total of 300 children from 2 intermediate schools was recruited for the study as follow: 50 children (males and females) from each level.

### Sampling technique

Non-probability “Quota” sampling was used in order to obtain a representative sample from the 3 levels in the intermediate schools. Quota sampling refers to a form of non-probability sampling in which knowledge about population of interest was used to build some representativeness into the sample. A quota sample identifies the strata of the population and proportionally represents the strata in the sample [15]. The researchers visited the available school and explained the objectives of the study to the school principals. The students of the free classes were recruited for the study until the required number from each level was recruited.

### Data collection methods and instruments used

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers, after reviewing the literature. It includes two parts:

**Part 1:** includes demographic data such as age, sex, educational level

**Part 2:** includes questions related to children experiences of corporal punishment.

The questionnaire was tested for validity by asking the experts in the field to assess relevancy and necessary modifications were done. Reliability was 0.832 by using Cronbach's Alpha test. The researchers distributed the questionnaire to the recruited participants who were willing to participate after asking them to sign the informed assent. To minimize the possibility of bias the researchers ensured the respondents received standardized instructions on how to complete the questionnaire.

### Data management and analysis plan

Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS version 18.0) was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics was calculated to describe the demographical characteristics of the respondents. In addition to this, the relationship between corporal punishment experiences and demographical characteristics analysis was done by using Chi-Square test. The significance level was pre-set at P<0.05.

### Ethical considerations

The researchers submitted the research proposal and questionnaire to the Research Committees of the College of Nursing-Jeddah for review and to obtain a permission to conduct the study. All the respondents were fully informed about the research purpose, the nature of the study. All respondents were required to indicate their willingness to participate in the study by signing a consent form and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was ensured in this study by using code names rather than respondents' real names during data collection and analysis. The questionnaire used for data collection was handled only by the research team.

### Results

Table 1 represents demographic characteristic of children. Three hundred children participated in the research that was equally distributed between males and females. Their age ranged from 12-18

with the mean age of 14.52 ± 1.38. First, second and third intermediate educational levels were equally presented by the participants. Most of participants lived with their parents. In addition, 80% of participants' fathers were employed. Most of the parents were free from physical and mental illness (86.7% for fathers and 94% for mothers). About half of the participants had a middle sized family while 28.6% of them had large sized family.

	N=300	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	150	50
Females	150	50
<b>Age</b>		
Min-Max: 12-18		
Mean ± SD: 14.52 ± 1.38		
<b>Level of Education</b>		
First intermediate	100	33.33
Second intermediate	100	33.33
Third intermediate	100	33.33
<b>Child ranking in family</b>		
3-5	223	74.33
6-8	57	19
9-more	20	6.7
<b>The child live with</b>		
With both parents	236	87.7
With Single parent	37	12.3
<b>Father's employment</b>		
Employment	240	80
Unemployment	60	20
<b>Father's health status</b>		
Has physical or mental disease	40	13.3
Does not have physical or mental illness	260	86.7
<b>Mother's health status</b>		
Has physical or mental disease	18	6
Does not have physical or mental illness	282	94
<b>Size of Family (members/house)</b>		
Small sized family (3-5)	68	22.6
Middle sized family (6-8)	146	48.6
Large sized family (9-more)	86	28.6

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristic of children.

Table 2 illustrates experiences of corporal punishment (CP) among participants. Fifty two percent of the participants reported that they experienced corporal punishment, 60.2% of them did not remember the last time while corporal punishment was reported today by 12.8% and last week by 18% of them. About half of participants were punished by their fathers then teachers (22.4% and mothers 12.8%). As regards to the tools used in CP, around 48.1% of participants were punished by hands followed by stick (43%). Corporal punishment

leaved marks in 13.5% of participants and other 11.5% had to be taken to the hospital in 11.5% of them. Misbehavior, incomplete homework, missing prayer and bad school marks were the reasons of corporal punishment (39.1%, 15.4%, 9% and 7.7% respectively). About one third of the participants who were punished did nothing after CP while about 28% of them either cried or isolated themselves in their rooms. In addition, about three quarters of them did not experience CP in front of strangers.

	N=300	%
<b>Experiences of CP among participants</b>		
Yes	156	52
No	144	48
	<b>N=156</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Last time of CP</b>		
Today	20	12.8
Last week	28	18
Last month	14	9
I didn't remember	94	60.2
<b>The person who usually punishes the child</b>		
Father	74	47.5
Mother	20	12.8
Grandfather / Grandmother	2	1.3
Teacher	35	22.4
Another person	25	16
<b>Tools used in corporal punishment</b>		
Hand	75	48.1
Stick	67	43
Another tool	14	8.9
<b>If corporal punishment left any marks</b>		
Yes	21	13.5
No	100	64.1
Sometimes	35	22.4
<b>They need to go to the hospital because of CP</b>		
Yes	18	11.5
No	138	88.5
<b>Reasons for corporal punishment</b>		
Without any reason	23	14.7
Misbehavior	61	39.1
Didn't finish homework	24	15.4

Poor school performance	12	7.7
Missing a prayer	14	9
Other reasons	22	14.1
<b>Participant reaction after CP</b>		
Do nothing	54	34.6
Cry	45	28.9
Isolate in his/her room	44	28.2
The disposal of another	13	8.3
<b>Experiences of CP in front of strangers</b>		
Yes	21	13.50%
No	118	75.60%
Sometimes	17	10.90%

**Table 2:** Experiences of corporal punishment (CP) among participants.

Children's perception of CP	N	%
<b>Do you think that CP can affect the academic level of the child?</b>		
Yes	188	62.70%
No	69	23%
Sometimes	43	14.30%
<b>Do you think that CP is the best way for change the bad behavior?</b>		
Yes	31	10.30%
No	204	68%
Sometimes	65	21.70%
<b>From your point of view what is the ideal way to change inappropriate behavior?</b>		
Keep the behavior as it	14	4.70%
Reasoning	196	65.30%
Wrangle	12	4%
Withdrawal of privilege	74	24.70%
Another way	4	1.30%
<b>In future, will you practice CP with your children?</b>		
Yes	14	4.70%
No	250	83.30%
Sometimes	36	12%

**Table 3:** Children's perception of corporal punishment (CP).

Table 3 presents participants' perception about corporal punishment. About sixty-three percent of participants reported that CP can affect the academic performance and 68% of them agreed that

CP is not the best way to change the bad behavior and 65.3% of them think that the reasoning is the ideal way to change the inappropriate behavior. Most of the participants reported that they will not use CP in future with their children.

The results revealed that among the participants who reported that they experienced CP, more than two thirds (67.9%) of them were males. The results revealed males experienced corporal punishment more than females and the differences were statistically significant as presented in Table 4.

Experiences of CP	Gender		Total	Chi - square
	Males	Females		
Yes	106	50	156	0.000
	67.90%	32.10%	52%	
No	44	100	144	
	30.60%	69.40%	48%	
Total	150	150	300	
	100%	100%	100%	

Statistically significant at P ≤ 0.05.

**Table 4:** Relationship between experiences of corporal punishment (CP) and participants' gender.

The relationship between experiences of corporal punishment and to employment of fathers was presented in Table 5. It was found that use of CP among unemployed fathers was more than employed fathers but differences are not statistically significant. Table 6 presents the relationship between experience of CP and family size.

The results revealed that the use of CP among middle sized families is slightly less than large and small sized families, although the differences were not statistically significant.

Experiences of CP	Father's employment		Total	Chi - square
	Yes	No		
Yes	106	50	156	0.107
	67.90%	32.10%	52%	
No	44	100	144	
	30.60%	69.40%	48%	
Total	150	150	300	
	100%	100%	100%	

Statistically significant at P ≤ 0.05.

**Table 5:** Relationship between experiences of corporal punishment (CP) and fathers' employment.

Using corporal punishment among parents with chronic physical or mental disease (fathers 62.5%, mothers 61.1%) was greater than the parent without chronic physical or mental disease (fathers 50.4%,

mothers 51.4%), and the differences were not statistically significant as presented in Table 7.

Experiences of CP	Family Size			Total	Chi-square
	Small Size	Middle size	Large size		
Yes	36	72	48	156	0.623
	52.90%	49.30%	55.80%	52%	
No	32	74	38	144	
	47.10%	50.70%	44.20%	48%	
Total	68	146	86	300	
	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Statistically significant at P ≤ 0.05.

**Table 6:** Relationship between experiences of corporal punishment (CP) and family size.

Experiences of CP	Mothers health status			Father health status		
	With chronic physical or mental	Without chronic physical or mental	Total	With chronic physical or mental	Without chronic physical or mental	Total
Yes	25	131	156	11	145	156
	62.50%	50.40%	52%	61.10%	51.40%	52%
No	15	129	144	7	137	144
	37.50%	49.60%	48%	38.90%	48.60%	48%
Total	40	260	300	18	282	300
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Chi-square	0.104			0.291		

Statistically significant at P ≤ 0.05.

**Table 7:** Relationship between experiences of corporal punishment (CP) and parents' health status.

Experience CP	Perception of participant using CP in future with their children			Total	Chi-square
	Yes	No	Sometimes		
Yes	9	117	30	156	0
	5.80%	75%	19.20%	100%	
No	5	133	6	144	
	3.50%	92.40%	4.20%	100%	
Total	14	250	36	300	
	4.70%	83.30%	12%	100%	

Statistically significant at P ≤ 0.05.

**Table 8:** Relationship between experiences of CP among participants and their acceptance to use it in the future with their children.

Table 8 presents the relationship between experiences of CP among participants and their acceptance to use it in the future with their children. The majority of the participants who never experienced CP (92.4%) reported that they will not use CP in future with their children compared with 75% of participants who experienced CP and the differences were statistically significant.

### Discussion

Studies have shown that corporal punishment against children is a common child rearing practice, causing damage to child development [14]. Using corporal punishment is the single most controversial and emotionally charged topic in parent-child relationships [16]. Aggression, behavioral deviance, physical abuse, substance abuse and criminal activities can be the undesirable outcomes of corporal punishment [17]. Recently, CP is considered to be violence against children [18]. The current study aimed to assess corporal punishment from children's point of view.

The results of the current study revealed that 52% of participants experienced corporal punishment. This prevalence is lower than the results of study done by Ateah and Parker [19] which indicated that 75% of college students sample reported experiencing some forms of corporal punishment in their childhood [19]. Furthermore, results revealed that 80% of mothers used CP to bring their children up [17]. Moreover, the majority of American parents discipline their children physically. Over 90% report having used corporal punishment at least once [20].

In a systemic review done by Appleton and Stanley [21], mothers were reported to use physical punishment more than the father. Unlike the results of the current study, fathers (47.5%) were reported by the participants to use corporal punishment more than mothers (12.8%). This may be attributed to the culture in the Arab world that accepts the corporal punishment as a way of modifying the misbehavior and compliance to the parents' authority. Furthermore, role of father in Arab world and culture view of the family as the private sphere and under male control.

WHO [22] reported that large family size is one of the risk factors for child's physical abuse. This in agreement with who found that large family size was associated with harsh corporal punishment in Yamen. On the other hand, the results of the current study revealed that no statistical significant differences were found between using corporal punishment and family size. Furthermore, the results revealed that the use of corporal punishment among middle sized families was less than among small and large sized families.

As regards to the tools used in corporal punishment, the use of hands was reported by 48.1% of participants in the current study followed by the use of stick 43%. While the results by Alyahria and Goodman [7] revealed that all mothers described hitting their children with their hand in urban area.

In the current study, when participants were asked to select the single best method that could help in changing the misbehavior, reasoning was the most frequently chosen by them (65.3%) followed by withdrawal of privileges (24.7%). This is in accordance with Vittrup and Holden [10,16]. Although the age of their participants was younger than the age of participants in the current study (6-10 years), reasoning was the most frequently chosen method as reported by 37% of participants followed by withdrawal of privilege as reported by 27% of them. Furthermore, Gershoff's [4] meta-analytic review findings revealed that spanking may be effective in obtaining immediate compliance, but it is not effective in eliciting long term internalization. The interpretations of these results direct us to the importance of using reasoning to direct the children misbehavior.

In the current study, 13.5% of the participants reported that the corporal punishment left marks and 11.5% of them reported that they had to go to the hospital because of it. These results indicated that corporal punishment could lead to physical abuse. This is in agreement with Donoso and Ricas [18] who reported that when the physical punishment fails to produce the results desired by the child-rearer, the tendency is to increase the intensity and frequency, leading to a vicious circle that may result in tragic situation. Furthermore, Gershoff [4] reported that physical abuse is the potential outcome of the corporal punishment.

Males experienced corporal punishment more than females and the differences were statistically significant. This is in agreement with the results of Lansford et al. [5] who studied the corporal punishment of

children in nine countries and revealed that boys were more frequently punished corporally than were girls.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that fifty-two percent of participants reported that they experienced corporal punishment. It provides the evidence of using corporal punishment and the tools used. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for the public awareness about children's rights as well as avoids use of CP.

## Recommendations

Develop awareness programs that prohibit corporal punishment in all settings as schools, primary health care, clinics, etc.

Increase awareness among parents about child rearing and the ways to modify the children behaviors rather than corporal punishment.

## Limitation of the study

The sample size is considered one of the study's limitations. The second limitation is sampling technique as the researchers recruited the available schools and students with free classes. Therefore, a more comprehensive study is needed with large sample size and random selection of the schools and participants for generalization of the results.

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