



Understanding caregivers' attitudes towards physical punishment of children: Evidence from 34 low- and middle-income countries

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This article presents findings on caregivers' attitudes towards physical punishment of children from 34 household surveys conducted in low- and middle-income countries in 2005 and 2006. The article analyzes the variability in attitudes by background characteristics of the respondents to examine whether various factors at the individual and family levels correlate with the caregivers' beliefs in the need for violent discipline. The article also examines to what extent attitudes influence behaviors and compares groups of respondents to see how attitudes relate to disciplinary practices across caregivers of different socio-economic backgrounds.

Methods: The analysis is based on nationally representative data from 33 MICS and 1 DHS surveys. Questions on child discipline were addressed to the mother (or primary caregiver) of one randomly selected child aged 2–14 years in each household. The questionnaire asked whether any member of the household had used various violent and non-violent disciplinary practices with that child during the past month. Additionally, the interviewers asked the respondent if she believed that, in order to bring up that child properly, physical punishment was necessary. The sample included 166,635 mothers/primary caregivers.

Results: The analysis shows that, in most countries, the majority of mothers/primary caregivers did not think there was a need for physical punishment. Overall, characteristics such as household wealth and size, educational level and age, as well as place of residence were significantly associated with caregivers' attitudes. The analysis confirms that beliefs influence disciplinary practices to a large degree: in all the countries but two, children were significantly more likely to experience physical punishment if their mothers/primary caregivers thought such punishment was needed. However, large proportions of children were found to be subject to physical punishment even if their mothers/primary caregivers did not consider this method necessary. This discrepancy between attitudes and behaviors is observed, although to different extents, in all the countries and across groups of mothers/primary caregivers with different levels of education and wealth.

Conclusions: The data presented in this article are among the few resources available to help develop a more global understanding of caregivers' motivation in using violent discipline across a multitude of low- and middle-income countries. As such, the analysis of these data provides important insights for the development of effective strategies that will promote positive parenting practices. However, further data collection and analysis are needed to fully understand the reasons why physical punishment is used – even when caregivers do not think such method is necessary – opening the door for an even sharper programmatic response to change the practice.

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Introduction

Violent discipline is a violation of a children's right to protection from all forms of violence while in the care of their parents or other caregivers, as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 19). The Convention clearly acknowledges the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and other caregivers in providing appropriate direction and guidance in the process of children's development (articles 5 and 18). [The Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comments No. 8 \(2006\) and No. 13 \(2011\)](#) has stated that the "interpretation of 'appropriate' direction and guidance must be consistent with the whole Convention and leaves no room for justification of violent or other cruel or degrading forms of discipline" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 8). In particular, General Comment No. 13 provides States Parties with guidance on their obligations under the Convention, outlining specific measures that may be taken to establish a national framework for caregiving and protection.

Enacting the legislative guidance from the CRC and developing appropriate policy responses to the issue of violence in the home require an understanding of what motivates caregivers to choose – consciously or unconsciously – among different ways to discipline children. Such information is needed to break the invisibility and social acceptance of violence in child discipline, and to inform the development and implementation of laws, policies, regulations and services for prevention and response. This knowledge is also essential for the design of educational efforts aimed at changing social norms and individual attitudes that are harmful to children and to promote durable changes in behaviors and collective practices.

Limited data are available on how parents and other caregivers discipline children and why certain methods are used, especially in low- and middle-income countries. [The United Nations Study on Violence against Children \(2006\)](#) recognized this important knowledge gap and called upon States to improve data collection and information systems, to develop indicators based on internationally agreed standards, and to ensure that data are compiled, analyzed and disseminated to monitor progress over time.

To address the need for more data on parenting methods, the third round of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) included a module on child discipline in 33 countries, making MICS the largest source of comparable data on child discipline across low- and middle-income countries. The MICS questionnaire gathered information on violent and non-violent disciplinary methods employed by all caregivers in a household, as well as on mothers/primary caregivers' beliefs in the need for physical punishment. Data on disciplinary practices and attitudes were also collected using the same MICS module in a Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) conducted in Azerbaijan in 2006.

This article presents findings on caregivers' attitudes towards physical punishment of children using data from these 34 countries, which comprise around 10 percent of the total population of children globally. The article analyzes the variability in attitudes by background characteristics of the respondents to examine whether various factors at the individual and family levels correlate with the caregivers' beliefs in the need for violent discipline in each of the countries surveyed. The article also examines to what extent attitudes influence behaviors and compares different groups of caregivers to see whether there is a similar association between attitudes and disciplinary practices across different socio-economic groups. Finally, the article includes recommendations for future programmatic and policy investments.

Current understanding on attitudes towards violent discipline and their impacts on disciplinary practices

A number of studies have explored the significance of parental attitudes as a factor to predict spanking and other forms of violence employed in child discipline. Nevertheless, these studies have varied tremendously in terms of their sample sizes, sample representativity and coverage of populations. Geographically, the scope of current research remains fairly limited as the majority of studies has been undertaken in North America and Europe, and only one study taking place in Kuwait ([Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem, & Shah, 1998](#)). In general, data are cross sectional in nature with only one study using prospective data to investigate the phenomenon ([Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006](#)). Sample sizes were pretty uniform: usually studies tended to have small to modest sample sizes and limited their investigations to select sub-groups of respondents such as mothers ([Vittrup et al., 2006](#)) or parents with at least one child ([Qasem et al., 1998](#)). Only a few studies were based on representative samples ([Gagné, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliot-Lapointe, 2007](#); [Jackson et al., 1999](#)).

Some of these studies have looked at the significance of certain demographic and socio-economic factors as determinants of positive attitudes by parents regarding physical punishment of children ([Gagné et al., 2007](#); [Jackson et al., 1999](#); [Qasem et al., 1998](#)). Conservative ideology, attitudes that devalue children, ethnic background and socio-economic status were found to be significant predictors of attitudes towards the use of violent methods in child rearing ([Gagné et al., 2007](#); [Jackson et al., 1999](#); [Qasem et al., 1998](#)).

Another focus of the research has been to determine whether attitudes in favor of using some form of violence in child discipline are good predictors of actual violence against children. A consistent finding is that favorable parental attitudes towards corporal punishment are associated with the use of such methods ([Bower-Russa, 2005](#); [Gagné et al., 2007](#)). The inverse was also found to be true in a US representative sample: parents were more likely to have positive attitudes towards physical violence if they used physical discipline with their children ([Jackson et al., 1999](#)). [Vittrup et al. \(2006\)](#) further noted that the significant positive correlations among parents between spanking attitudes and behaviors are considerably stable across the first years of the child's life.

Within the literature less attention has been placed on the degree to which parents engage in violent disciplinary practices with their children even though they are not in favor of these practices and on identifying possible reasons for this apparent

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