

# CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN: A SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL SURVEY



**Save the Children**  
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ANDREW DAWES\*, ZOSA DE SAS KROPIWNICKI\*\*, ZUHAYR KAFAAR\*\*\* &  
LINDA RICHTER\*\*\*

## **Affiliations:**

\* Child Youth and Family Development Human Sciences Research Council, University of Cape Town and University of Oxford.

\*\* University of Oxford.

\*\*\* Child Youth and Family Development Human Sciences Research Council and University of Stellenbosch.

\*\*\*\* Child Youth and Family Development Human Sciences Research Council and University of Kwazulu-Natal.

**Address for correspondence:** Andrew Dawes: Child Youth and Family Development Human Sciences Research Council, PO Box X9182 Cape Town 8000. email:

[adawes@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:adawes@hsrc.ac.za)

## INTRODUCTION

The study to be reported here is the first South African national survey of attitudes to the use of corporal punishment by caregivers. It should be noted here that this study formed part of a larger study of intimate violence that examined the prevalence of, and links between, partner violence and corporal punishment. These results and full technical details are reported elsewhere (Dawes, De Sas Kroppiwinski, Kafaar, & Richter in press; Dawes et al 2004).

There is a dearth of good information available on the incidence and prevalence of corporal (physical) punishment in the South African context or the disciplinary attitudes used by parents and caregivers to warrant their use of corporal punishment. However, the limited data suggests that it is very common and widely accepted mode of child rearing in the South African context.

Current gaps in our knowledge compromise our ability to understand this form of violence against children, and weaken efforts to create viable intervention strategies in order to address the problem. It is therefore hoped that evidence produced by this study can be used to inform intervention.

In addition to reporting on the extent and severity of corporal punishment by South African parents we report on predictors of this form of intimate violence. Attitudes to corporal punishment in schools are also addressed. Finally, the study provides baseline data that can be used to track change over time, as various initiatives are undertaken to deepen a culture of democracy and children's rights.

The study focuses on the views and practices of persons over 16 years of age. Children were not included as participants in this research. As it is critical to access the views and voices of children, children will participate in a series of future studies that build on participatory work commenced by Save the Children Sweden (2002).

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: RISK FACTORS AND OUTCOMES

The literature review that follows is not intended to be exhaustive (except in the South African case). The objective is to outline the main issues. Material for the review was gathered from the following main sources:

International peer reviewed literature:

- Recent reviews of theoretical contributions and empirical findings in the field that were published between 1993 and 2003.

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### <sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements

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- Seminal studies in the above fields published in the past 30 years.

South African literature since 1994:

- All the peer reviewed papers and empirical studies that could be sourced;
- Relevant 'grey literature' including unpublished reports.

Journal articles and other literature were sourced using key-word searches of electronic databases such as PsychInfo, Ebscohost and others. South African grey literature was obtained from a range of sources including the collections of research institutes and relevant Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Incidence rates and risk factors associated with the incidence of parental *corporal punishment* will be identified. Research quality, methodological inconsistencies and challenges are discussed as they pertain to the measurement of the prevalence and incidence of corporal punishment. Finally, various challenges will be posed for future researchers.

### **The Incidence of Corporal Punishment in South Africa**

According to Pete (1999), corporal punishment is interwoven into the way patterns of power were established and entrenched historically in South African society. Authoritarian systems tend to be ideologically based on the notion that discipline must come in the form of punishment because most members of the society are incapable of critical thinking and self-discipline, and thus need to be taught to fear disobedience. It was extensively used in parts of South Africa, which were under colonial rule.

It was sanctioned by law under Apartheid and later entrenched through the efforts of the Dutch Reformed church and Christian National Education schemes (Porteus et al, 2001). Corporal punishment became one of the ways in which the patriarchal, racial and authoritarian Apartheid system entrenched itself (Bower, 2002).

There is little good information available on the prevalence of parental corporal punishment in South Africa. However, the limited available evidence suggests that it is highly prevalent and socially accepted. For example, a survey conducted among 300 students from the University of the Witwatersrand found that only 41.2% of black students, 30.4% of English-speaking whites and 8% of Afrikaans speaking whites stated that they were *not* hit at home (Rakitzis, 1987).

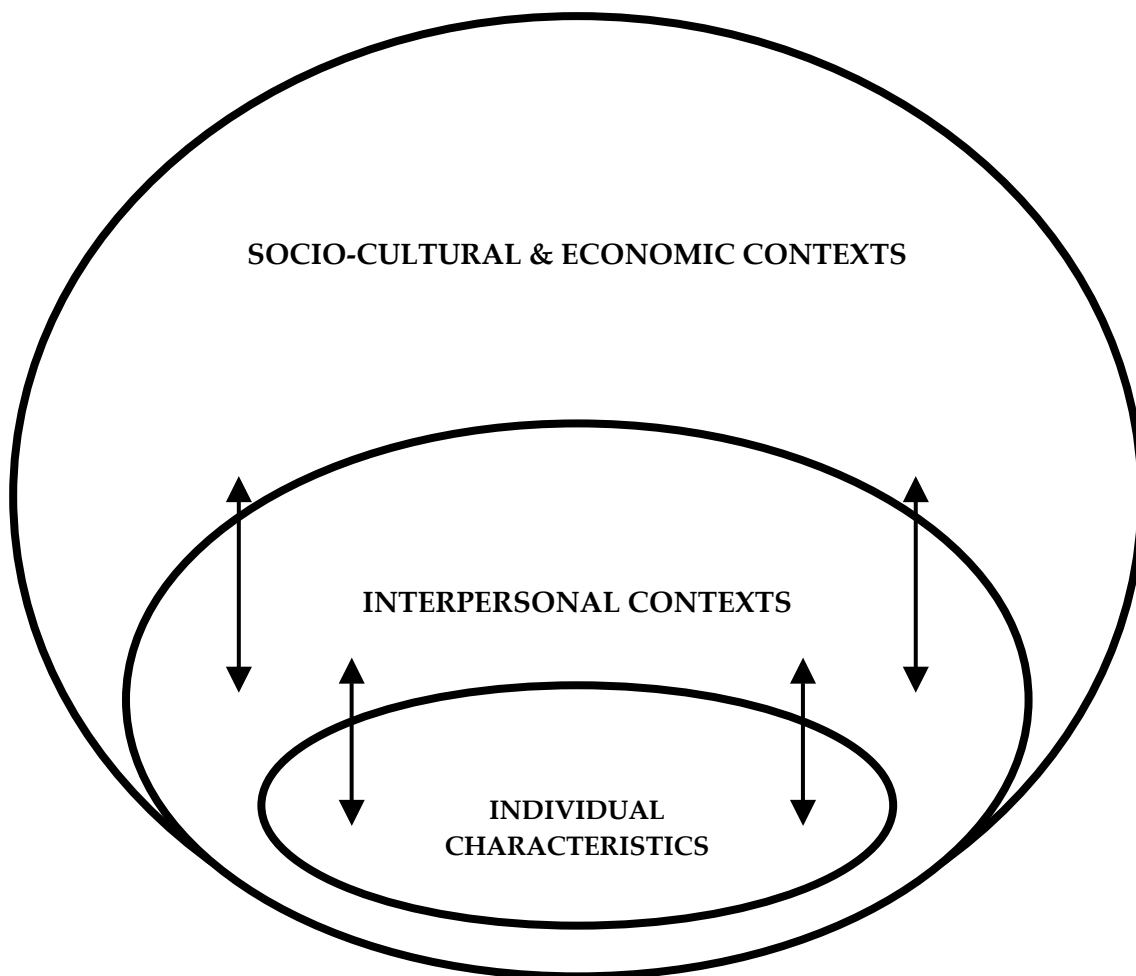
There is however a definite need for updated quantitative and qualitative studies that address the incidence of parental corporal punishment in the South African context in light of the risk factors identified in international reviews and seminal studies to which we turn below.

## Theoretical Framework

It needs to be recognized that there are multiple pathways leading to physical punishment as illustrated in Figure 1, which is based on a synthesis of Tolan and Guerra's (1998) biopsychosocial approach and that of Becker and Kaplan (in Becker, 1994).

According to this framework, levels of influence are nested within one another. The concentric circles suggest that individual characteristics are nested within contexts of interpersonal relationships, which in turn are nested within socio-cultural and economic systems.

**Figure 1: A multilevel model of risk factors**



## INCIDENCE RATES AND RISK FACTORS

### Socio-cultural & Economic Context Risk factors for Corporal Punishment

#### 1: Culture, Attitudes and beliefs:

Families are embedded in a social-cultural context which impacts upon patterns of family interaction and the values and skills that parents transmit to their children through

socialization. The socio-cultural context also provides the scripts for childrearing and belief systems that guide parenting.

Ideologies of the child, the family and of patriarchy are central background factors in determining the manner in which adults in our society construct their relationships toward children. It is the character of normative constructions of the power relations between adults and children and adult rights over children makes violence to the young by adults possible (but by no means inevitable).

It is attitudes to child rearing that lie behind the use of different discipline techniques, and it is important that these be understood if interventions to promote non-violent discipline are to be developed. Child rearing attitudes have their roots in taken for granted cultural practices regarding discipline. The vast majority of cultures have used, and continue to use physical punishment of children, and believe it to be appropriate (Nilsson, 2002). Bartholdson (2001) notes that "in almost all cultures, corporal punishment is an integral part of child rearing" (p.5).

He cites studies that show that over 90% of American, British, and Indian parents say they smack or use sticks and other instruments to discipline young children.

The treatment of the women and the young tells us much about adult behaviour: about cruelty, abuse of power, willingness to commit excesses and flout norms, and the ease with which the women and the young were denied their humanity. It tells us about the uses and abuses of childhood that are sanctioned by society.

Lloyd De Mause (1982) has noted that cruelty to children has been the historical norm rather than the exception. The opening line of his volume *'Foundations of Psychohistory'*, reads as follows: "The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken" (p.1).

If physical punishment is so common across the world, we have to ask whether we are in fact emerging or not. Be that as it may, and noting the difficulties of inferring the behaviour of groups from often sketchy records, De Mause presents a compelling enough case that ill-treatment (by contemporary standards) and violence to children is commonplace across the western historical record, and it seems to be fundamentally related to the low status of children relative to adults.

The primary forces influencing the status and treatment of children through history have been and remain economic and religious / ideological. In pre-modern times and prior to about 7 years of age children were valued for their economic potential as workers and contributors to the family income. And punishments were frequently meted out in the context of the child's failure to perform appropriately. Arguably, modern children occupy a contradictory position as precious beings but also economic burdens. (Scheper-Hughes, 1989). As she notes, when conditions for parents get tough, the risks of violence to burdensome children increase. Indeed, the cross-cultural literature suggests that child maltreatment is less likely in cultures where children are valued for their economic utility, cultural heritage, lineage, emotional pleasure and satisfaction (Ferrari, 2002). And when

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children are valued positively, there is more tolerance for misbehaviour and less use of punitive discipline (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999).

South Africa is no stranger to the institutionalization of physical punishment of the young. During the Apartheid era, corporal punishment was widely used as a sentence for juveniles in the justice system, and in schools as the primary method of discipline. In 1997, the Abolition of Corporal Punishment Act abolished the former practice, and the South African Schools Act of 1996 outlawed corporal punishment in schools. This policy decision followed shortly after South Africa's signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

It was certainly not greeted with enthusiasm by all, as is evident in a letter to *'The Teacher'* (April 1999, p. 19). The moral tone and warrant for the author's position is clear:

"In the past, when you had the option of giving a hiding, the children were far more likely to behave and listen. I really dread to think of the caliber of adults we are going to be producing in the next ten years. I fear New Age philosophy is slowly eating away at the core of our moral fibre and destroying our children's lives."

The way adult-child relationships were understood before the Schools Act came into force, made it legitimate for a teacher to physically assault a pupil. Beyond the physical act was the cultural goal of producing good citizens through teaching obedience to authority. Coupled to this was the cultural belief that beatings served this purpose, as is well illustrated in the above quote. While adults confirmed their power relationship with children, the young learnt a range of scripts about their place in society, as well as notions of power, justice, and the use of violence to solve problems.

During the South African Law Commission deliberations (SALC, 2001; 2002) that were associated with the drafting of the Children's Bill (at the time of writing before parliament and due to replace the Child Care Act of 1983), the question of introducing legislation to ban physical punishment in the home featured strongly. This path was ultimately rejected by the Commission, which among other points, recognized the difficulty of policing private space, the risk of criminalizing caregivers, and perhaps most important, awareness that there might be significant resistance on the part of cultural and religious groupings.

The Commission did however recommend the removal of the common law parental defence of the *right to reasonable chastisement* (of their children) from the statutes. This provision continues to raise the risk that parents accused of abuse could claim parental rights as a defense, and get away with violent treatment of their child. The removal of the parental defence would have the effect of criminalizing corporal punishment. It would have the same status as Assault in the Common Law. Children would be placed on the same level as adults were this amendment to the law to be accepted.

When the community accepts corporal punishment, parents feel justified in using it. Straus, (2000) notes that corporal punishment is legal in all states of the USA, and that most Americans favour its use (Straus & Mathur, 1996; Straus & Mathur, 1995; Straus and Stewart, 1999). It is of interest that support for corporal punishment in the USA is declining. Studies conducted between 1968 and 1994, show a drop from 94% to 68% over time (Straus &

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Mathur, 1996). Higher rates of corporal punishment were found in rural areas and in southern parts of America even after controlling for demographic factors such as education, income, population group and religious affiliation (Giles-Sims et al, 1995).

Studies suggest that parenting beliefs are, not surprisingly, related to parenting styles (Crouch & Behl, 2001; Locke & Prinz, 2002).

Religion appears to play a role in the use of corporal punishment, but the evidence is complex and inadequate to draw profound conclusions. For example, conservative Protestant religions tend to exhibit higher approval rates of corporal punishment when compared to Catholics and atheists (Dietz, 2000; Giles-Sims et al, 1995). Other studies indicate religiosity or religious commitment plays a role – some research indicates that *positive child-oriented* discipline is associated with religiosity (Gershoff, 2002).

The role of ethnicity is complex, and Straus and Stewart (1999) have shown in the USA, that the relationship between ethnicity and parental corporal punishment is inconclusive.

On the one hand it is argued that African-American parents are more likely to use corporal punishment than white parents as a function of their slave and oppressed heritage. Corporal punishment was used to secure obedience in a dangerous world. During the slave period in the USA, misbehaviour would result in being sold and lynched. The argument is that corporal punishment thus emerged as the most appropriate way of socializing a child to adapt to that type of society (Ferrari, 2002).

Baumrind (1991) and Belsky (1991) argue that the environment in which contemporary working class African American's live promotes the use of corporal punishment as a way of preparing children for the harsh world. For example, ghetto life is characterized by high levels of violence, peer pressure to use drugs, and to engage in crime. Rearing children under such conditions is very challenging, and prevention of risks to children requires firm parental monitoring and control. Some studies report that these parents see corporal punishment as a way of reducing the risk of their children engaging in destructive behaviour (Straus, 1994; Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994).

Other studies have found that African Americans have similar or lower rates of corporal punishment (Straus & Lauer, 1992:). Straus and Stewart (1999) argue that such inconsistencies can be explained by methodological biases. Ferrari argues that mental health professionals judge parenting behaviour by Anglo-American standards and definitions of abuse and fail to include a sampling of family, friends and neighbours in large studies such as the National Incidence Survey from whom white children are likely to be reported.

Straus notes that studies often do not control for confounding variables such as low SES, ethnic/minority group status, violence between parents and parental abuse of alcohol and drugs (Ibid; Straus & Stewart, 1999).

Instead of arguing that ethnicity does or does not *cause* corporal punishment, one needs to see socio-cultural factors as influencing proximal practices through their moderating influence on interpersonal relations and individual proclivities. For example, male gender

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and a history of violence in the family of origin (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999) have been identified as moderating factors.

Leaving the USA aside, studies of cultural practices and obedience practices in Africa suggest that corporal punishment is certainly used by parents to control their children in the face of danger. Similar to inner city life in the USA, in rural contexts, the need for obedience is evident in contexts that are perceived as dangerous for children. Strict discipline that promotes obedience is believed to be a source of protection. Compliant children, who listen to their care-givers, regardless of who they are, will be regarded as safer than those who are freer to exercise their will (LeVine et al, 1994).

The point here is that parents who use physical discipline *believe* in its appropriateness and efficacy, and this belief is commonly supported by local norms. Whether it is indeed effective in protecting is a separate matter. It is the belief system that is of interest to us here.

However, an authoritarian context does not only produce the conditions for corporal punishment, it may be a vehicle for its reduction as Bartholdson (2001) argues. Korbin (1991) points out that in close-knit communities the presence of elders who have authority beyond the confines of their families can protect children from parental disciplinary excesses. In addition, authority structures such as these can be used to drive changes in community practices. Once the elders are convinced of the merits of the change, their local authority can be used to implement changes for the better of children, as has occurred in China, resulting in reductions of child maltreatment.

Finally, there is evidence that rapid social change of the kind occurring in South Africa, particularly urbanisation accompanied by poverty and the loss of cultural patterns of relationship and surveillance (of caregivers), is associated with increases in child maltreatment. However the relationship between these factors is complicated and not well understood.

## *2: Low socio-economic status*

A number of studies and reviews have suggested that low socio-economic status is a significant predictor for the use of parental corporal punishment (Dietz, 2000; Keagan, 2001; Straus & Mathur, 1995; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Gershoff, 2002). Low SES parents tend to use corporal punishment more often than middle class parents. Straus (1994) does however argue that incidence and chronicity is not significantly related to income. Rather, levels of stress determine the influence of socio-economic status on the use of corporal punishment. Stress is associated with increased parental depression and marital conflict both of which are predictors of punitive and hostile parenting practices (Crouch & Behl, 2001). The likelihood that stress is positively associated with child abuse and corporal punishment is moderated by beliefs related to parenting and corporal punishment in particular. In other words, parents who face high levels of stress but do not believe in corporal punishment and the use of physical force in interventions with children are not likely to use corporal punishment (Crouch and Behl, 2001; Gershoff, 2002).



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In addition, as noted above, the use of physical punishment by caregivers living in dangerous communities may have little to do with stress. Rather it may well be seen as an adaptive way of controlling their children and protecting them from danger.

## **Interpersonal Context Risks for Corporal Punishment**

### *1: Male-dominated household:*

Research suggests that parents in male-dominated households are more likely to utilize corporal punishment as a means of disciplining their children. Such households tend to be characterized by hierarchical and rigid gender roles. Parenting styles in these families tend to be aggressive, authoritarian and likely to be based on physical rather than verbal punishment techniques, all directly related to patriarchal attitudes (Ferrari, 2002; Straus, 2000).

### *2: Marital conflict*

Marital conflict has been shown to have direct and indirect effects on the use of corporal punishment (Keagon, 2001; Gershoff, 2002; Straus & Yodanis, 1996).

Indirect effects are illustrated by children who witness marital conflict; they become distressed and aggressive, imitating their parent's conflict resolution styles. Parents then attempt to halt this problematic behaviour by using corporal punishment.

Another example of an indirect effect is when stressed abused women divert their anger and conflict from the spouse towards the child (O'Keefe, 1995).

Direct effects are evident when marital aggression spills over into the parent-child relationship, as is the case with violent fathers who are irritable and uninvolved in parenting practices. Holden and Ritchie (1991) show that violent husbands use less physical affection, and more negative control techniques such as physical punishment with their children.

Finally, conflictual parental relationships are a risk factor in the incidence of parental corporal punishment. Inconsistent disciplinary techniques may be the result of poor communication and disagreements about child rearing between maritally discordant parents. This may alter parenting behaviour in the presence of a spouse or result in inconsistent behaviour within one parent (Holden & Ritchie, 1991).

### *3: Family Structure:*

Family size as a risk factor has yielded contradictory results (Asdigian & Straus, 1997). Using data from the 1985 US National Family Violence Survey, they controlled for birth order and age. The results showed a linear relationship between the prevalence and chronicity of corporal punishment and the number of children in the family.

In fact Straus suggests that a decline in the American fertility rate may partly explain the decreasing use of corporal punishment noted above. High numbers of children influence parenting styles; because with more children, parents have less time and energy to reason with their offspring, and they resort to corporal punishment as the quickest disciplinary technique. Furthermore, larger families place economic pressure on parents who need to

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work more hours to support their families, become isolated from social supports, and resort to more harsh discipline (Asdigian & Straus, 1997; Gershoff, 2002).

Finally, higher rates of corporal punishment have been found among single parents and stepparents (Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Gershoff, 2002). The argument is that such persons experience greater stress as a result of parenting alone, particularly when under conditions of economic hardship. For example, divorced women commonly experience a drop in income and financial stress. The additional strain may result in inconsistent discipline and physical punishment.

### **Individual Characteristics and Corporal Punishment**

#### *1: Caregiver Psychological functioning, Temperament and Gender:*

Caregiver's psychological functioning and temperament predicts their use of corporal punishment, particularly those who are depressed, anxious and aggressive use corporal punishment more frequently. According to Keagon (2001) maternal depression is a significant risk factor for the use of corporal punishment.

Mothers use corporal punishment more often than fathers (Dietz, 2000; Gershoff, 2002; Straus et al, 1998), and the difference is greatest for young children. This finding must be interpreted within the context of maternal and paternal roles in the family. Clearly, mothers have greater opportunities to discipline children simply because they assume the role of primary caretakers and tend to spend more time with their children.

The chances of mothers utilizing corporal punishment are thus higher than fathers even though fathers tend to assume the role of disciplinarians in the family. This is consistent with findings that fathers have more favourable attitudes to corporal punishment than mothers, even though increased chronicity (frequency) is associated with mother's use of corporal punishment (Straus and Stewart, 1999).

#### *2: Age and educational attainment:*

A larger percentage of younger parents use corporal punishment than older parents (Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Straus, 1994; Dietz, 2000). In terms of chronicity, younger parents use corporal punishment at least 38% more often than older parents (Straus and Stewart, 1999). In other words, the number of incidences of parental corporal punishment and severe assaults decreases with the age of the parent. This is attributed to young parents' lack of experience with children, their propensity to abuse alcohol, and the greater economic stress that they face. According to Keagon (2001) and Giles-Sims and his colleagues (1995), this relationship is compounded when young parents have a low level of educational attainment. They argue that low education limits their knowledge of alternative disciplinary methods; alternative means of problem solving and hinders any understanding of the negative effects of corporal punishment. Furthermore, low levels of educational attainment are frequently correlated with low status and low paying occupations that are in turn associated with stress.

### *3: Violence in the family of origin:*

As noted previously, in our discussion of partner violence, a history of violence in the family of origin is a significant predictor of parenting behaviors and attitudes (Dietz, 2001; Ferrari, 2002; Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999; Straus, 2000). For example, a study of university students found that those who were spanked were more likely to approve of corporal punishment and said they intended to use it to discipline their own children.

## **The Characteristics of the Child and the Risk of Corporal Punishment:**

### *1: Psychological Functioning and Temperament:*

Children who are spanked more often exhibit more socio-emotional problems in the form of hyperactivity, aggression and low self-regulation. It is not clear however whether these are the cause or the result of corporal punishment. Some authors argue that caregivers resort to punitive and harsh disciplinary measures as a means of stopping pre-existing undesired behaviour (Keagan, 2001). However, other evidence suggests that the presence of socio-emotional problems may be caused by corporal punishment rather than constituting a factor behind its use (Gershoff, 2002). It is most probable that the two are closely connected. Difficult children provoke more controlling discipline, which exacerbates the child's problems. Independently, harsh discipline is likely to give rise to emotional problems.

### *2: Gender of the child:*

Corporal punishment is used more on boys than on girls (Dietz, 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Gershoff, 2002). Various explanations have been proposed for this relationship. For example, boys may be more likely to engage in misbehaviour more frequently than girls leading parents to adopt harsher disciplinary measures on boys (Straus and Stewart, 1999). Alternatively, and more likely, parents' decisions regarding disciplinary techniques are influenced by their gender role expectations - parents may believe that boys are more aggressive and require greater discipline. Parents may also use corporal punishment because they aim to socialize boys to be more aggressive in order to reinforce traditional gender norms (Giles-Sims et al, 1995).

### *3: Age of the Child:*

The use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure is largely moderated by the child's age (Dietz, 2000; Keegan, 2001; Straus and Mathur, 1995; Straus and Stewart, 1999; Giles-Sims et al, 1995; Asdigan and Straus, 1997; Straus et al, 1998; Gershoff, 2002). Research in the U.S.A. suggests that 90% of children are smacked (Giles-Sims et al, 1995). Overall prevalence then declines after five years of age.

Just over half of a nationally representative sample of American parents interviewed in 1995 hit their children at age twelve, a third at age fourteen, and thirteen percent at age seventeen. Severity measured by hitting the child with a belt or stick was the greatest at ages five to eight (Straus and Stewart, 1999). The age differences in discipline practice is influenced by the extent to which the child is conceived to have the cognitive ability to understand the disciplinary message and by the involvement of alternative forms of authority such as peers who may be regarded as hindering the success of such punishment (Gershoff, 2002).

### Summary of Risk factors

The use of parental corporal punishment is associated with a range of complex interacting factors. Cultural scripts on parenting and constructions of childhood, impact on parent's beliefs about childrearing and consequently their tendency to use corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure. The relationship between ethnicity and corporal punishment is inconclusive. The evidence does however suggest that such a relationship is confounded by variables related to low socio-economic status and the violence that often accompanies such poverty-stricken communities.

Within the family, risk factors include patriarchal and authoritarian households, high levels of marital conflict, single-parent status and large family size particularly in the presence of high levels of economic stress. Caregivers who use corporal punishment frequently tend to be young, have a low level of educational attainment and have experienced violence in their family of origin. Mothers tend to use corporal punishment more frequently than fathers because they spend more time with their children; however, studies show that fathers believe in the use of corporal punishment more than mothers.

Children who are spanked often, tend to be male, between the ages of five and eight and tend to exhibit socio-emotional problems although these problems may be caused by the use of corporal punishment. Hence, various risk factors interact to ensure the incidence of parental corporal punishment. There is no information available on risk factors behind parental corporal punishment in the South African context.

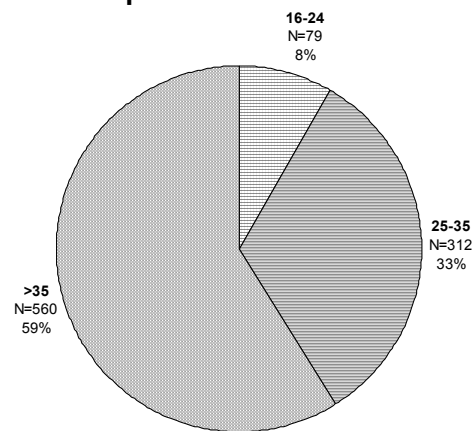
## METHODOLOGY

### Sample characteristics

The national SASAS sample was stratified explicitly by province and implicitly by population group to ensure adequate representation across the country. A maximum potential of 3500 households was selected in order to facilitate a realised sample of 2497 participants, distributed by province and population group as reported in Table 1 above.

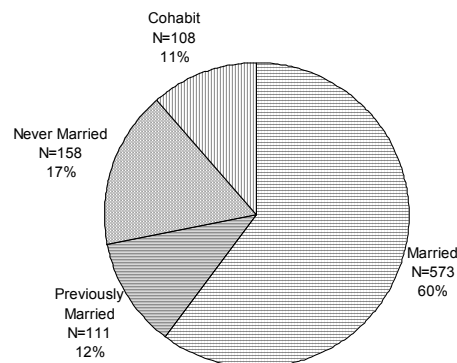
A sub group of the SASAS participants who had children under 18, and who answered the questions on child discipline and corporal punishment was extracted. This procedure yielded **925 participants**. It was felt that the most valid responses to questions on corporal punishment would be provided by people with children. Their characteristics are noted in the Figures below.

**Figure 2: Age Groups of Participants with Children under 18 in the household**



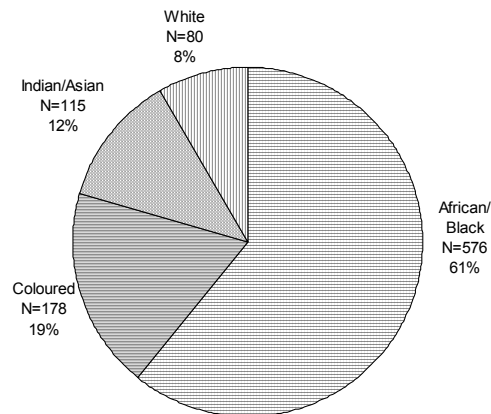
As is evident in Figure 3 below, most of the parents are married. **Eleven** percent of the parents are cohabiting **but** not married. The 'never married' and 'previously married' groups do not live with a partner.

**Figure 3: Marital Status of Participants with Children under 18**



When attempting to examine possible cultural differences in disciplinary attitudes and use of corporal punishment, language and population group variables were considered. After preliminary analyses, population group was considered to be an appropriate proxy for cultural group. Groupings are reported in Figure 4. The majority are African as this reflects the population distribution of the country.

**Figure 4: Population Group distribution of Participants with Children under 18**



## Measures and Procedure

SASAS comprises 324 questions covering a range of social attitude topics including *demographic* items designed to tap such characteristics as the participant's age, socio-economic status, language group, population group, educational level and religious background. A number of these variables were used for the current study. They will be specified where appropriate.

### *The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory AAPI*

The AAPI (Bavolek, 1984) assesses four constructs relating to parenting: expectations of children; parental empathy; belief in physical punishment; and role reversal. It has been validated over twenty years of research. For the current study, and due to the need to restrict the volume of items in the SASAS, only the four highest loading items in the *parental empathy* scale and the three highest in the *belief in physical punishment* subscale were utilized. They were subjected to psychometric analysis to ensure their reliability.

The Alpha coefficient for the Attitude to Empathic Parenting Scale was 0.690 which is acceptable. In the case of the Belief in Physical Punishment Scale, reliability was poor (unacceptably low Alpha coefficients). In order to address this problem scale item with the highest correlation to the total scale score was selected as an indicator of an attitude to the use of corporal punishment.

### *The use of corporal punishment in the home*

Corporal punishment at home was assessed by asking the respondents the following questions:

*"When was the last time you or your partner smacked one of the children in your family once with a hand?"*

And:

*“When was the last time you or your partner beat one of the children in your family with a strap, a belt, a stick or a similar object?”*

Response options are in the Appendix.

#### *Administration of the interview schedule*

The interview schedule was administered face-to-face in the home language of the participants. Wherever possible the population group and language of the participant and the fieldwork interviewer were matched to facilitate maximum empathy and cultural sensitivity. Interviewers explained to participants that they were participating voluntarily, that the information was confidential (we did not record names), and that they could terminate the interview at any time.

## RESULTS

### **Patterns of Corporal punishment**

Corporal punishment refers to “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (Straus, 1994, p. 4). We note that this definition is problematic because clearly, smacking can indeed cause injury. However, Straus’ definition is widely used in the field.

A distinction is made between the use of the hand to *smack* or *spank* or slap the child, and the *use of a belt or some other object* to administer punishment. The intention here is to provide an index of severity of punishment. While injury can and does occur when either form is used, when an object is used to beat the child, injury is more likely.

In order to assess prevalence of ‘mild’ corporal punishment among parents with children under 18 years, they were asked *when the last time was that he or she or a partner had smacked one of the children in their family with their hand (mild corporal punishment for present purposes)*. Regardless of the time frame, any parent who stated that he or she had smacked a child in the family was recorded as using smacking.

To assess the prevalence of ‘severe’ corporal punishment, the parents were asked *when was the last time was that he or she or a partner had beaten one of the children in their family with a strap, belt, stick or similar object*. Regardless of the time frame, any parent who stated that he or she had beaten a child in the family was recorded as using beating.

The age of the child is also recorded so as to find out the most common age for the two forms of corporal punishment.

#### *Prevalence of corporal punishment – all parents with children under 18*

In this data we cannot strictly speaking use the term *prevalence* as we have not sampled from the universe of parents – the SASAS is a household sample. Given the sampling frame used for the study, it is however very likely that the results are reflective of the discipline practices of the South African population.

Ninety three percent (93%) of the parents in the SASAS investigation answered questions related to smacking. The table below shows that 57% of them (or their partners) had smacked their children at some point. The rest, at 43% report never having smacked their children – a surprisingly large proportion given figures cited previously in relation to the USA and British parents, where over 90% report smacking (Bartholdson, 2001).

Sixteen percent of parents report smacking in the past week, and an additional fourteen percent smacked their children in the remaining three weeks of the month (making a total of 30% reporting smacking in the past month).

**Table 1: Period during which a child was smacked with a hand**

Period	Proportion of parents using smacking
Child smacked in the past week	142 (16%)
Child smacked in the past month (but not in the past week)	124 (14%)
Child smacked longer than a month ago	243 (27%)
Child never gets smacked	378 (43%)
Total sample	887

Table 2. provides figures on the use of *severe* corporal punishment (beatings with a stick, belt or other object) for all parents with children under 18. Only 531 of the parents answered this question suggesting that parents may have felt more comfortable with answering questions on smacking than beating.

The *majority* of those who responded (59%) said they had used a belt or another object to beat one of their children (33% of the total parent sample of 887).

**Table 2: Period during which a child was beaten with a belt or other implement**

Period	Proportion of parents using beatings
In the past week	56 (11%)
In the past month	66 (12%)
Longer than a month ago (in past year)	189 (36%)
Never get beaten	220 (41%)
Total	531

*How old are children who are smacked and beaten?*

The most common age of children who are *smacked* is 3 years of age and the most common age of children who are *beaten* with some or other object is 4 years old

In sum, the data presented above shows that 57% of parents with children under 18 report using corporal punishment, with 33% using severe corporal punishment in the form of beatings. No doubt these are used in addition to smacking.

We now turn to examine the parental factors associated with corporal punishment in more detail. All data is reported for use of corporal punishment in the past year.



*Gender differences:*

Of those parents who reported that they *smacked* their children in the past year, 30% were fathers and 70% were women. In the case of *severe* corporal punishment, 30% were men and 70% were women.

These results are similar to the United States in which women are more likely to use corporal punishment than men. Given the young age of the affected children noted above, it is likely that this difference between the men and women simply reflects the different child care roles of men and women and the fact that women are likely to spend more time with young children.

*Age differences:*

If we examine age trends, fewer younger parents are smacking their children than those who are older.

**Table 3: Corporal punishment in different age groups**

Age Group	Proportion who smack children	Proportion who beat children
16-24 years of age	44% (N =29)	51% (N =15 )
25-35 years of age	57% (N =253)	50% (N =92 )
> 35 years of age	43% (N =307)	64% (N = 204)

Again, the trends in Table 3 are different to some of the results from abroad, where youth of parents is a risk factor for harsh punishment. The explanation in the South African case may be generational. It is possible that severe corporal punishment is less acceptable to younger parents.

*Population group differences in the use of corporal punishment:*

The results are presented in Table 4. The figures should be treated with caution because the numbers of parents in each population group are relatively small. However, an examination of the role of ethnicity in the use of severe punishment shows that Indian parents are *least* likely to use both forms of corporal punishment, and that greater proportions of black Africans and whites beat their children with a belt or a similar object. In the case of the Indian parents this is likely to be a function of cultural values regarding discipline (see also below with respect to educational settings).

**Table 4: Corporal punishment in different population groups**

Group	Proportion who smack children	Proportion who beat children
Black African parents	59% (N =309)	69% (N = 210)
Coloured Parents	61% (N =107)	48% (N = 55)
Indian parents	43% (N =44)	43% (N = 44)
White parents	61% (N =46)	61% (N = 46)

### *Marital Status and the use of corporal punishment:*

The main results are reported in Table 5 below. *Previously married* parents in this study are defined as widowed, divorced or separated parents *who are not living with a partner*.

A greater proportion of *cohabiting (unmarried) parents* smack their children than other groups (the N is small though). Cohabitation is a similar risk factor to the case of partner violence, but given the small sample, this requires further investigation. Unlike evidence reported from international studies, similar proportions of single to married parents use corporal punishment.

Of interest is the fact that a greater proportion of *previously married single parents* use severe corporal punishment (the N is small though). It may well be the case that this is stress related as suggested in the literature. However, the individual state of these parents was not investigated in the SASAS. The matter requires further exploration.

**Table 5: Corporal punishment in the past year in relation to marital status**

Group	Proportion of each group who smack children	Proportion of each group who beat children
Married parents	56% (N = 237)	56% (N = 181)
Previously married single parents	59% (N = 61)	72% (N = 46)
Single parents who have never married	58% (N = 137)	59% (N = 84)
Cohabiting parents	68% (N = 68)	63% (N = 46)

### **A question of attitude?**

#### *Attitudes to the use of corporal punishment at home*

The Adolescent-Adult Parenting Inventory was used to explore this issue. The Attitude to Corporal Punishment scale was used for this purpose. However, the Cronbach's Alpha values were too low for the items to constitute a scale. The item with the highest correlation to the total scale score was selected as an indicator of attitude to corporal punishment. The item asks the participants whether they agree or disagree with the statement:

*"When children do wrong, it is always better to talk to them about it than give them a smack".*

It was very encouraging that **72%** of participants agreed with the statement (Men and women being very similar).

However, clearly there is a discrepancy between what people believe and what they do. Despite the fact that some 70% believe it is better not to punish children physically, 57% of the sample had actually smacked their children.

#### *Attitudes to modes of punishment in schools*

Attitudes to a range of questions on the quality of education and related issues were assessed in another module of the SASAS (wa Kivilu & Morrow, in press). Note that the data

is based on all survey respondents and not just parents as used in the previous analyses above. We briefly note some trends.

Wa Kivilu & Morrow report that 33% of the respondents *supported* the use of corporal punishment in school. Whites were more in favour of it than other population groups (53% support it), while the Indian community was most strongly opposed. An encouraging generational change is evident in the finding that *younger* respondents (16- 24 years) are much less in favour of school-based corporal punishment than those who are older. An education effect is also evident with better educated participants favouring reasoning-based discipline and more likely to reject the use of corporal punishment.

### **Predictors of corporal punishment**

Primary factors associated with the use of corporal punishment of children established in the international literature are:

- Parental support for the use of physical punishment; non-empathic parenting attitudes; female gender; young parents; a positive attitude to the use of corporal punishment in schools; and cohabitation status rather than marriage.

In order to examine the extent to which these factors make corporal punishment more or less likely, a stepwise multiple regression was computed using these variables, all of which were measured in the SASAS. Technical details are to be found in the Appendix.

These results show that:

- *Attitudes supportive of the use of physical punishment and non-empathic parenting attitudes* were the only significant predictors of severity of corporal punishment. Of these two factors, the first is the *strongest* predictor of the severity of corporal punishment. This does not mean that the other factors are unimportant. It does demonstrate the *overriding influence* of parental attitudes in the use of corporal punishment (when compared with the other variables measured in this study).

### **Summary of findings**

Our review of the literature identified a number of risk factors for corporal punishment: poverty, patriarchal beliefs, and beliefs supportive of the use of corporal punishment. The use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure is largely moderated by the child's age with 5 years being modal for corporal punishment in the USA. In that country, the evidence suggests that 90% of children are smacked at some point (Giles-Sims et al, 1995).

In the South African study, 57% of parents smack their children, and about a third use severe corporal punishment. The majority in the South African study agree that corporal punishment is not a desirable approach to discipline, but most still admit to using it.

Similar to evidence elsewhere, it is South African women who are the overwhelming majority when it comes to administering corporal punishment (the ratio is 7 women : 1 man).

We found that greater proportions of Africans and whites smack and beat their children than other groups. The most common age of children who are smacked is 3 – 4 years of age, not unlike the US data.

Cohabiting parents are most likely to smack their children and similar proportions of single to married parents use this form of corporal punishment. However greater proportions of single, previously married parents use severe corporal punishment and beat their children.

Finally, attitudes supportive of the use of physical punishment and non-empathic parenting attitudes have the most powerful effect on the severity of corporal punishment (when examined together with single or couple status, support for school corporal punishment, parent age and income level).

In many respects, therefore, the South African evidence concurs with the international literature. If our figures are reflective of the true national situation regarding the prevalence of corporal punishment (and until further evidence is in, it remains a *big if*), there is at least some comfort in the finding that South African parents are less prone to smack and beat their children than those in some other parts of the world. Further in depth studies are needed to take this question further.

All studies have limitations and a finite scope; the current study is no exception. It is important to be aware of the limitations of this research so that inaccurate conclusions are not drawn from the results.

The present study provides us with the first national baseline information on parents' reports of their use of corporal punishment. While robust on many levels, it has three primary limitations that must be taken into account.

The first limitation is that the interview schedules were not translated into all South African languages, and in many cases, the interviewer had to translate the questions into the participant's home language. While rigorous training was given to all the field staff, it was not possible to control the translations used by the field workers in the field. It is probable that speakers of the various languages would have interpreted the meaning of certain questions differently from one another and this would have affected the results in ways that are not possible to detect. While this sort of problem is to some extent inevitable in a multilingual country, it does impact on the results and they need to be considered in this light.

The second limitation concerns sampling. The participants in the SASAS are representative of the South African *population* as they were drawn from a representative household survey. However, it is important to note that *technically speaking*, the parents with children under 18 we interviewed are not strictly representative of the population of parents with children under 18 years, because parents were not the universe from which the sample was selected.

Notwithstanding this observation, and given that the households were representative and thus likely to reflect the distribution of adults with children, it is very unlikely that the data derived from this study are not reflective of the attitudes and practices of South African

parents. In any event, it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to sample from the universe of South African parents.

The third and final limitation is that the study does not include the voices of children or the adult participants' reflections on their own childhood punishment. This is not strictly speaking a limitation of methodology, rather it is a consequence of the choice of an adult population for study as part of an adult survey. A national survey of *children's* experience of corporal punishment is the next necessary step needed to fill this gap in our information.

Studies of sensitive subjects with parents are likely to emerge with under-estimates in their claims as to the use of physical punishment. Therefore, an additional national survey of adults is necessary to ask whether or not they experienced corporal punishment as children. Notwithstanding problems with reliable recall, this would go some way towards collecting retrospective prevalence estimates of corporal punishment from adults.

For now, there is clear evidence from the recent Children's Rights Poll conducted in five provinces (Save the Children Sweden, 2002), that safety and protection from abuse were the most important rights violations children were concerned about. This was not however a provincially representative sample of children.

### **Change is a challenge: prevention targeting**

It is beyond the scope of this report to develop a strategy for changing prevailing attitudes and practices in South Africa. Those that surround discipline practices are powerfully entrenched in individuals, and supported by local norms and the behaviour of others in the community. Single strategy interventions that focus simply on changing individual attitudes and behaviour are unlikely to meet with success. Systematic efforts must be undertaken with an understanding of locally embedded attitudes and everyday practices. The influence of "what others" do is essential to address given that deviation from destructive community norms, particularly for women, is difficult and can invite further abuse.

Child discipline and corporal punishment could be addressed in the life orientation sections of the National Curriculum. Education interventions focusing on parent- child and gender relations, and which include positive non-violent male role models and alternatives to corporal punishment constitute possible important universal intervention strategies. The focus should be on men as much as women.

However, education at school will not be enough. It is through assisting communities to change their everyday behaviour toward their children that is most likely to make a difference over time.

Legislation is also a powerful tool. The Domestic Violence Act and the Schools Act (which banned corporal punishment in schools) have been very positive moves. However in the latter case, unless teachers are assisted with other resources and techniques of discipline, attempts to reduce violence to children and assert their rights in the school context will struggle for success.

While legislating against corporal punishment in the private space of the home is challenging (many South Africans would be likely to object), there are strong arguments for this route (Save the Children United Kingdom, 2001). The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the South African Bill of Rights both seek to protect the child from physical and mental violence.

Corporal punishment is violence to children, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently interpreted the Convention as requiring its prohibition including in the home. Removal of the common law parental defence of the *right to reasonable chastisement* (of children) would provide greater protection for South African children in the domestic sphere. Corporal punishment would then have the same status as Assault in the Common Law. Children would be placed on the same level as adults were this amendment to the law to be accepted.

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## APPENDIX

**RELEVANT SASAS QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS:****ATTITUDES TO REARING CHILDREN (AAPI)**

**TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS? [SHOWCARD 2]**

*Fieldworker: Please circle one box on each line*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know
1. Parents will spoil their children by picking them up and comforting them when they cry	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. If you leave children to cope on their own, they will often grow up to be more independent	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Children should never be spanked when they misbehave	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Children who are crying are usually best ignored	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. When children do wrong, it is always better to talk to them about it than to give them a smack.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Children should be forced to accept that their parents are in charge	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Young children who are hugged and kissed usually grow up to be "sissies"	1	2	3	4	5	6

8. **When was the last time you or your partner smacked one of the children in your family with a hand?**

*(Fieldworker: If there are no children in the household, skip the question)*

*Fieldworker: Do NOT read out options.*

It has happened in the past week	1
It has happened in the past month	2
It has happened in the past 6 months	3
It has happened in the past year	4
It happened longer than a year ago	5
Children in this household never get smacked	6
Not applicable (no children in family)	7

9. **If it happened in the last week, how old was the child \_\_\_\_\_**

10. When was the last time you or your partner beat one of the children in your family with a strap, a belt, a stick or a similar object?

*Fieldworker: Do NOT read out options.*

It has happened in the past week	1
It has happened in the past month	2
It has happened in the past 6 months	3
It has happened in the past year	4
It has only happened rarely	5
Children in this household never get smacked with such objects	6
Not applicable (no children in family)	7

11. If it happened in the last week, how old was the child \_\_\_\_\_

#### CHILD DISCIPLINE QUESTIONS (AT SCHOOL)

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following methods of keeping discipline in schools?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know
13. Reasoning and discussion with learner	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. Corporal punishment by the teacher in class	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. Corporal punishment by the principal only	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. Physical labour like digging holes or sweeping	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Keeping learner in school after official hours	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. Additional learning tasks like doing extra homework or writing essays	1	2	3	4	5	6

## STATISTICAL SUMMARY

### Regression Analyses: Seriousness of Corporal punishment

**Variables Entered/Removed (a)**

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Attitude to Corporal Punishment	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).
2	Attitude to Empathic Parenting	.	Stepwise (Criteria: Probability-of-F-to-enter <= .050, Probability-of-F-to-remove >= .100).

a Dependent Variable: Severity of Corporal Punishment

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1 (a)	.123	.015	.014	.86396
2 (b)	.165	.027	.024	.85933

a Predictors: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment

b Predictors: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment, Attitude to Empathic Parenting

**ANOVA (c)**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	8.057	1	8.057	10.793	.001 (a)
	Residual	521.752	699	.746		
	Total	529.809	700			
2	Regression	14.377	2	7.189	9.735	.000 (b)
	Residual	515.432	698	.738		
	Total	529.809	700			

a Predictors: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment

b Predictors: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment, Attitude to Empathic Parenting

c Dependent Variable: Severity of Corporal Punishment

**Coefficients (a)**

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations		
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part
1	(Constant)	2.311	.130		17.817	.000	2.056	2.566			
	Attitude to Corporal Punishment	-.104	.032	-.123	-3.285	.001	-.167	-.042	-.123	-.123	-.123
2	(Constant)	2.676	.179		14.911	.000	2.324	3.029			
	Attitude to Corporal Punishment	-.104	.032	-.123	-3.298	.001	-.166	-.042	-.123	-.124	-.123
	Attitude to Empathic Parenting	-2.746E-02	.009	-.109	-2.926	.004	-.046	-.009	-.109	-.110	-.109

a Dependent Variable: Severity of Corporal Punishment

**Excluded Variables ©**

Model		Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance
1 (a)	Proper Recoded Marital Status	-.012	-.329	.742	-.012	.997
	Attitude to School Corporal Punishment	-.046	-1.216	.225	-.046	.995
	Age of respondent in completed years	.032	.862	.389	.033	.999
	Gender	.022	.581	.561	.022	.998
	Attitude to Empathic Parenting	-.109	-2.926	.004	-.110	1.000
	Socio-Economic Status	-.056	-1.505	.133	-.057	.999
2 (b)	Proper Recoded Marital Status	-.019	-.497	.619	-.019	.994
	Attitude to School Corporal Punishment	-.046	-1.231	.219	-.047	.995
	Age of respondent in completed years	.020	.543	.588	.021	.987
	Gender	.025	.659	.510	.025	.997
	Socio-Economic Status	-.056	-1.491	.136	-.056	.999

a Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment

b Predictors in the Model: (Constant), Attitude to Corporal Punishment, Attitude to Empathic Parenting

c Dependent Variable: Severity of Corporal Punishment

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Mann Whitney Test for independent samples: Attitudes to corporal punishment and partner violence

Participants	N	Lifetime Partner Violence Mean Scores
Agree with Corporal punishment	188	546.88
Disagree with Corporal punishment	847	511.59

Mann Whitney:  $U=74189.50$ ;  $Z = -2.14$ ;  $p = 0.033$ .

Those who agree with corporal punishment have higher prevalence of partner violence than those who do not.