

# Corporal Punishment Study: A Case in Malaysia

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The study investigates the occurrence of childhood corporal punishment at home on a sample of participants who resided in the northeast of Malaysia, Kelantan. The Discipline Questionnaire (DQ) - a 32-item self-report instrument was completed by 196 medical students studying in fourth and fifth year at School of Medical Sciences Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The participants were asked about the type, frequency, and severity of parental corporal punishment they remembered to receive at home during childhood, in addition to their attitudes toward corporal punishment on children. Sixty three percent of participants remembered being corporally punished at home, as children. Only 3% of them reported that the punishment reaches an abusive level – which was defined as physical punishment that results in welts, bruises, bone fractures or breaks, or large/deep cuts. Pinching was the most commonly reported types of punishment used at home (35%), followed by slapping on the hand, arm or leg (31%), whipping using flexible material such as leather or rope (23%), and spanking/slapping on the buttocks with open hand (20%). The study indicates that on average the participants had a fairly favorable attitude towards corporal punishment. The findings suggest that majority of parents in Malaysia have been using corporal punishment on their children – primarily of mild types. Generally, the participants have had a fairly favorable attitude towards corporal punishment. Corporal punishment in this context is not perceived as an action of abusing a child, but rather one of many ways to teach the child a lesson in life.

*Keywords:* Corporal Punishment, Childhood, Home, Malaysian Medical Students

## Introduction

Malaysia is located in Southeastern Asia with an approximate population of 23.27 million. Of this number, about 21,890 or 94.1% were Malaysian citizens. By races, majority is Bumiputera (65.1%); others are Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%) (Malaysian Census 2000: <http://www.statistics.gov.my>). Islam is the official religion and is the most widely professed in Malaysia.

Child maltreatment has been in the society for many years. However, only few years back it has been given substantial attention and considered as problem in the community. Child abuse and neglect is claimed can be found in all cultural, ethnic, and both rural and urban areas (Wan Ismail, 1995). There are many factors and causes leading to child abuse and neglect. An abusive environmental model suggests several factors including child related factors, parental factors, and social factors (Wan Ismail, 1996).

A Malaysian child is protected from social and economic exploitation by several legislations. The Juvenile Courts Acts 1947 for example, has a dominant concern on issues amongst children's aged 10 to 18 years old. The rights, liabilities and duties of parents are contained in the Guardian of Infant 1961. Any persons who neglects or refuses to look after his legitimate child may be ordered by court to do so under The Married Woman and Children (Maintenance Ordinance) 1950 (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2000). The Child Protection Act 1991 protects children from all forms of abuse and to prevent the abuse from recurring. Section 2 (3) for example, gives legal authority for children to be transferred to a children's home as

“a place of safety” in the event of physical abuse or neglect, emotional or sexual abuse (Fulcher & Mas'ud, 2000). Under the same Act, The Minister of National Unity and Community Development is responsible to provide a social plan to eligible children that includes opportunities for the child's physical, mental, socio-emotional and language development. A recent statute called Child Bill 2000 which combines the aforementioned acts defines a Malaysian child as one below 18 years of age. The Act is a breakthrough in the country's successful attempt to include the spirit of the Convention Rights of the Child as preamble of the Act henceforth being part of the law (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2000).

In providing immediate responds to the victims, the Sexual Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) teams are established. The team provides a 24 hour toll free hotline for reporting, counseling and registration of abused children. Preventive measures including the setting up of child activity centers within the community that provide educational and development support services to children and families in socially high risk areas (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2000).

In Malaysia, the incidence of child abuse can be inferred from various survey studies conducted in the country. The Ministry of Community Welfare stated that 1,013 abuse cases were reported in Peninsula Malaysia, from 1981 to 1988 (Samad, 1992) and from 1983 to 1993, 4479 new cases were reported (Man, 1995). A report from General Hospital Kuala Lumpur (GHKL) reveals an increase number of reported cases of suspected child abuse and child neglect, from 25 cases in 1985 to 211 cases in 1991. The cases were either categorized as physical abuse, sexual abuse, or physical neglect. Many of

the victims were small children and a third was less than three years old, similar to international data in physical abuse (Wan Ismail, 1995). Of those detected abuse cases in GHKL, 82 were classified as mild, and 37 were severe. Thirty death cases were detected due to physical abuse in between those years. The report indicates that those severely mistreated were more often than not abused by their caretakers. Fathers were the most frequent abusers, followed by mothers, and then the caretakers (Kassim, 1997).

The incidence of child abuse and child maltreatment is very much related to one's cultural practices and values. To illustrate, in a traditional family, father is the key figure, who is, in most Malay families applies authoritarian parenting style. Authoritarian in this sense implies certain aspects like he is the person who will give punishment for any wrongdoings in the house, he makes most of family decision, and he must be informed of any important occurrences in the family. Usually, the father-figure is a quiet, calm, and less talk-more action oriented person. Normally, small children are afraid of him, and gradually as they become older they develop respect to the father. As far as the punishment in the house is concerned, father has authority to punish his children. Usually, traditional parenting practices involve canning, but it is rarely done as it applies only to the most deprived acts.

In Malaysia particularly, it is difficult to ascertain the abusive incidence in the society as many people are reluctant to become involved through reporting of such cases. Malay children in particular, are raised in an environment which involves elements of secrecy, guilt, and shame. Sue (1997) as quoted by Futa et al., (2001) mentions that the feelings of guilt and shame may extend to children's tendency to blame themselves for problems in the family due to egocentric thinking. It is also common for parents to instill guilt and shame feelings to control the behavior of family members. Shon and Ja (1982), as reported by the same previous author, explain the social concept of shame in the culture is frequently associated with the phrase "loss of face" in the literature, which means shame in the face of society. Shame and loss of face are among ways how the culture enforces values of conformity, inconspicuousness and interdependent, group oriented society. When a person is shamed, there is risk the family, community, and societal confidence and support will be withdrawn (Futa et al., 2001).

Islam, as a religion, serves as a protective factor as it promotes compassionate and kind treatment to children. It is the responsibility and obligation of the parents to take care of their children, as every child is considered as a trust and a gift from Allah.

The present study aims to investigate:

1. The occurrence of childhood corporal punishment at home on a sample of participants who are medical students of Malaysia.
2. To confirm the occurrence of corporal punishment and to know at what extent these students remembered the corporal punishment.
3. To know the student attitude towards corporal punishment.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants consisted of a total of 196 Malaysian stu-

dents of School of Medical Sciences Hospital Universiti Sains Malaysia (HUSM) Kelantan Malaysia. All of them were medical students aged from 24 to 26, either in their fourth or fifth year of study. Data was collected in the year of 2000 by the first author.

### Measures

The Discipline Questionnaire (DQ) is a 32-item self-report instrument that took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Items 1-12 asked about demographic information that included age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Items 13-22 measured the type, frequency, and severity of parental corporal punishment remembered in the home by the participant. Items 23-25 assessed the participants' remembered experience with alternative disciplinary strategies used by their parents. Finally, items 26-32 asked participants' attitudes toward corporal punishment in children.

All the DQ items were selected from Hyman's Survey of Attitudes toward Children (SATC), and used to compile a total attitude score, a key element of the present study. To determine a total attitude score, items 26 to 32 were summed. However, items 27, 29, 31, and 32 were reverse scored. That is, a response of 1 on these items would be scored a 5; a response of 2 would be scored as a 4; and vice versa. Therefore, a higher total attitude score is indicative of a respondent in favor of the use of corporal punishment. The actual possible range of scores for the total attitude scale was 8 to 40. The DQ has been reviewed by an advisory panel of prominent abuse researchers including Murray Straus, Joan Durrant, Edward Zigler, Cynthia Price-Cohen, Stuart Hart, and Ralph Welsh, and the participating international scholars, and has been found to have strong content validity. Test-retest reliability was conducted with a two-week interval for re-test from the American sample, and was also found to be acceptable at 0.87.

### Procedures

Potential researchers from various part of the world were invited to join the cross cultural studies on corporal punishment by the American researchers through international bodies related to children maltreatment such as the International School Psychology Association (ISPA), the International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA), and the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). More researchers were invited to participate via an announcement in the Psychology International Winter 2000 Newsletter of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Office of International Affairs.

Ethical approval to conduct research at the university was obtained and students who agreed to participate signed the consent form before completing the questionnaires. The original English version of the questionnaire was used since all students are assumed to know the language well as English is the medium of learning instruction for medical student Year 4 and 5. The questionnaire was filled in the class after a brief description of the study by the researcher.

Correspondence established and maintained with researchers in the U.S. mainly via electronic mail and phone calls as necessary. The data collected in were sent to the U. S. via an e-mail attachment and synthesized for comparison.

## Results

The present article presents the main findings of the cross cultural study on corporal punishment as experienced by Malaysian students studying at school of Medical sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. We examined the percentage of participants who admitted receiving corporal punishment as a child, at home; the typical types of punishment they remembered getting and its severity; as well as the participants' perceptions and attitude towards the usage of corporal punishment at home in general.

The answers for Question 13 of the DQ were used to measure how many percent of the participants remember receiving corporal punishment when they were at home. The question read, "As a child did you ever receive corporal punishment in your home?" The results indicated that more than half (63%) of participants in the present study remembered being corporally punished at home, as children.

Items 20 and 21 of the Discipline Questionnaire were examined separately to determine whether the remembered experience of corporal punishment a child received in the home reached a physically abusive level. Item 20 relates to the severity of the typical incident of corporal punishment, while item 21 requires a response to the most severe incident of corporal punishment. According to Straus' 1994 definition, child abuse is defined as clear, identifiable harm or injury to the child that usually includes physical evidence of attacks on the child such as bruises, welts, contusions, broken bones, or scars. Based on that definition, two of the choices for respondents on items 20 and 21 were used to determine if the physical punishment they received reached an abusive level. Either of the following responses was considered to be abusive discipline: caused welts or bruises; or caused physical injury more serious than welts or bruises (such as bone fractures or breaks, large or deep cuts). Responses to either of these items were summed to determine the percentage of participants who were physically abused as children.

The results indicated that only 3% of the participants remembered the typical experience with corporal punishment that reaches an abusive level – which was defined as physical punishment that results in welts, bruises, bone fractures or breaks, or large/deep cuts. Five percent (5%) of the participants claimed to remember the most severe experience with corporal punishment that reaches an abusive level.

Question 19 of the DQ asked participants to remember the types of corporal punishment they remember receiving as children in the home and ticked the applicable types of punishment. The participants can choose to respond with as many choices as applied. Therefore, many subjects responded that they received multiple forms of corporal punishment at home as children (e.g., circled more than one response). Table 1 corresponds to question 19 of the Discipline Questionnaire on which participants were asked to remember the types of corporal punishment they remember receiving as children in the home. Not surprisingly, each culture has its own methods of corporal punishment.

The participants responded on questions that asked them to tick the types of corporal punishment they remember receiving as children at home. The results showed that pinching is the most commonly reported types of punishment used at home (35%), followed by slapping on the hand, arm or leg (31%), whipping using flexible material such as leather or rope (23%),

Table 1.  
*Types of corporal punishment used in participants' home.*

Response	Percentage (%)
Pinching	35
Slapping on the hand, arm, or leg	31
Whipping (Flexible material such as leather or rope)	23
Spanking (Slapping on the buttocks with open hand)	20
Slapping on face, head, or ears	12
Shaking	5
Hitting with object such as hairbrush or paddle	4
Arm twisting	3
Hair Pulling	3
Punching	2
Kicking	2
Beating up (hit as hard as possible, over and over)	2
Other	2
Throwing or knocking down	1
Choking	1
Burning or scalding on purpose	1
Threatening with a knife or gun	1

and spanking slapping on the buttocks with open hand (20%).

Other forms of punishment used at home reported by the participants were slapping on face, head or ears (12%), shaking (5%), hitting with objects such as hairbrush or paddle (4%) and arm twisting or hair pulling (3%). Punching, kicking, beating as hard as possible and repeatedly, throwing or knocking down, choking, burning or scalding on purpose or threatening with knife or gun were the least commonly reported types of punishment (2% and lesser) experienced by participants in Malaysia.

Finally, the participants' attitude towards corporal punishment was measured using seven single statements of 5-point scale. The score closer to 1 indicating an attitude against the use of corporal punishment, and scores closer to 5 indicating an attitude for the use of corporal punishment. The mean attitude score of the participants regarding the use of corporal punishment was 2.9, indicates a fairly favorable attitude towards corporal punishment.

## Discussion

The majority of the participants remembered receiving corporal punishment at home, when they were child. One of the possible reasons may due to the fact that some forms of 'corporal punishment' as defined in this study are amongst the common techniques used by the parents in Malaysia in parenting their children. The techniques including slapping on the

hand and whipping on the buttock, once were not regarded as forms of physical abuse, but much of as different ways of teaching or reprimanding the misbehaved children (Kaur, 2000; Ling, 2000; Tan, 2000; Nagrace, 2000). This idea is proven by a popular Malay proverb relating to family practices '*sayangkan tanak tangankan*', literally means 'if you love the child, then you should use your hands (i.e. physically beating etc) to teach them a lesson'. This notion of parenting is quite similar to the English proverbs 'spare the rod, spoil the child', which is in a way accepting the application of physical forms of punishment in parenting a child.

Even though the new act of child abuse, states severe punishment for the abusers the practice of child abuse still going on in Malaysian society. Many of the parents believe that non abusive physical abuse is beneficial but still there is no substantial evidence to prove this Larzelere (2000) states more research is needed on non abusive physical punishment. Most of the students in the present study shows the favourable attitude in using corporal punishment.

As using physical forms of punishment in teaching the child is acceptable and commonly practiced during the days when the participants in this study were children (around 1980s-1990s), the high reporting of receiving such punishment at home is not surprising. Around these years too, child abuse polices were not yet established, or at least fully implemented in the country, so the parents were possibly unaware of the implications of their actions. On top of that, many parents may have not been exposed to different or better techniques of teaching and/or parenting a child as the parents today, where marriage and family courses are made compulsory to new married couples. In comparison to the earlier generation, parents now may be better informed about effective parenting styles.

Despite having majority of participants admitted to remember having corporally punished as a child at home, very small number of them remembered and reported getting punishment that are severe or reach an abusive level. Thus, most of punishments given were mild in nature and possibly negligible. These results supported the above arguments that parents have been using corporal punishment mainly as a way to teach the child, rather than purposely abusing them. There are some studies (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993) support the corporal punishment as an acceptance of the Biblical literalism, the conviction that human sin demands punishment. Results of the present study similarly accepts the role of religion and the father as the Head of the family is responsible to maintain the discipline by using corporal punishment as and when necessary (Futa et al., 2001).

In another study, the corporal punishment is commonly seen in nuclear family with children of mixed parentage are reported (Nathan & Hwang, 1981). It may be true in Malaysia as Malaysia is a multi religious and multiracial country where one can find the marriages are common among different races.

One more study reports that widespread use of corporal punishment present in Indian setup, where as children finds this is unacceptable (Segal, 1999). This is contrary to our results as most of the students express favourable attitude towards corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment is a discipline method in which a supervising adult deliberately inflicts pain upon a child in response to a child's unacceptable behavior and / or inappropriate language. The immediate aims of such punishment are usually

to halt the offence, prevent its recurrence and set an example for others. The purported long-term goal is to change the child's behavior and to make it more consistent with the adult's expectations. In corporal punishment, the adult usually hits various parts of the child's body with a hand, or with canes, paddles, yardsticks, belts, or other objects expected to cause pain and fear (Dayton 1994).

Corresponding to above findings, the results further indicated that majority of Malaysian parents engage in 'milder' types of corporal punishment such as pinching, slapping on hand, arm or lap, and not throwing or knocking the child down, choking, burning or scalding on purpose or threatening with a knife or gun.

Having said that, it is logical that majority of the participants in this particular sample have had a fairly favorable attitude towards corporal punishment. They may perceive that corporal punishment, to certain extent, is not an action of abusing a child, but rather one of many ways to teach them a lesson in life.

## Summary

The findings of the present study suggest that majority of parents in Malaysia have been using corporal punishment on their children – primarily of mild types. Generally, the participants have had a fairly favorable attitude towards corporal punishment which may suggest that corporal punishment in this context is not perceived as an action of abusing a child, but rather one of many ways to teach the child a lesson in life.

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