



Cultural Factors in Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence in Korea

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In Korean culture, children are taught to be obedient and to live up to adults' expectations, quietly carrying out their important duties like schoolwork. In such an adult-centered culture that has largely ignored children's opinions and perceptions, corporeal punishment has been accepted as a disciplinary action often employed by parents and teachers. Until recently, little public attention has been paid to children at risk of being abused in the name of disciplining. In recent years, child maltreatment emerged as a social problem in Korean society as the country accelerated its industrialization and societal structures and the family system have undergone many changes. Media coverage of child abuse incidents widely sensitized the public to abused children's plight. With this media coverage and the help of various civic and non-profit organizations' child welfare advocacy efforts, a national level public policy for preventing child abuse is near completion.

Article 9 of the Declaration of Korean Children's Rights, which was revised on May 5, 1988, declared that "Children should not be maltreated or abandoned and they should not be used for harmful or arduous labor." In addition, Public Child Welfare Law (revised on April 13, 1981), Article 18, Section 9 prohibited abusive behaviors against children under penalty of fine or imprisonment. However, the law has not been enforced and lacks provision for a mandatory child abuse reporting system. In 1996, women's organizations proposed the enactment of legislation to establish a "Law for Preventing Domestic Violence," which included a provision for dealing with violence against children. Currently, a legislative proposal for amending the existing Child Welfare Law is being scrutinized by the lawmakers, while some scholars have produced empirical study results relating to child abuse incidence and adults' and children's perceptions.

In a 1994 survey of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade children from 4 randomly selected schools in Seoul, 20-item questionnaires were administered to 1,080

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children in order to determine the prevalence of physical punishment from the children's perspective (Park, 1996). The study results showed that 76.7% of the 1,045 respondents received physical punishment by family member(s) during the last year. Those who experienced severe physical punishment were 9.4%, while 67.3% reported having received light corporeal punishment. Boys and younger children were more likely to experience physical punishment than girls and older children. Children living in the nuclear families (77.1%) and those living with unemployed parents (80.0%) were more likely to receive physical punishment than those living in grandparent-present families (74.3%) and those living with dual-wage earner parents (78.6%). Of all punished children, 78.8% were punished by their mothers, 55.1% by fathers, and 30.3% by older siblings, which reflected the primacy of Korean mothers' traditional roles in disciplining children. Of the severely punished group, 43.3% were punished by 3 or more members of a family, compared to 23.3% of lightly punished counterparts. This seemed to imply that physical punishment imposed on children might be closely associated with domestic violence in a family.

Another significant finding is that 10.9% of the lightly punished group and 18.3% of the severely punished group responded that they did not understand why they were punished. At the same time, most of the respondents recognized various reasons for having been punished physically: fighting with a sibling (50.9%), failing to do homework (16.2%), getting poor grades (14.2%), talking back to parents (14.0%), coming home late (11.2%), failing to be courteous to grownups (10.9%), and so on. The fact that a sizeable proportion of children felt that they were being punished without understanding the reason for the punishment implies a strong possibility that child abuse may frequently occur in the name of disciplining children. Not surprisingly, many children who were severely punished showed a variety of mental health symptoms, such as aggressiveness and feelings of fear and anger, as well as physical symptoms including headache, pain in limbs, etc. Park's recommendations for preventing child abuse included 1) a definition of the concept of child maltreatment that can be accepted by the general public, 2) a national survey of child maltreatment covering all age groups, 3) enactment of a child abuse prevention law with specific provisions for legal enforcement and social services, 4) parent education programs for child abuse prevention, and 5) reaffirmation of children's rights.

Another empirical study of 987 children aged 9-12 residing in Seoul examined the correlation between child maltreatment and children's anti-social behaviors, using 6 reliable measurement scales (Kim & Kim, 1997). Stepwise

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