

# Parental disciplinary strategies: experience of 12-year old school children

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the non-violent and violent parental disciplinary strategies experienced by 12-year old Sinhala speaking school children, by using the Sinhala version of the parent-child conflict tactics scale (CTSPC). One hundred and eleven children, with a relatively equal number of boys and girls, from two conveniently located schools in the Gampaha district took part in the study. The CTSPC was administered in groups of approximately 20 children. Non-violent discipline was the most commonly reported disciplinary type (annual rate 56%; lifetime rate 68%), followed by psychological aggression (annual rate 40%; lifetime rate 50%) and then corporal punishment (annual rate 33%; lifetime rate 46%). Though physically abusive acts were the least commonly experienced (annual rate 15%; lifetime rate 23%), it was nevertheless reported by a considerable number of children. The results indicate that a relatively large percentage of children experience psychological and physical violence at home. The results also suggest that parents may resort to physically abusive acts when "normal" violent disciplinary encounters escalate beyond their

control. Larger scale studies determining the prevalence and correlates of parental use of violent discipline need to be carried out in order to design culturally appropriate preventive intervention programmes aimed at combating child-directed violence in Sri Lanka.

**Key Words:** parental disciplinary strategies, experience, school children.

## Introduction

Parental disciplinary strategies vary across cultures to such an extent that cross-cultural agreement on what could be considered "violent" is difficult to reach (1). An informed discussion on discipline (2) requires an understanding of its types. However, there are no globally accepted definitions of the types of non-violent discipline, psychological aggression, corporal punishment or physically abusive acts. In such an absence, the present study defines non-violent discipline as "widely used alternatives to corporal punishment" (3), and, psychological aggression as "verbal and symbolic acts intended to cause psychological pain or fear" (3). Corporal punishment is defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child

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to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviour" (4), and physical abuse as "the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child, rather, the injury may have resulted from over discipline or physical punishment" (5).

The appropriateness of corporal punishment as a form of discipline is a heavily debated topic (6). Some childcare professionals have shown a qualified acceptance of it (7,8) whilst others consider it to be violent (4). Though Sri Lanka is a signatory to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (9), which mandates to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence, the Sri Lankan legal provisions still accommodate parental use of violent means when disciplining children (10). In fact, concern about the use of such violence, in the name of discipline, has been growing in professional and lay communities in the country (10) because of its adverse consequences (11). However, reliable statistics on the prevalence of violent (or non-violent) disciplinary practices is not available in Sri Lanka (10). Without such statistics, it would be inappropriate to design culturally relevant preventive intervention programs to combat violence against children (12). Thus, the objective of the present study was to determine the rate of parental disciplinary strategies experienced by a sample of 12-year old Sinhala speaking school children.

## Methods

The Sinhala version of the CTSPC (13) was used to obtain information on the violent

and non-violent disciplinary strategies experienced by 12-year olds. The instrument has shown adequate validity and reliability in Sri Lanka (13). Two conveniently located schools in the Gampaha district were chosen for the study. All children in grade seven who attended school on the day of the study were included. A total of 111 children (54 boys, 57 girls) took part. All gave complete information. The instrument was administered in groups of 20 children approximately (13).

Children were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. It was explained that there was no direct benefit to them from the study and the information provided would be useful when planning services for Sri Lankan children. The Education Ministry gave approval for the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Medicine, Colombo. Verbal consent of the participants was obtained.

## Results

The mean age of the sample was 12.1 years (range of 11-14 yrs.) with relatively even number of boys and girls.

Table 1 shows the annual and lifetime rate for the four disciplinary types assessed by the CTSPC as well as the rate for each disciplinary strategy of a given type.

The most frequently experienced disciplinary type (Table 1) was non-violent discipline (annual 56%; lifetime 68%), followed by psychological aggression (annual 40%; lifetime 50%), corporal punishment (annual 33%; lifetime 46%), and, physically abusive acts (annual 15%; lifetime 23%). In non-violent discipline, the most frequently reported disciplinary strategy was "explained why something was wrong" and in

Table 1 : Percentage of children that reported a disciplinary type/strategy

Disciplinary types/strategies	Prevalence rate (%)	
	Annual prevalence (%)	Lifetime prevalence (%)
<i>Category of non-violent discipline</i>	56	68
Explained why something was wrong	85	95
Gave you something else to do instead of what you were doing wrong	55	68
Took away privileges or prevented you from doing fun things	29	38
<i>Category of psychological aggression</i>	40	50
Shouted at you in a loud voice	65	76
Threatened to spank or hit you but did not actually do it	59	68
Called you dumb or lazy or some other name like that	40	60
Compared you to a child whom your parents considered as good and listed out your faults	36	51
Listed out your faults in front of others in a way that made you feel ashamed	35	38
Scolded/cursed you in bad words	32	41
Said that you would be sent away or kicked out of the house	12	16
<i>Category of corporal punishment</i>	33	46
Hit you on the bottom with something like the handle of a big spoon, broom, cane, a stick or some other hard object	55	64
Squeezed your ear	53	66
Hit your head with the knuckles	41	55
Pinched you	39	52
Slapped you on the hand, arm or leg	31	46
Slapped you on the face or head or ears	28	62
Spanked you on the bottom with his/her bare hand	28	44

Table 1 (ctd)

Table 1 *ctd.*

Shook you	13	28
Pulled your hair	12	38
<i>Category of physical abuse</i>	15	23
Hit you on some other part of the body besides the bottom with something like a handle of a big spoon, broom, cane, a stick or some other hard object	37	54
Hit you with a fist or kicked you hard	29	38
Beat you up (you were beaten over and over as hard as possible)	18	29
Threw or knocked you down	11	17
Grabbed you around the neck and choked you	06	11
Threatened you with a axe, pestle or knife	05	06
Burned or scalded you on purpose	02	03

Table 2 : Percentage of children by the range of disciplinary strategies in their lifetime, for psychological aggression, corporal punishment and physical abuse

Range of strategies experienced in lifetime	Disciplinary type		
	Psychological aggression (%)*	Corporal punishment (%)*	Physical abuse (%)
1	5	9	37
2	22	13	23
3	21	13	15
4	16	6	17
5	23	20	6
6	9	12	1
7	6	13	1
8	N/A**	8	N/A**
9	N/A**	4	N/A**

\* Column percentages may exceed/be less than 100% as the row values have been rounded up.

\*\* There is only a maximum of seven strategies in the physical abuse category

N/A = not applicable

psychological aggression, "shouted in a loud voice" (Table 1). In corporal punishment, the most commonly reported strategy was "hit on the bottom with something like the handle of a big spoon, broom, cane, a stick or some other hard object" and in physical abuse, "hit on some other part of the body besides the bottom with something like the handle of a big spoon, broom, cane, a stick or some other hard object" (Table 1).

Table 2 shows the percentage of children by the range of disciplinary strategies experienced by them in their lifetime, for psychological aggression, corporal punishment and physical abuse. Results indicate that a majority of children has experienced 5 different strategies of corporal punishment, 5 different strategies of psychological aggression, but only one strategy of physical abuse in their lifetime.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the parental disciplinary strategies experienced by 12-year-old Sinhala speaking school children.

When caregivers explain to a child what he/she had done wrong, it helps the child identify what aspects of his/her behaviour were deviant (14). Such constructive feedback assists the child to modify his/her behaviour such that he/she could show more acceptable behaviour in the future. It is encouraging to note that the most frequently reported disciplinary type in this study was that of non-violence (annual 56%; lifetime 68%) and that "explaining to the child what he or she did wrong" (annual 85%; lifetime 95%) was the most frequently indicated strategy (Table 1).

Though most children reported non-violent discipline, a large number had reported the disciplinary type of psychological aggression as well (annual 40%; lifetime 50%). The psychologically aggressive strategies of "shouting in a loud voice" (annual 65%; lifetime 76%) and being "threatened to hit or spank" (annual 59%; lifetime 68%) were the second and third most commonly reported disciplinary strategies in the study (Table 2). These results indicate that psychological aggression is commonly experienced by the study sample and this finding is similar to that of other countries (15, 16). Any act of psychological aggression by a parent is an unacceptable form of human interaction and by doing so the parent serves as a poor role model for the child (17). Further, psychological aggression has been shown to be associated with a host of negative consequences such as delinquency and psychological problems (15, 16). In this context, it is imperative that the Sri Lankan cultural belief that psychological aggression is a useful type of discipline need to be put in to correct perspective, especially because its occurrence is so frequent and its negative psychological outcomes are evidenced by research world-wide.

Corporal punishment (annual 33%; lifetime 46%) and physical abuse (annual 15%; lifetime 23%) were the third and fourth most frequently reported disciplinary types (Table 1). Though corporal punishment is a culturally accepted form of discipline in most countries as well as Sri Lanka, research has shown its association with a host of psychological, social and academic problems in the child (11). Further, corporal punishment is considered a risk factor for physical abuse (12), as most often,

perpetrators are "normal" persons (3) who when disciplining a child lose control of their anger or underestimate their strength (18) thus escalating a "normal" violent disciplinary encounter to abusive levels. Similarly, verbal aggression (a psychologically aggressive strategy) also potentially increases the risk of physical assault (19). The idea of not using psychological aggression in disciplinary encounters may be considered disastrous by most parents, especially as there is also pressure for not using corporal punishment (20). However, no psychological aggression or no corporal punishment does not mean no discipline (17). Parents should discipline their children, but by using non-violent means rather than violent means such as psychological aggression and corporal punishment which lends itself to psychological problems in the child (17) as well as physical abuse (12). Hence, if a country is to initiate policies and programmes to prevent child physical abuse and to promote psychological health in its children, it should educate parents to relinquish psychological aggression and corporal punishment in response to child misbehaviours, and instead, to adopt non-violent disciplinary strategies.

The study indicates that a majority of children had experienced a range of 5 different psychologically aggressive strategies and 5 different corporal punishment strategies in their lifetime (Table 2). This indicates that most parents tend to use a range of psychologically aggressive or corporal punishment strategies on their children. This may be because parents are familiar with a repertoire of such strategies due to its cultural acceptance. However, for physical abuse, a majority of children had

experienced only 1 of its strategies (Table 2) possibly because their parents are unfamiliar with such disciplinary methods. This lack of diversity may mean that most parents may resort to abusive strategies only when culturally accepted "normal" violent disciplinary encounters escalate beyond their control and when they are unable to manage their anger appropriately (12, 18).

An understanding of the correlates associated with the use of violent discipline among Sri Lankan parents would be useful. Such an understanding would guide the designing of preventive intervention programmes catering to at-risk groups. In recognising this need, the authors are currently studying the disciplinary experiences, consequences and correlates of a representative sample of children, envisioned to provide information that would be useful in designing preventive intervention programmes appropriate to the Sri Lankan culture.

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