



# Sex Differences in the Intergenerational Transmission of Harsh Punishment of Children in Ghana

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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to assess the relationship between mothers' and fathers' use of harsh punishment on their children and their retrospective accounts of their own experiences of harsh parenting in childhood, in Ghana. Participants consisted of 1,202 parents (601 mothers and 601 fathers) who completed a questionnaire on harsh disciplinary practices. The findings showed associations between mothers' and fathers' childhood experiences of harsh punishment and their current use of such disciplinary techniques on their own children. Exposure and transmission varied by sex in that males were more exposed to harsh punishment when they were young than females, and they also punished their own children more often than females. Both males and females assessed that they used much less harsh parenting than they themselves had been exposed to as young. The use of physical punishment is a shared cultural value that is rooted as part of the Ghanaian national values. However, transmission in the use of harsh disciplinary measures across generations may be broken if younger generations of parents learn to use alternative ways of disciplining a child.

**Keywords:** harsh parenting, physical punishment, intergenerational transmission, sex differences, Ghana

## Introduction

Physical punishment (PP) is a concept used to describe any punishment by a parent or other legal guardian in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light the pain might be (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012). This typically involves a broad range of acts including hitting (“smacking”, “slapping”, “spanking”) children, with the hand or with an implement - a whip, cane, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Milder forms such as pulling the child’s hair or ear as punishment also qualify as PP.

Harsh parenting is a broader concept than PP, and may include also verbal and psychological abuse, inferring psychological rather than physical pain.

There is clear evidence that PP is associated with a large number of adverse concomitants. A meta-analysis of 111 studies found a link between spanking and 13 out of 17 negative outcomes, most notably aggression, antisocial behaviour, and depression (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). PP is also associated with increased risk for alcohol abuse, divorce, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts during adulthood (Österman, Björkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014). Furthermore, PP is associated with somatic illnesses later in life, such as asthma (Hyland, Alkhalaf, Whalley, 2013; Lau, Liu, Cheung, Yu, & Wong, 1999), cardiovascular disease, and cancer (Fuller-Thomson & Brennenstuhl, 2009; Hyland et al., 2013).

An increasingly growing number of countries are now banning PP of children in all settings, including the home. On a global scale, 53 nations have protected children by law from PP in all settings (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019). Still, only 10% of the world’s children are protected by law.

## Intergenerational Transmission of Harsh Parenting Practices

Intergenerational transmission is defined as ways in which earlier generations, deliberately or not, influence attitudes and behaviour of subsequent generations (van Ijzendoorn, 1992). The transmission of harsh parenting practices is typically studied across generations by examining the associations between mothers’ and fathers’ present behaviours and their accounts of their past experiences of how they were disciplined as children.

Results of such studies consistently show that people who experienced PP as children are more likely than others to use similar disciplinary technique with their own children (Bailey, Hill, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2009; Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011), even accounting for explanatory models (e.g., hostile personality, child temperament; Muller, Hunter, & Stollak 1995; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) and its revised version social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) have often been used to explain intergenerational transmission of harsh parenting. The theory suggests that children learn aggressive discipline within

their family of origin through modelling and identification processes, and exhibit these behaviours when the opportunity arises later in life. An individual's behaviour is a direct result of parents' modelling effect, in combination with other forms of learning such as direct reinforcement, and genetic predispositions. Therefore, children are likely to use the same disciplinary methods that they themselves were disciplined with by their parents.

Studies have supported this view and shown somewhat different ways of transmission for fathers and mothers. Cappell and Heiner (1990) established a relationship between exposure to PP during childhood and the present use of such measure for mothers, but not for fathers. Both mothers' and fathers' use of PP was predicted by their own disciplinary childhood experiences, but the predictive power was stronger for mothers than for fathers (Muller et al., 1995).

Lunkenheimer, Kittler, Olson, and Kleinberg (2006) assessed associations between mothers' and fathers' present approval of PP and their retrospective account of their own PP experiences during childhood. They reported that the forms of transmission varied by sex for both the first and the second generation, in the sense that the mothers who experienced PP by their own mothers were more likely to approve the use of PP with their children, while fathers' present use of PP with their children was associated with their exposure to paternal PP in the original families.

These findings are consistent with a sex-specific social learning model, which suggests that the role modelling effect is facilitated by gender identification, and individuals consequently tend to model especially the role played by their same-sex parent (Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2003).

### **Sex Differences regarding Physical Punishment**

Studies of sex differences (between sons and daughters) in the prevalence of PP have been inconclusive, although the majority of studies have found boys to be exposed to more PP than girls (e.g., Afifi, MacMillan, Boyle, Taillieu, Cheung, Sareen, 2014; Douglas & Straus, 2006). However, some studies report no sex differences (Hanson, Self-Brown, Fricker-Elhai, Kilpatrick, Saunders, Resnick, 2006; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). In a study of harsh punishment in childhood based on a nationally representative sample from the United States, Taillieu, Afifi, Mota, Keyes and Sareen (2015) found that boys indeed experience more harsh punishment than girls.

When Lansford (2010) examined differences between mothers' and fathers' PP of their daughters and sons in nine countries, they found across the entire sample that boys were more frequently physically punished than girls, and mothers used PP more often than fathers did. There were significant differences across countries, with reports of PP being lowest in Sweden and highest in Kenya. Where sex differences were found, for instance in China, both parents and children reported that parents used PP more frequently with boys than with girls (Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004).

Cultural expectations could drive parents to treat boys and girls differently in terms of PP. Boys are supposed to be able to “handle” punishment better and without crying than girls. Being more physically active than girls, they may also provoke punishment more easily.

### **Physical Punishment Practices in Ghana**

In the late 1970s, the Ghana Education Service (GES) partially banned the use of PP in all schools, but permitted head teachers or their deputies to administer it to pupils (Agbenyega, 2006). The 1998 Children’s Act allows adults to use any punishment that is “justifiable” and “reasonable”, including violent punishment (National Laws on Labour, Social Security and Related Human Rights, 1998). The Ghana Education Code of Discipline allows teachers to hit a child up to six times in secondary school, and four times in basic school, if sanctioned and recorded by the Head Teacher. Ghana has not prohibited and eliminated all violent punishment of children at home, alternative care settings, day care, schools, although there are some prohibitions in penal institutions, and it is prohibited to use PP as sentence for a crime (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019).

This legitimization and acceptance by law may have contributed to a widespread acceptance of PP in Ghana. Some believe that the rejection of PP as a disciplinary method is a Western notion that risks ‘spoiling’ a child (Antonowicz, 2010). In Ghana, to be labelled as a “good child” is determined by how much respect one shows to adults (Twum-Danso, 2010). When children’s perceptions of PP were examined, 66% thought the behaviour constitutes an important part of their socialization process, and they felt that parents have a duty to punish them. However, they felt emotional pain if they perceived the punishment to be unjust. Older children are also given the authority to punish their younger siblings and cousins (Imoh, 2013).

Surveys suggest that over 70% of children have been caned in school, while 61.4% of children have also been caned at home; over 70% of children cite school as the place where they are most likely to experience physical punishment (Imoh, 2013). Caning remains the most common form of PP in Ghana.

Compared to 33 low and middle-income countries, Ghana ranks 7<sup>th</sup> highest in ‘violent discipline’ (UNICEF, 2010), with over 90% of children surveyed having experienced violent discipline in the preceding month (Imoh, 2010; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2014). Surveys find no difference in rates of PP in the home according to the child’s age or sex, or the parent’s level of education or wealth, or whether the family lives in urban or rural areas (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2010), suggesting that the practice is pervasive in Ghana.

The poorest children in a class are most likely to experience PP (Portela & Pells, 2015). In Ghana, some parents can afford to send their children to expensive private schools where only non-violent discipline is used, but the poorest families send their children to under-resourced schools with large classes and poorly trained and

supported teachers, thus increasing the chances that they will experience violence (Antonowicz, 2010).

A survey in 2011 showed that 94% of parents and 92% of students were in favour of PP in schools, whilst 64% of teachers thought it must be tolerated (Owen, 2012). This is in spite of some important personalities in Ghana speaking publicly against PP (Owen, 2012).

A justification for Ghanaians acceptance PP is based in the erroneous believe that Ghanaian children are better behaved than children in other countries that prohibit PP, and that this is a good value (Twum-Danso, 2010). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has strongly recommended that Ghana prohibits the use of PP and remove from teachers' guidelines all references to disciplinary measures using physical force (United Nations Children's Fund, 2006). Most recently, the Director of Ghana Education Services has himself called on teachers to stop using PP, since it accounts for increased cases of absenteeism and school drop-out (Yeboah- Obeng, 2016). Unfortunately, PP against children does not seem to be decreasing despite laws and pressure from the UN, and top figures publicly speaking against it.

The current study aimed at examining the relationship between mothers' and fathers' use of harsh parenting methods on their children, and their retrospective accounts of their own experiences of the same methods during their childhood.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

A total of 1,202 respondents (couples consisting of 601 females and 601 males) who were over 21 years of age and had children, volunteered to participate in the study. They were selected in order to match the social and educational strata in Ghana.

The age difference between males (mean age 44.8 yrs., *SD* 13.4) and females (mean age 43.4 yrs., *SD* 13.6) was not significant. The participants' level of education was coded as either having (1) no education, or finished (2) middle school, (3) secondary school, or (4) university/polytechnic. Regarding educational level, males and females did not differ from each other.

### **Instrument**

Harsh punishment was measured with an expanded version of the Brief Physical Punishment Scale (Österman & Björkqvist, 2007). The added items were culture specific and selected in order to match common practices of disciplinary methods in Ghana. There were two versions of the scale: in the first version, respondents were supposed to assess, on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), how often they were exposed to certain mentioned disciplinary measures when they were children. This version was thus retrospective. In the second version, they were to assess (on the same five-point scale) how often they exposed their *own* children to

the same disciplinary practices. The respondents were asked: "When you were a child, did an adult subject you to any of the following things?" The items, 12 in number, were as follows: (1) pull your hair, (2) pull your ear, (3) hit you with the hand, (4) hit you with an object, (5) throw an object at you that could hurt you, (6) scream at you or curse you, (7) refuse to talk with you, (8) refuse to give you food or water, (9) threaten not to love you, (10), call you stupid or lazy, (11) threaten to beat you, and (12) walk out on you or leave the house. All of the items did not measure PP, some of them measured verbal or psychological violence. As a whole, they were intended to measure typical forms of harsh parenting in Ghana.

In the second version, the respondents were asked whether and how often they had used the same disciplinary measures against their own children. The reliability of the scales was assessed with Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . It was .82 for the retrospective version (i.e. how often the respondents themselves had been exposed to harsh parenting as children), and .72 for the present-day version (how often they exposed their own children to the same disciplinary measures). The two scales will be referred to as "Punishment of Generation I" and "Punishment of Generation II". Please note that the same individuals served as respondents, in both cases.

## Procedure

Eight trained research assistants, who had all completed their Master's level studies in psychology and who had experience in conducting research, were employed to help with the collection of data.

## Ethical Considerations

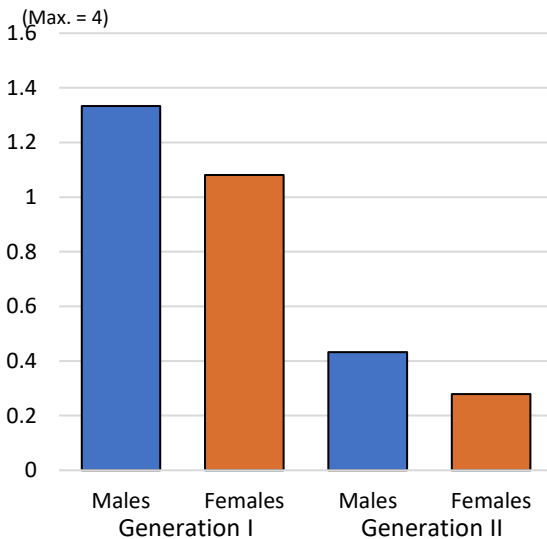
The study adheres to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), as well as guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012). The collected data are stored according to the regulations of the European Commission Data Protection (2016). Participation was voluntary without any form of economic or other incentive, all participants were adults, and the research was conducted with informed consent, strict anonymity and confidentiality.

## Results

The two scales, Punishment of Generations I and II, correlated highly with each other: .52 ( $p < .001$ ) for males, and .45 ( $p < .001$ ) for females. That is, there was high consistency of punishment practices across generations. Those parents, mothers as well as fathers, who had been harshly punished as children tended to punish their own children with the same methods.

The means of the scales are presented in Figure 1, separately for females and males. The results showed that males were significantly more often harshly punished as children than females [Generation I:  $t_{(1200)} = 4.491, p < .001$ ]. They also punished their own children more often than females did [Generation II:  $t_{(1200)} = 4.830, p < .001$ ].

When the results from the measurement of punishment of Generation I and Generation II were compared with each other with paired samples *t*-tests, separately from females and for males, a consistent trend was found: scores for punishment of Generation I were considerably higher, for both sexes [females:  $t_{(598)} = 22.697$ ,  $p < .001$ ; males:  $t_{(593)} = 26.235$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Both males and females reported that they themselves had been exposed to much more than they exposed their own children to.



**Figure 1. Mean scores for harsh punishment of Generations I and II.**

## Discussion

The study assessed the relationship between mothers' and fathers' harsh punishment of their children and their retrospective accounts of their own punishment experiences from their childhood. The findings showed clear associations between punishment practices of Generation I and Generation II, showing evidence of intergenerational transmission of harsh parenting methods.

According to their assessments, males were more exposed to harsh parenting when they were young than females. Both mothers and fathers exposed their sons more often to harsh punishment than their daughters, and this is consistent with previous studies (Bailey, Hill, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2009; Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Lansford et al., 2010; Afifi et al., 2014).

The study has certain limitations, such as the use of retrospective data. It could be questioned how correctly adults remember the punishments they were exposed to many years ago. The accuracy of retrospective reports on childhood abuse has been investigated in several studies. Brewin, Andrews, and Gotlib (1993), in a review of the literature, conclude that retrospective data are not so unreliable as critics seem to



think. A number of other studies have also found evidence for the reliability of retrospective reports on childhood maltreatment and abuse. (Bifulco, Brown, Lillie, & Jarvis, 1997; Brown, Craig, Harris, Handley & Harvey, 2007; Cournoyer & Rohner, 1996; Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Under-reporting has, on the other hand, been found in a number of studies, of e.g. childhood trauma (Williams, 1994), childhood abuse (Widom & Shepard (1996), parental maltreatment (Brown et al., 2007), and childhood exposure to physical and sexual abuse (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000; Widom & Morris, 1997). Thus, retrospective reports of childhood negative experiences appear to be relatively accurate, and, if anything, show under-reporting.

The respondents, both mothers and fathers, assessed that they exposed their offspring to considerably less harsh discipline than they themselves had experienced. This evaluation may partly be due to embellishment of their own behaviour. However, the discrepancies were so large that it appears likely that a decrease from Generation I to Generation II really had occurred.

Ghanaian parents in general believe that children who experience PP are better behaved than those who have not been exposed to PP (Twum-Danso, 2010). Therefore, by putting discipline at the centre of a child's upbringing, important cultural and social expectations are met. Socialization plays an important part in the process of generational transmission of aggression in Ghana. Ghanaian children themselves believe that physical punishment is important to the socialization process to ensure they grow up to become well-behaved and responsible members of their societies (Imoh, 2013). As parents put so much emphasis on the values of 'respect' and 'discipline', they use PP to instil these values in their children, from an early age. Children internalize these values and will continue to teach them to their own children.

Some countries have been successful in banning PP through enacting new laws, e.g., Sweden and Finland, so there is evidence that the banning of PP minimizes its use. There are laws banning PP in most situations in Ghana, but the practice continues. Rules that have worked in one cultural setting might not work in a different one, not because of the law itself, but when the law comes into conflict with traditional and cultural values, citizens of post-colonial nations might consider culture and tradition as a better alternative than 'foreign' laws.

PP is not only a part of the parent-child relationship in the Ghanaian social and cultural context, it is also seen as a component of the *adult*-child relationship where all adults, including relatives, teachers, and neighbours, all play a role in the socialization process (Twum-Danso, 2010). The acceptance of PP as a legitimate form of punishing a child to correct and control them is deeply entrenched in the Ghanaian culture; therefore, to eliminate the practice may seem to reject a cultural norm.

Efforts to eliminate PP in Ghana could, besides legal prohibition of the practice, focus on changing parents' views on parenting and the way children are seen in the



Ghanaian society in general. Such efforts could include providing an alternative cultural definition and understanding of a 'good person'. Rather than judging children as 'good' or 'bad' based on how much they respect adults, parents could focus on how the society speaks to and treats people when they have done something 'wrong', and develop a clearer sense of appropriate and inappropriate treatment of children.

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