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Corporal punishment in rural Colombian families: Prevalence, family structure and socio-demographic variables



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To reveal the prevalence of corporal punishment in a rural area of Colombia and its correlates to family structure and other socio-demographic variables. **Method:** A survey about childrearing and childcare was developed for this study, including a specific question about corporal punishment that was developed based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Family structure was categorized as follows, based on previous literature: 'nuclear family,' 'single parent' family, 'extended family,' 'simultaneous family' and 'composed family.' **Results:** Forty-one percent of the parents surveyed admitted they had used corporal punishment of their children as a disciplinary strategy. The type of family structure, the number of children living at home, the age of the children, the gender of the parent who answered the survey, and the age and gender of the partner were significant predictors of corporal punishment. **Conclusion:** Family structure is an important variable in the understanding of corporal punishment, especially in regard to nuclear families that have a large number of children and parents who started their parental role early in life.

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Introduction

The use of corporal punishment as a method to correct a child's misbehavior is a controversial issue within the public debate. Corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing physical pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction or control of a child's behavior (Straus, 2010). Many families (Gracia & Herrero, 2008a) and professionals (Schenck, Lyman, & Bodin, 2000; Straus, Larzelere, & Rosemond, 1994) from different countries and cultural contexts (see the work by Gracia & Herrero, 2008b) strongly support the use of corporal punishment, although many of the reasons to perform it, such as its effectiveness or harmlessness, have been shown to be myths (Gámez-Guadix, Straus, Carrobes, Muñoz-Rivas, & Almendros, 2010; Gershoff et al., 2010).

Despite public support for corporal punishment, and even when corporal punishment has shown to improve immediate compliance (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005), the existing literature indicates that non-abusive physical punishment is related to social and psychological problems not only during childhood but also later in life. The relationship between parental spanking and antisocial traits and behaviors in children has been demonstrated over the past 50 years (see the seminal work by Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957) by longitudinal studies (for example, see Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997) and recent publications (Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005) from various countries (Gershoff et al., 2010), regardless of whether there is positive parenting or psychological aggression related to punishment (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2010). Corporal punishment

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has also been related to emotional and behavioral problems (Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006; Gershoff et al., 2010; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007), the restricted development of cognitive ability (Straus & Paschall, 2009), detrimental effects on brain development (Sheu, Polcari, Anderson, & Teicher, 2010; Tomoda et al., 2009), and other psychosocial problems for both the individual child and the society as a whole (see Straus, 2000). For a review of the harmful effects of corporal punishment, the meta-analysis by Gershoff (2002) revealed 93% agreement on these effects from over 300 studies included. Another meta-analysis by Paolucci and Violato (2004) suggested a small negative relationship between exposure to corporal punishment and affective, cognitive, and behavioral functioning.

There are a number of specific characteristics that have been reported to be associated with families who tend to use corporal punishment, such as the male gender of the child (Abolfotouh, El-Bourgy, Seif El Din, & Mehanna, 2009; Malhi & Ray, 2004; Straus & Stewart, 1999); the personalities of the child and the mother (Latzman, Elkovitch, & Clark, 2009; Towe-Goodman & Teti, 2008); a young parental age (Combs-Orme & Cain, 2008; Dietz, 2000; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995), especially related to the chronicity of corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999); the religion of the family (Flynn, 1994), with Catholics presenting a lower use of spanking (Giles-Sims et al., 1995); a low educational level among parents (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Dietz, 2000; Flynn, 1994; Malhi & Ray, 2004); low family income (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Dietz, 2000; Flynn, 1994; Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Hahleg, Heinrichs, Bertram, Kuschel, & Widdecke, 2008; Straus & Stewart, 1999); a large number of children in the family (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Flynn, 1994); the rural origin of parents (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Giles-Sims et al., 1995); poor inter-parental relationships, including spousal violence and separated or divorced parents (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Xu, Tung, & Dunaway, 2000); unmarried mothers (Giles-Sims et al., 1995); stress, mental health and substance abuse among parents (Cabrera, González, & Guevara, 2012; Lee, Perron, Taylor, & Guterman, 2011); and especially having been exposed to corporal punishment or physical abuse and verbal hostility as children (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Chung et al., 2009; Gagné, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliot-Lapointe, 2007).

Although research has shown higher rates of violent childrearing for several types of children and families (Straus & Stewart, 1999), only a few studies have related corporal punishment to family structure (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Mitchel, 2008; Nobes & Smith, 2002). Family structure can be defined as the internal composition of the family, the number of people who comprise the family, the relationships that exist between family members, the parents' marital status and the responsibility of the parents in raising children (Del Ángel-Castillo & Torres, 2008). It is recognized that understanding family structure allows the understanding of the composition and the course of family life and the relationship between family structure and the psychological well-being of its members (Acosta, 2003; Zeiders, Roosa, & Tein, 2011) in order to guide policymaking.

In this sense, the emergence of new family models in Latin America has become a reality as a result of economic and political adjustments and social changes that have occurred worldwide (Ariza & De Oliveira, 2006; Del Ángel-Castillo & Torres, 2008). Demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural changes that have occurred in Latin American societies have affected the structure, organization and internal dynamics of families (Ariza & De Oliveira, 2004). For example, in the last decade, there has been a decrease in the prevalence of nuclear families in Latin America (Sunkel, 2006) and a reduction in the average size of the family. Quiroz (2001) suggested that early motherhood and marital breakdowns have been increasing. Because culture has shown to make a difference in determining attitudes about corporal punishment (Douglas, 2006), additional research is needed to explain the differences in corporal punishment according to child, maternal, and family characteristics in Latin American countries such as Colombia.

There is only one study that has analyzed the prevalence of corporal punishment in Colombian families, from the city of Medellín, with more than half of the families interviewed reporting mild corporal punishment (included spanking, hitting, or slapping with a bare hand; hitting or slapping on the hand, arm, or leg; shaking; or hitting with an object) (Lansford et al., 2010). However, the sample was too restricted to generalize the results to other areas of the country. The National Demographic and Health Survey (2000) from Colombia suggests that mothers tend to punish their children more often than fathers do. For mothers, 47% of them spank and 36% slap their children. For fathers and stepfathers, 42% of them spank and 27% slap their children and/or stepchildren. However, no scientific studies have been published that link the use of corporal punishment to the family structures of Colombian families.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to expand the limited results found on corporal punishment in Colombia, providing details about the actual occurrence of corporal punishment in a rural area and its relation to family structure and other socio-demographic variables, such as parental age, the number of children in the family, parental education, parental occupation, marital status, and child age and gender, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the subject in Latin America.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 620 parents of children aged between 5 and 8 years old (45% girls) from a rural area north of Bogotá, Colombia. We chose this age range because the use of corporal punishment by parents reaches its highest peak during the end of the preschool and childhood years and decreases thereafter (Lansford et al., 2010; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Additionally, having a sample of children under 12 years old allowed us to compare the prevalence of corporal punishment in our sample with other studies of Latin American countries that used similar age ranges, including the studies by Gavin and Smith (2002), Day, Peterson, and McCracken (1998), and Straus (2010).

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