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# Corporal punishment and physical maltreatment against children: A community study on Chinese parents in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This study aimed to examine rates and associated factors of parent-to-child corporal punishment and physical maltreatment in Hong Kong Chinese families.

**Method:** Cross-sectional and randomized household interviews were conducted with 1,662 Chinese parents to collect information on demographic characteristics of parents and children, marital satisfaction, perceived social support, evaluation of child problem behaviors, and reactions to conflicts with children. Descriptive statistics, analyses of variances, and logistic regression analyses were conducted.

**Results:** The rates of parent-to-child physical aggression were 57.5% for corporal punishment and 4.5% for physical maltreatment. Mothers as compared to fathers reported higher rates and more frequent use of corporal punishment on their children, but this parental gender effect was insignificant among older parents and those with adolescent children. Boys as compared to girls were more likely to experience higher rates and more frequent parental corporal punishment, especially in middle childhood at aged 5–12. Furthermore, parents perpetrated more frequent physical maltreatment on younger as compared to older children. Results from logistic regression analyses indicated that significant correlates of parental corporal punishment were: children's young age, male gender, and externalizing behaviors as well as parents' young age, non-employment, and marital dissatisfaction. For parent-to-child physical maltreatment, significant correlates were externalizing behaviors of children and parental marital dissatisfaction.

**Conclusions:** Hong Kong Chinese parents commonly used corporal punishment on their children, which was associated with characteristics of children, parents, and family.

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*Keywords:* Chinese parental physical aggression; Chinese corporal punishment; Chinese parental physical maltreatment

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## Introduction

Children throughout the world experience various forms of violence, which mostly occur in the family context (World Health Organization, 2002). Researchers have argued that corporal punishment and physical maltreatment should be considered as two separate aspects of parental physical aggression (Straus, 1994; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Whipple & Richey, 1997). According to Straus et al. (1998), corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force to inflict pain, but not injury, in disciplining children or controlling children's undesirable behaviors. Physical maltreatment refers to parents' use of physical violence to inflict pain and injury on their children, which is more severe than that allowed by laws for disciplining children. This study aimed to determine rates and associated factors of corporal punishment and physical maltreatment against children among Hong Kong Chinese parents.

### *Parental physical aggression*

Almost all parents across countries use spanking and other forms of corporal punishment on their children (Straus, 1994; World Health Organization, 2002). Parental corporal punishment rarely occurs in isolation, and is often combined with other discipline techniques such as time-out, withdrawal of privileges, as well as verbally and physically violent behaviors. Studies (Gershoff, 2002; Sidebotham, Golding, & The ALSPAC Study Team, 2001; Sidebotham, Heron, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 2002; Sidebotham, Heron, & The ALSPAC Study Team, 2003; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993) tend to support ecological models that suggest parent-to-child aggression is best understood as a dynamic process involving the interplay of characteristics of the parent-child dyad, the family, and the larger social context. Boys, young children, and children with disliked gender, physical attributes, or behaviors are often at risk of parental aggression. Various parental characteristics such as mothers, young parents, and parents with inadequate understanding of child development, poor coping skills in handling daily hassles, or personality/psychiatric disorders are also related to the use of violence against children. Other important associated factors include family factors of marital conflicts, lack of social support, social isolation, and economic deprivation.

Studies conducted in contemporary Chinese societies such as Hong Kong (Lau, Liu, Yu, & Wong, 1999; Samuda, 1988; Tang, 1996, 1998a, 1998b) have found that Chinese parents also use physical aggression on children and believe the infliction of physical pain is necessary to train children's strength in enduring physical hardship in the future. In a telephone survey of Hong Kong Chinese parents, prevalence rates were 46–52.6% for minor child physical aggression (Tang, 1998a, 1998b). Parental physical aggression showed a curvilinear pattern across the age span of the children and a declining trend as parental age increased, with boys being the more likely victims and mothers the more likely perpetrators (Tang, 1996, 1998b). Compared to those who did not engage in physical aggression on their children, violent mothers tended to report higher parenting stress, greater dissatisfaction with their spouse, and less social support (Chan, 1994). Parents' reasons of using physical aggression against their children included the latter's disobedience, poor school performance, persistent crying, and conduct problems (Tang & Davis, 1996). Other researchers (Lau, Chan, Lam, Choi, & Lai, 2003; Lau, Liu, Cheung, Yu, & Wong, 1999) also documented that high school students who had experienced parental physical aggression were more likely to exhibit various behavior, health, and mental health problems such as drug abuse, self-injurious behaviors, and psychiatric conditions.

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