

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT AMONG SCHOOL GIRLS IN BAHRAIN

FADHEELA AL-MAHROOS, MD, FAAP*

Objectives: To identify the prevalence and factors associated with increased risk for corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment of school girls in Bahrain.

Study design: A total of 184 school girls attending two summer centres in Manama and Muharraq had answered the questionnaire. The students were in 6th-12th grades. The questionnaire included inquiries about instances of corporal punishment by the school teachers over the preceeding year, demographic data that may associate with increased risk for abuse, reason(s) for the punishment, the instrument used, manners or style of hitting and the student's reaction and perception about the appropriateness or otherwise of corporal punishment. They were also asked about instances and types of verbal insults and their reaction to them, the use of corporal punishment at home, the person administering the punishment and the apparent presumed reason(s) for it.

Results: Corporal punishment was experienced by 23 % of the students at school and by 25 % at home. Verbal insults at school were reported by 78 % of the girls. The students' reactions to these punishments and insults were anger, dislike of school, low self-esteem, depression, desire for revenge and indifference. Factors associated with an increased risk for corporal punishment at school included; poor school performance, schools located in rural areas and junior classes.

Conclusion: Corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment of school girls are common. Enacting and enforcing laws that prohibit corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment at schools in Bahrain are urgently needed. In addition, there is a need to educate teachers about normal behavioural development of children, anger control skills, healthy approach to conflict resolution and alternatives to corporal punishment for controlling undesirable behaviour of children.

Bahrain Med Bull 1997;19(3): 70-3.

The prevasiveness of corporal punishment in the life of children and its link to adulthood violence¹⁻³ has raised the concerns of educators, psychologists, social scientists, physicians and various agencies concerned with the welfare of children⁴⁻⁶.

The factors contributing to the risk of violence in society are complex and intertwined including poverty, lack of basic life necessities, drug abuse, alcoholism, psychiatric disorders and child rearing practices. The latter may seem to be a small player in the complex factors influencing the development of children. None-the-less, there is compelling evidence linking adult violent behaviour and poor outcome to the use of aversive and coercive disciplinary practices to control undesirable behaviours of children at home and school⁷⁻⁹.

The aim of this study is to identify the prevalence of and the factors associated with increased risk for physical punishment and psychological maltreatment of school girls in Bahrain.

METHODS

During the summer of 1994, a cross-sectional study was con-

ducted in the two summer centres of Awal Women Association in Muharraq and Bahrain Young Ladies Association in Manama. These summer centres are organised for educational and social activities for school girls. Students from 6-12 grades were seen in small groups, they all responded to the questionnaire after a brief explanation of the contents by the author.

The questionnaire included the following inquiries; instances of corporal punishment and verbal insults by the school teachers over the preceeding year, reason(s) for the punishment, the instrument used, manner or style of hitting and student's reaction and perception about the appropriateness or otherwise of the corporal punishment or verbal insults. They were also asked about instances of corporal punishment at home, the person administering the punishment and the apparent presumed reason(s) for it.

The demographic data included; age of the student, school area, class level, family order, number of siblings, parents' education and jobs, the presence of chronic illness and repeating a class.

Corporal punishment is defined as any form of physical punishment including spanking, hitting or slapping. Verbal insults included name-calling, belittling and verbal put-downs.

The statistical package SPSS for windows was used for the statistical analysis. Chi-square was used to determine

* Clinical Assistant Professor of Paediatrics
College of Medicine & Medical Sciences
Arabian Gulf University
Consultant Paediatrician
Salmaniya Medical Centre
Editor, Bahrain Medical Bulletin
State of Bahrain

the association between two qualitative variables, phi statistic was used to measure the strength of the association for nominal data with two variables, Cramer's V statistic was used for variables with more than two categories. The presence of statistically significant association between corporal punishment and verbal insults and different socio-demographic factors was sought. Logistic regression analysis was used to control for confounding factors.

RESULTS

One hundred and eighty-four girls participated in the study. All residential areas in Bahrain were represented except for Rifa area (Table 1). Mean age was 15 years with a range from 11-22 years.

Table 1. Distribution of students by area of school

Area of school	No (%)
Al-Hidd	9 (5)
Muharraq	41 (22)
Manama	24 (13)
Jidhafs	26 (14)
Northern area	5 (3)
Sitra	11 (6)
Central area	17 (9)
Isa Town	28 (15)
Western area	7 (4)
Hamad Town	16 (9)

Corporal punishment was experienced by 42/183 respondent (23 %) of the students at school. The most commonly reported methods of corporal punishment were; a strike on the hands in 50 %, followed by pulling the ears in 36 % and a slap on the face in 33 % of the cases (Table 2). Other forms of corporal punishment were used less frequently.

Table 2. The style of corporal punishment of girls at schools

Corporal punishment style	No./42 (%)
Strike on the hands	21 (50)
Slap on the face	14 (33)
Slap on the buttock	5 (12)
Hit the legs	6 (14)
Hit any part of the body	7 (17)
Pinch	12 (29)
Stick	3 (7)
Pulling ears	15 (36)
Punch	1 (2)
Keeping in uncomfortable place	6 (14)
Deprivation from WC privileges	5 (12)

Hitting instruments included a stick or a ruler in 62 %, hands in 52 %, and a hose in 2 %. The most commonly reported reason for the use of corporal punishment was not doing home-work (Table 3). The student's reactions to corporal punishment were as follows; 67 % disliked school, 45 % felt angry, 36 % felt the desire for revenge, 29 % felt embarrassment and loss of self-esteem, 19 % felt depressed and 14 % were indifferent (Table 4).

Table 3. Reasons for corporal punishment of girls at schools

Reasons	No./42 (%)
Not doing homework	12 (29)
Poor school performance	3 (7)
Late arrival to school	6 (14)
Use of foul language	3 (7)
Disruptive at class	6 (14)
Other reasons	14 (33)

Verbal insults occurred more often; it was reported by 139/179 respondent (78 %) of the students. Insults included; calling the student impolite and boorish was reported by 60 % of the students, calling them animal was reported by 58 %, and stupid by 46 %. Feelings expressed by the verbally insulted girls were anger by 67 %, dislike of school by 60 %, low self-esteem by 25 %, the desire for revenge by 25 %, depression by 24 % and indifference by 10 % (Table 4).

Table 4. Student's reaction to corporal punishment

Reaction	No./42 (%)
Anger	19 (45)
Dislike school	28 (67)
Low self-esteem	12 (29)
Depression	8 (19)
Desire to revenge	15 (36)
Indifferent	6 (14)
Other feelings	5 (12)

Corporal punishment at home was reported by 44/179 respondent (25 %). The main presumed reason(s) for corporal punishment at home were conflict with siblings in 46 % and not helping with home chores in 34 % (Table 7). Mother as the person spanking or hitting in 63 %; and the father in 37 % of the cases. Only 14/184 girls (8 %) felt that corporal punishment is an acceptable method of discipline while 92 % felt it was not acceptable.

Table 5. Type of verbal abuse

Type	No./139 (%)
Impolite/poorly nurtured	84 (60)
Stupid	64 (46)
Animals	80 (58)
Negligent	16 (11.5)
Others	27 (19)

Table 6. Reactions to verbal abuse

Reaction	No./139 (%)
Anger	93 (67)
Dislike of school	83 (60)
Low self-esteem	35 (25)
Depression	33 (24)
Desire to revenge	35 (25)
Indifferent	14 (10)
Other feelings	28 (20)

Risk of corporal punishment by area of school

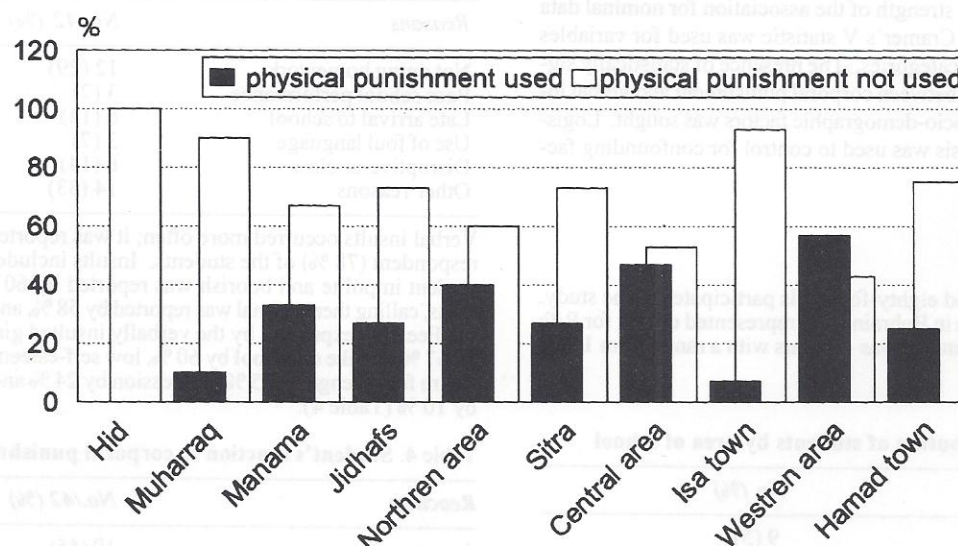


Table 7. Reasons for corporal punishment at home

Reasons	No./139 (%)
Not doing homework	2 (3)
Not doing home chore	24 (34)
Disobeying parents	7 (10)
Conflicts with siblings	32 (46)
Other reasons	7 (10)

Socioeconomic status, order in the family, physical punishment at home, and the presence of chronic illness did not show any correlation with the risk of corporal punishment at school. The only variables that showed a significant association with the risk of corporal punishment were the school area, repeating a class and the student's class level. Hidd, Muharraq and Isa Town schools showed significantly less use of corporal punishment (p value < 0.01) while Western area schools showed the highest use. Overall, rural schools used corporal punishment more than urban schools (Fig). Corporal punishment was used more frequently in grades 6-9 and less often in higher grades (p value < 0.005). Repeating a class correlated strongly with the risk of corporal punishment, 44 % for those repeating a class vs. 20 % for those who did not (p value < 0.01).

When controlling for all variables was done, the association between repeating a class and the risk of corporal punishments was the only association that remained significant with a p value < 0.01 and 95 % confidence interval of 0.07-0.45.

The limitations of this study include: 1. boys and primary school children were not participating in the summer centres studied, thus they were not included in this study. These two groups are known to be more vulnerable to corporal punishment at school, thus this study may have underestimated the size of the problem. 2. the subgroups of some residential areas are small and these may not be representative of the population of students in those particular areas. Thus there is a need for undertaken a similar study on a larger scale and including boys and primary school children.

DISCUSSION

The use of corporal punishment to control behaviour of school children has been linked with negative student outcomes such as increased aggressive and destructive behaviour, increased disruptive classroom behaviour, vandalism, poor school achievement, poor attention span, increased drop-out rate, school avoidance, low self-esteem, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, suicide and retaliation against teachers¹⁰.

This study showed that the use of corporal punishment among school girls is alarmingly high, reported by 23 % of the study sample. In addition, humiliating methods of corporal punishment have been used frequently, such as; pulling the ears in 36 % and slapping the face in 33 % of the cases.

Student's reaction to the corporal punishment included; anger, dislike of school, the desire for revenge against the offending teacher, loss of self-esteem and depression. Such negative reactions do not only lead to poor student outcome, but also reduces the ability of the teacher to influence children's behaviour and it teaches the students that it is acceptable to resolve conflicts with others through violent actions especially if you are in power.

Do teachers use corporal punishment based on a conscious, intelligent decision to discipline? Observations of violent interactions between teachers and students indicate that most teachers resort to physical punishment in an impulsive manner in a moment of anger and frustration. The teacher may be able to control undesirable behaviour momentarily but it puts the student at risk of the short-term and long-term consequences of physical punishment such as; physical injuries and psychological damage⁷. One study found that teachers who frequently use corporal punishment tend to be authoritarian, dogmatic, relatively inexperienced, impulsive and neurotic compared to those who do not resort to physical punishment¹¹.

Risk of corporal punishment is more in rural schools, however, a city such as Manama is a high risk area as well. The reason for such distribution is not clear from this study.

Repeating a class, an indicator of learning disability or under achievement, has shown a significant correlation with the risk of corporal punishment, that persisted after controlling for other confounding factors (p value of <0.01). Whether it is the cause or the result of corporal punishment is equally alarming, because, first, if the presence of learning disability is treated with physical punishment instead of remedial education, it represents a major flaw in the education system that needs immediate correction. Secondly, if it is the result of corporal punishment, this is a strong reason for abolishing corporal punishment of school-children.

Psychological maltreatment and verbal insults were even more common, reported by 78 % of the students. The use of such name-calling, belittling and verbal put-downs would undoubtedly shatter the self-esteem of any human-being, but is more damaging to children and adolescents who are commonly sensitive, vulnerable and insecure. Statistically, it is difficult to examine the risk factors of psychological maltreatment when its distribution is so skewed (78 % reporting it).

The findings of this study suggest the need for developing strategies to eliminate corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment of school-children, such strategies should include: 1. enacting and enforcing laws that prohibit psychological maltreatment and corporal punishment at schools, 2. educating teachers about the normal behavioural development of children, 3. educating teachers about anger control skills, healthy approach to conflicts resolution, and alternatives to corporal punishment for controlling undesirable behaviour of children, 4. including social skills development programme in the school curriculum, 5. conducting a similar study on a larger scale and including boys and girls and primary schools, such study cannot be undertaken without a commitment and cooperation from the Ministry of Education.

CONCLUSION

Corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment

of school girls are common in Bahrain. Such approaches to child discipline should be abandoned not only because it is ineffective in controlling children's behaviour in the long run; and not only because it is physically and psychologically harmful to children, but also because it is uncivilized and morally unacceptable.

REFERENCES

1. Grossman DC, Rauh MJ, Rivara FP. Prevalence of corporal punishment among students in Washington state schools. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 1995;149:529-32.
2. Hyman IA. Using research to change public policy: Reflection on 20 years of effort to eliminate corporal punishment in school. *Pediatrics[Suppl]* 1996;98:818-21.
3. Straus MA. Spanking and the making of a violent society. *Pediatrics[Suppl]* 1996;98:837-42.
4. AAP Committee on school health. Corporal punishment in schools. *Pediatrics* 1991;88:173.
5. Office of the General Council, AMA. Corporal punishment in the schools. *JAMA* 1992;267:3205-8.
6. Wilson-Brewer R, Spivak H. Violence prevention in schools and other community settings: The pediatrician as initiator, educator, collaborator, and advocate. *Pediatrics* 1994;94:623-30.
7. McCord J. Unintended consequences of punishment. *Pediatrics[Suppl]* 1996;98:832-4.
8. Bauman LJ. Assessing the causal effect of childhood corporal punishment on adult violent behaviour: Methodological challenges. *Pediatrics[Suppl]* 1996;98:842-4.
9. Graziano AM, Hamblen JL, Plante WA. Sub abusive violence in child rearing in middle-class American families. *Pediatrics[Suppl]* 1996;98:845-8.
10. Poole SR, Ushkow MC, Nader PR, et al. The role of pediatrician in abolishing corporal punishment in schools. *Pediatrics* 1991;88:162-7.
11. Kohr M. Validation of the my worst experience scale. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 1996. [Thesis]