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Understanding the mediating role of corporal punishment in the association between maternal stress, efficacy, co-parenting and children's adjustment difficulties among Arab mothers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study, guided by the Family Systems Theory, examines the direct effect of maternal use of corporal punishment on children's adjustment difficulties. Also, it explores whether corporal punishment serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between several maternal characteristics, marital relationships, and children's adjustment difficulties. A total of 2,447 Arab mothers completed anonymous, structured, self-report questionnaires. The use of corporal punishment was generally strongly supported by the Arab mothers in our sample. A greater likelihood of using corporal punishment was found among mothers of boys rather than girls, among mothers with lower perceived self-efficacy to discipline children, and among mothers with a lower perception of their husbands' participation in child-related labor. In addition, the higher a mother's reports on disagreement with her husband about discipline methods and the stronger her level of maternal stress, the more likely she was to use corporal punishment. Corporal punishment also mediated the association between the above mentioned factors and child adjustment difficulties. Furthermore, a husband's emotional support and family socioeconomic status were directly associated to children's adjustment difficulties. The results of the current study emphasize the need to observe children's development within the context of their family systems and to consider the mutual influences of different subsystems such as marital relationships and mother-child interactions. Prevention and intervention programs should raise parents' awareness concerning the harmful effects of corporal punishment and take into account the impact of dynamic transactions of parental conflicts and disagreements regarding discipline methods on child outcomes.

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Introduction

Parental use of corporal punishment has tremendous adverse effects on children's short- and long-term social, behavioral and emotional outcomes (Davidov & Khoury-Kassabri, 2013; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009). For example, corporal punishment is associated with both internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression and anxiety) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., delinquency and aggression) (Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff, 2002; Regev, Gueron-Sela, & Atzaba-Poria, 2012).

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Despite its negative effects, corporal punishment remains a common disciplinary method among parents (Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010). Studies in the US are conflicted about the number of parents who use corporal punishment to discipline their children. Some cite as few as 26% while others claim it is closer to 70% (see for example, Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004; Runyan et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2010). In a study of 234 Jewish and Arab mothers in Israel it was found that parents used corporal punishment on average 19.75 times in the year before the study. In Israel there is solid evidence to suggest that Arab mothers are much more likely than Jewish mothers to use corporal punishment (e.g., Khoury-Kassabri & Straus, 2011).

In order to understand child emotional and behavioral development, Family Systems Theory suggests viewing the individual within the context of his or her larger family system, rather than focusing exclusively on the child-parent relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997). This study makes use of that theory by examining the effects of multiple levels of family systems such as mothers and children, the dynamic transaction of other family subsystems such as marital relationships, and their influence on children's behavior and adjustment difficulties. This examination, which takes into account interactions between parents and children, as well as interactions between the parents themselves, expands our ability to understand the mechanisms by which child adjustment outcomes are shaped.

Based on this theoretical perspective, our study examined the direct effect of mothers' use of corporal punishment on children's adjustment difficulties. In addition, we explored whether corporal punishment serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between children's adjustment difficulties and various maternal characteristics, such as stress and the perceived ability to discipline and set roles for children. We also explored the effects of factors relating to marital relationships, such as the perception of spousal support and attitudes about co-parenting, on children's adjustment.

Maternal Self-Efficacy and Stress

Bandura's (1977, 1982) Cognitive Social Learning Theory defines parental self-efficacy as parents' belief in their competence and confidence in parenting roles (Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Johnston & Mash, 1989). It also includes parents' perceptions regarding their ability to perform tasks and handle various parental situations (Sanders & Woolley, 2004), and to positively affect their child's development and behaviors (Coleman & Karraker, 2003).

Parental self-efficacy has been shown to contribute directly to children's outcomes (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Jones & Prinz, 2005). It is negatively correlated with children's behavioral difficulties (Yaman, Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010) and also with socio-emotional difficulties (Hill & Bush, 2001).

Different formulations of parental self-efficacy, such as task-specific and domain-specific, have been used in previous studies (for more details, see Coleman & Karraker, 2003). In this study we used the *domain-specific parental self-efficacy* approach, examining mothers' perceptions of their own competence in disciplining and assigning roles to the child (Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Jones & Prinz, 2005).

Previous studies suggest that parental self-efficacy affects child outcomes through its impact on different aspects of parenting (Jones & Prinz, 2005). For instance, lower self-perception of maternal efficacy has been associated with harsh and inconsistent discipline (Sanders & Woolley, 2004), a passive coping style in the parental role (Wells-Parker, Miller, & Topping, 1990), and abusive behaviors toward children (Mash, Johnston, & Kovitz, 1983). The current study explores the association between mothers' perception of their ability to discipline their children and children's adjustment difficulties. It also examines whether that association is mediated by a mother's likelihood of using corporal punishment.

Parental stress also plays a significant role in child outcomes. According to Deater-Deckard (2004, p. 6), "parenting stress is a set of processes that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood". Higher levels of parental stress may lead to dysfunctional parenting (Abidin, 1992), including punitive practices (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994; Pinderhughes, Bates, Dodge, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Sanders & Woolley, 2004), and consequently to behavioral and emotional adjustment problems on the part of the child (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005).

In a large-scale study of 2,508 mothers in the US, Taylor et al. (2009) found that higher levels of maternal stress were associated with an increased risk of using physical and psychological aggression, as well as neglect. The effect of mothers' stress was still significant after accounting for the presence of other risk factors, such as intimate partner violence, maternal depression, and demographic factors. The punitive, power-assertive discipline strategies associated with maternal stress, were in turn related to children's misbehavior and adjustment difficulties (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Mash & Johnston, 1990; Patterson, 1983).

Marital Relationship Quality

Marital relationship quality has been found to have a significant effect on parenting practices and child development (Belsky, 1984; Feinberg, 2003). The present study focused on two central domains related to mothers' relationships with their spouses: the husband's emotional support and co-parenting.

Studies show that a person who receives strong support from his or her spouse, friends, and family members have better physical and psychological health than individuals with weaker support systems (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Of these, marital support, which includes caring, loving, and showing an interest in the spouse's feelings, has been found to be the most significant source of support (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). It has also been found that partner support influences maternal

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