

## Does Childhood Physical Punishment Predispose to a “Victim Personality”?

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### Abstract

**Background:** In a previous study, victimization to childhood physical punishment (CPP) was found to be a risk factor for becoming also a victim of school bullying. This finding was replicated and investigated further in two separate studies with adolescents as subjects.

**Study I:** Finnish adolescents ( $N=1,247$ , 611 girls, 636 boys;  $M$  age=14.0,  $SD=0.9$  yrs) served as subjects in a quantitative self report survey. A relationship was found between CPP and victimization to both traditional bullying and cyber aggression, but also between CPP and perpetration of cyber aggression. The finding prompted the need to include measures of perpetration of traditional school aggression into the study design.

**Study II:** In a follow-up survey ( $N=620$ , 296 girls, 324 boys;  $M$  age=13.1,  $SD=1.6$  yrs), CPP was found to correlate with victimization to all measured forms of school aggression (physical, verbal, indirect, cyber), but also with perpetration of all of these.

**Discussion:** The results suggest that CPP may predispose to not only victimization but also to perpetration of school aggression. Different trajectories and intervening variables need to be investigated in future research.

**Keywords:** Physical punishment; School aggression; Traditional bullying; Cyber aggression; Physical aggression; Verbal aggression; Indirect aggression

### Introduction

Childhood Physical Punishment (CPP) [1] has been associated with a number of negative psychosocial outcomes in adulthood, such as increased aggressiveness [2,3], depression [4], low self-esteem [5], phobias, anxiety, schizotypal personality, and alcohol and drug abuse [6]. In a study of school bullying in a representative middle school sample on the Åland Islands in Finland, it was found that victims of school bullying had been hit by an adult to a much greater extent than non-victims (39.5% vs. 16.8%) [1]. The finding was unexpected, since the only parental practice having a possible relationship with victimization to school bullying so far mentioned in the research literature has been overprotection of the child in question [7]. The authors speculated that children having been victimized to physical punishment might develop some kind of “victim personality”, non-verbally signaling defenselessness and vulnerability, thus attracting potential bullies.

The possibility of the existence of a “victim personality” has rarely been touched upon in the research literature, but it was discussed by Randall [8], who suggested that victims have certain personality characteristics, i.e. they are lacking mechanisms to assert themselves against would-be dominators.

On basis of a literature review, Hong and colleagues suggested a number of possible mediating variables between child maltreatment and school bullying and victimization to school bullying, including emotional dysregulation, depression, anger, and social skills deficits. They also suggested that certain factors, such as the quality of the parent-child relationship, peer relationships, and teacher relationships could serve as moderators [9]. Although they did not discuss physical punishment per se, their discussion may be relevant in this context as well.

There clearly seems to be a need to investigate the relationship between victimization to CPP and victimization to bullying and school aggression in general further. In the Åland Islands study, CPP was measured with a single item only, and the same was true in regard to the measurement of bullying. The findings needed to be replicated

with more robust measures such as multi-item scales. Also, in recent years, bullying has developed new forms, e.g. cyber bullying [10] and the authors wanted to include measures of cyber aggression into the test battery as well. The present article presents two follow-up studies.

### Study I

#### Sample

A total of 1,247 adolescents (611 girls, 636 boys;  $M$  age=14.0,  $SD=0.9$  years) participated in the study. The participants were pupils of grades 7, 8 and 9 of three typical middle schools from Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia in Finland, highly representative for the region.

#### Instrument

Information about exposure to CPP was gathered with the Brief Physical Punishment Scale (BPPS) [11]. Respondents state, on a five-point scale ranging from 0=“never” to 4=“very often”, to what extent they have been exposed to four types of physical punishment during their childhood: (1) *pulled by the hair*, (2) *pulled by the ear*, (3) *hit with the hand*, and (4) *hit with an object*. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was .84.

Victimization to traditional school bullying was measured with a 28-item scale developed by Sharp, Arora, Smith, and Whitney [12], ( $\alpha=.93$ ).

For the measurement of cyber aggression, a 5-item instrument, the Cyber Aggression Scale (CAS), was created specifically for the

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present study. Both a victim and a perpetrator version were included. Participants had to estimate on a five-point scale (range: 0=not true at all, 4=completely true) the extent to which they had been exposed to (alternatively, exposed others to), (1) *hurtful mobile phone calls*, (2) *hurtful text messages*, (3) *hurtful e-mails*, (4) *having had humiliating texts or humiliating pictures of themselves put up on websites*, (5) *having been filmed in a humiliating situation with the film been put up on places like YouTube*. The internal consistency for victimization to cyber aggression was  $\alpha=.83$ , and for perpetration,  $\alpha=.85$ .

The term cyber aggression was here preferred from cyber bullying, since it is often difficult to ascertain the demarcation line between these two phenomena: bullying is usually defined as a subdomain of aggression, where there is an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim, and the aggressive encounters occur repeatedly over time with the intention to humiliate or harm the victim [13,14]. In real life situations, it is often difficult to determine whether these criteria are fulfilled.

### Procedure

Data was collected in the form of a paper-and-pencil test during school lessons, with the consent of both school authorities and parents. No parents objected, and all children present at the lessons filled in the questionnaire, the rejection rate thus being nil. The study was approved by the ethical board of Åbo Akademi University.

### Results

The results are presented as product-moment correlations, since a multiple regression model is not possible with only one predictor and several outcome variables. Correlations between the scales are presented in Table 1, with correlations for girls below the diagonal and for boys above the diagonal.

Table 1, CPP correlated significantly with victimization to traditional bullying in both girls and boys. CPP also correlated with both victimization to and perpetration of cyber aggression, likewise in both girls and boys.

### Discussion

The findings of Study I replicated the findings of the Åland Islands study [1], namely that there was indeed an association between victimization to CPP and victimization to both traditional bullying and cyber aggression. However, there was also a relationship between CPP and perpetration of cyber aggression, suggesting that victimization to CPP might predispose not only to victimization, but also to perpetration of school aggression, at least as far as its "cyber" form is concerned.

### Study II

The findings of Study I suggested that there was a need to investigate the relationship between victimization to CPP and school aggression even further. The design of Study I was incomplete in the sense that it

lacked measures of perpetration of traditional bullying. In Study II, the bullying measure by Sharp and Smith [14] was therefore substituted with Mini-DIA [15], which includes both a perpetrator and a victim version of three types of traditional school aggression: physical, verbal, and indirect.

### Sample

A total of 620 adolescents (296 girls, 324 boys; M age=13.1 years, SD=1.6) participated in the study. The participants were pupils of grades 5, 7 and 9 of typical junior (grade 5) and middle schools (grades 7 and 9) from Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia in Finland, highly representative for the region.

### Instrument

As in Study I, CPP was measured with BPPS [11], with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  in Study II being .78. Cyber aggression was likewise measured with the same instrument as in Study I; in Study II, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was, for perpetration=.72, and for victimization=.71.

Traditional school aggression of three kinds (physical, verbal, and indirect) was measured with the Mini-DIA [15], a short version of the Direct & Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS) [16]. Despite each type of aggression being measured with a single item only, its validity has been evidenced by the fact that it yields similar results as the original multi-item scaled DIAS [17]. In Mini-DIA, physical, verbal, and indirect aggression are defined to the participants, who then respond on a 5-point scale (0=not true at all, 4=completely true) to whether they have been exposed to these types of aggression, and to what extent: (1) "Physical aggression: Someone has for example hit you, kicked you, or shoved you?" (2) "Verbal aggression: Someone has for example yelled at you, called you bad names, or said hurtful things to you?" (3) "Indirect aggression: Someone has for example gossiped maliciously about you, spread hurtful rumours about you, or tried to socially exclude you from others?" Both a perpetrator and a victim version of the instrument were distributed to the participants.

### Procedure

Data was collected in the form of a paper-and-pencil test during school lessons, with the consent of both school authorities and parents. No parents objected, and all children present at the lessons filled in the questionnaire, the rejection rate thus being nil. The study was approved by the ethical board of Åbo Akademi University.

### Results

The results are again presented as product-moment correlations. Table 2 presents correlations between CPP and victimization to various types of aggression, and Table 3 correlations between CPP and perpetration of various types of aggression.

As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, victimization to CPP clearly correlates with all measured types of aggression, both as victims and as perpetrators.

### Discussion

The main objective of these two studies was to investigate whether exposure to CPP had a relationship with victimization to school aggression, in its various forms. This was found to be the case. However, exposure to CPP was also found to correlate with perpetration of aggression.

A limitation of the study is its correlational nature, and conclusions about cause and effect are mere speculation. Victimization to CPP may

	1	2	3	4
1. Victim of Physical Punishment		.43 ***	.54 ***	.36 ***
2. Victim of Traditional Bullying	.44 ***		.54 ***	.40 ***
3. Victim of Cyber Aggression	.41 ***	.51 ***		.65 ***
4. Perpetrator of Cyber Aggression	.39 ***	.38 ***	.58 ***	

Note: \*\*\* $p<.001$

**Table 1:** Correlation between Victimization to Physical Punishment during Childhood, and Victimization to Traditional Bullying in School, Victimization to Cyber Aggression, and Perpetration of Cyber Aggression. Boys above the Diagonal, and Girls below the Diagonal (N=1,247).

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Victim of Physical Punishment		.16 **	.22 ***	.28 ***	.32 ***
2. Victim of Physical Aggression	.40 ***		.47 ***	.40 ***	.22 ***
3. Victim of Verbal Aggression	.34 ***	.59 ***		.55 ***	.36 ***
4. Victim of Indirect Aggression	.26 ***	.37 ***	.51 ***		.41 ***
5. Victim of Cyber Aggression	.44 ***	.46 ***	.53 ***	.48 ***	

Note: \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**Table 2:** Correlations between Victimization to Physical Punishment during Childhood, and Victimization to Physical, Verbal, Indirect, and Cyber Aggression by Peers. Boys above the Diagonal, and Girls below the Diagonal (N=620).

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Victim of Physical Punishment		.17 **	.15 **	.25 ***	.28 ***
2. Perpetrator of Physical Aggression	.42 ***		.50 ***	.19 ***	.28 ***
3. Perpetrator of Verbal Aggression	.34 ***	.55 ***		.27 ***	.21 ***
4. Perpetrator of Indirect Aggression	.19 ***	.20 ***	.26 ***		.19 ***
5. Perpetrator of Cyber Aggression	.47 ***	.41 ***	.41 ***	.24 ***	

Note: \*\*\*p ≤ .001, \*\*p ≤ .01

**Table 3:** Correlations between Victimization of Physical Punishment during Childhood, and Perpetration of Physical, Verbal, Indirect, and Cyber Aggression against Peers. Boys above the Diagonal, and Girls below the Diagonal (N=620).

indeed in some cases predispose to victimization to school aggression, but on the other hand, it may in other cases predispose to perpetration of school aggression. In some individuals, it may predispose to both. It is also possible that the crucial factor is a third variable, i.e. poor parenting, which leads to both physical punishment and to victimization and/or aggression in school.

Dussich and Maekoya [18] found that children who had suffered physical harm in their homes were more likely to be involved in bullying behaviors in school, both as perpetrators (offenders, in their terminology) and victims. They interpret their finding in terms of Dussich's social coping theory [19], according to which coping behaviors are utilitarian in their ability to reduce stress, and are integrated into a child's repertoire due to learning principles. They suggest that children being physically harmed in their homes develop coping strategies clustering into two main groups: the fight group, involving aggressive responses, and the flight group, involving escape responses and vulnerable relationships. Depending on the relative success or failure of a particular coping response, a behavioral strategy is either reinforced or extinguished [18].

A suggestion for future research would be to investigate possible trajectories, and intervening variables between victimization to CPP and victimization to school aggression, and victimization to CPP and perpetration of school aggression, respectively. For instance, exposure to CPP has been found to be related to depression [3] and low self-esteem [4]. Depression was indeed suggested as a possible moderator between child maltreatment in general and victimization to peer aggression by Hong [9]. Accordingly, one may speculate that depression and low self-esteem may indeed serve as mediators between exposure to CPP and victimization to school aggression (a "victim" personality), while in other cases, exposure to CPP may lead to internalized anger and negativity towards others (i.e., an aggressive personality).

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