Published in final edited form as:

Child Abuse Negl. 2019 November ; 97: 104138. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104138.

Parenting and discipline in post-conflict Sierra Leone

Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski[a,*], **Elyse Joan Thulin**[b], **Kristen McLean**[c], **Tia McGill Rogers**[b], **Adeyinka M. Akinsulure-Smith**[d], **Theresa S. Betancourt**[e]

[a]Florida State University, University Center C4600, Tallahassee, FL, 32306, United States

[b]University of Michigan School of Public Health, United States

[c]Yale University, United States

[d]City College of New York, United States

[e]Boston College, United States

Abstract

Background: While the literature on physical punishment concludes that it has negative effects on children, the practice remains common in many countries. In post-conflict countries with non-governmental organizations (NGO) operating in child protection, traditional disciplinary practices may conflict with international child rights agendas. The country of Sierra Leone has a unique history of conflict, abject poverty, low literacy, and weak governance – often, NGO agents are responsible for providing social services that the government is unable to consistently provide.

Objective: We examined how Sierra Leonean caregivers think about appropriate discipline for children, and whether they perceived any changes in their attitudes toward disciplinary practices since the end of the war.

Participants and Setting: We collected data from parents and caregivers in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas of Sierra Leone's four districts.

Methods: We used focus groups (12 groups, n = 92) and individual interviews (n = 21) to collect data in 2013. Focus groups and interviews were conducted by research assistants fluent in Krio and English. We used a thematic content analysis approach.

Results: We found that physical discipline—"beating"—was widely acceptable and common. A few parents mentioned other means of discipline, such as withholding food. Parents widely agreed that parenting had changed since the war, and reported that child rights movements supported by NGOs had made it more difficult to discipline their children in traditional ways.

Conclusions: Discipline was seen a central component of child-rearing and a means of ensuring safe and proper development. This may be a protective mechanism in the precarious, high poverty environment of post-war Sierra Leone. The negative responses of parents to NGO efforts to reduce physical punishment and other forms of child abuse suggest that grassroots approaches are needed to address this pervasive problem.

[*]Corresponding author. szuilkowski@lsi.fsu.edu (S.S. Zuilkowski).

Keywords

Physical abuse; Violence against children; Sierra Leone; Parenting

1. Introduction

Armed conflict is widespread globally, and is increasing (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2018). Given the pervasive nature of armed conflict, it is crucial to consider how exposure to violence affects parenting not only during active conflict, but also in the post-conflict period. Studies from a variety of countries have shown that parental exposure to political violence and post-war social stressors can affect parenting. After living through a war, parents may become more aggressive and hostile to their children (Barber, Schluterman, Denny, & McCrouch, 2005; Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Bar-On, Eland, & Kleber, 1998; Jordan et al., 1992; Kerestes, 2006), or more violent toward each other (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998), with potential effects on children's outcomes.

The use of physical discipline is one area where caregivers' exposure to past violence may have consequences for children. In a large study compiling data on more than 77,000 children in 26 low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), the majority of preschool-aged children had been violently disciplined in the previous month (Frongillo, Kulkarni, Basnet, & Castro, 2017). In a study of 186 preindustrial societies, physical punishment was more common among societies high in social stratification and violence (Ember & Ember, 2005). UNICEF (2017) data show that the majority of children ages 2–14 years in many conflict-affected and post-conflict countries experience physical violence; for example, 90% in Liberia, 92% in Central African Republic, and 82% in Sierra Leone.

Physical discipline of children is of concern because it has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for children. High rates of physical discipline have been associated with elevated aggression and anxiety among mother-child dyads across the globe (Lansford et al., 2005), poorer socioemotional development in 59 countries (Pace, Lee, & Grogan-Kaylor, 2019), children's school dropout in South Africa (Sherr et al., 2016) and with externalizing problems among primary grade children in Tanzania (Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2014). In South Africa, women who had experienced physical punishment before age 18 were more likely to contract HIV by young adulthood (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, Jama, & Puren, 2010). However, the effect of discipline is dependent on the context in which it is used and the extent to which these techniques are culturally normative (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Parenting norms are constructed according to cultural and environmental context, reflecting the settings and needs of communities and social groups (Bornstein, Putnick, & Lansford, 2011; Bornstein, 2012; Hewlett, Lamb, Shannon, Leyendecker, & Schölmerich, 1998; Tamis-LeMonda & McFadden, 2010). Parents' beliefs about the right way to raise a child, in addition to historical and environmental factors, play powerful roles in shaping how parents interact with their children, such as when and how they discipline their children (Harkness, Mavridis, Liu, & Super, 2015).

In conflict and post-conflict periods, international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often have a strong presence, engaging with local and national governments in a range of sectors, including education, health, governance, and security. The presence of these IOs and NGOs, with organizational and cultural backgrounds that often differ greatly from the countries in which they work, may affect people's lives in many ways. Parenting—especially disciplinary approaches—is one place where traditional approaches and external actors may collide. IOs and NGOs often focus on Western defined concepts of "children's rights," resulting in policy and programmatic implementations that are often culturally and contextually disjointed with traditional parenting practices in countries such as Sierra Leone.

The present qualitative study examines caregiver disciplinary practices in Sierra Leone, a low-income country that struggles with persistent instability due to economic and governance challenges, including weak systems and corruption (Chêne, 2010), its decade-long civil war, and the devastation and after-effects of the recent Ebola virus disease (EVD) epidemic of 2014–15. The voices of parents and caregivers in post-conflict countries are rarely heard in high-level policy discussions about child rights. Our study aims to add their voices to the conversation.

2. Background and context

2.1. Context: challenges of parenting in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a country of roughly seven million people characterized by high rates of poverty and concentrated adversity. Nearly half of the adult population has no formal education, life expectancy is one of the lowest in the world at 51 years, and maternal and child mortality rates are among the world's highest (Statistics Sierra Leone, and ICF International, 2013; World Bank, 2015). These dire statistics have much to do with Sierra Leone's history of civil war (1991–2002), during which an estimated 50,000 people were killed and 2 million displaced. Sierra Leone continues to be classified as a 'failed,' 'rebuilding,' or 'developing' nation, where post-conflict stressors such as displacement, economic instability, and poor governance abound (Benton, 2012; Betancourt, Brennan, Rubin-Smith, Fitzmaurice, & Gilman, 2010). Economic development since the end of the civil war has been slow and burdened due to corruption and poor governance in public institutions (Chêne, 2010).

The concept of "family" in Sierra Leone, as in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, includes an extended host of relatives who offer a multitude of resources (Akinsulure-Smith & Smith, 2012). While this extended family caregiving can help families to cope with the challenges of poverty, it may also expose children to risks. For example, when children are cared for by extended family due to single- or double-parent orphanhood, several researchers have found poorer child health outcomes (Lindblade, Odhiambo, Rosen, & DeCock, 2003) as compared to children who have one or both biological parents alive, even in the case that they are not living with that biological parent.

Sierra Leone's history of adversity and long-term abject poverty creates a complex set of challenges for caregivers, likely affecting parenting behaviors and parent-child behaviors

in myriad ways. Prior research in similar contexts has found that parental illness and death (Sherr et al., 2014), economic hardship (Duggan, 2014; Ismayilova & Karimli, 2018), mental health strain (Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, & Brennan, 2015; Chibanda, Benjamin, Weiss, & Abas, 2014), and exposure to past trauma represent significant challenges to parenting (Sherr et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2005).

These stressors can also influence parental decision-making regarding disciplinary approaches. Parental level of education, cultural norms, living in poverty, hunger, domestic violence, poor caregiver mental health, caregiver sickness and/or disability, and caregiver use of alcohol or other drugs have been found to be risk factors for physical violence against children, including corporal punishment, in studies conducted in sub-Saharan African countries (Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Bornstein, Putnick, & Bradley, 2014; Madu, 2003; Madu, Idemudia, & Jegede, 2003; Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Mhlongo, 2015; Oburu & Palmérus, 2003; Thurman & Kidman, 2011). Culturally, physically punishing children is not necessarily seen in a negative light, however. In Tanzania, for example, some grandparents described physical punishment as a way of showing love for children, and said that not beating children when it was necessary was neglectful (Frankenberg, Holmqvist, & Rubenson, 2010).

Beyond the stressors related to extreme poverty, the use of child soldiers during the civil war and subsequent reunification policies influenced the landscape of parenting in Sierra Leone. The use of children to preform horrific acts of violence against their own and other families and communities inverted the normal relationship between adults and children, where the child is expected to be compliant and to show great respect towards adults and elders; the inversion of the normal power dynamic between adults and children has disrupted the normative social order (Shepler, 2005). Reunification policies pushed children back into families where atrocities had often been committed, and the fact that children had played such a significant role in the war changed perceived and real power dynamics between adults and youth, parent and child (Bolten, 2018; Shepler, 2005).

2.2. Child rights in Sierra Leone

Increased focus on global human rights occurred after both World Wars, resulting in the creation of the definition of Child's Rights in 1924, the establishment of the United Nations in 1948, and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child which led to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Imoh, 2016). The use of "Child's Rights" language and subsequent programmatic work in Sierra Leone became a major focus upon the end of the civil war in 2001, when reintegration of former child soldiers into families and communities was a main focus of the government of Sierra Leone and international NGOs working in Sierra Leone, such as UNICEF and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (Williamson, 2005). The implementation of various projects and increased education on children's rights emphasized that corporal punishment and child labor were violations of the rights of the child (Bolten, 2018). To enhance community reunification, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission the Government of Sierra Leone fully adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although driven by the Sierra Leonean government, the language and programmatic content of these changes were criticized as failing to consider cultural

context and social expectations of how to raise children correctly (Bolten, 2018). Subsequent policies and programs have often failed to address the family as a whole, instead targeting individual family members or roles, such as “children” or “women” (Akinsulure-Smith and Smith, 2012).

Given the involvement of various IOs and NGOs in the country in recent decades,[1] emphasis on “child rights” and “human rights” may have also influenced parenting behaviors in unknown ways. Although the government legally banned corporal punishment in 2007 in accordance with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the majority of programmatic work on protecting children against violence and abuse has been funded and implemented by IOs. The amount of funding that these organizations bring into low-income countries often gives them substantial influence (Valentin & Meinert, 2009). IO and NGO funding represented 31% of Sierra Leone’s national GDP between the end of the civil war and 2010, with 63% of those funds used for programmatic work (Hart, Hadley, & Welham, 2015). Despite the legal and programmatic interventions designed to protect children, the use of corporal punishment in Sierra Leone remains quite high in comparison to other countries (Lansford et al., 2017). This suggests that physical punishment of children may be deeply rooted in the cultural context.

2.3. Research questions

The literature discussed above has led us to the following research questions:

1. How do current Sierra Leonean caregivers think about and perceive appropriate discipline of children?
2. How, if at all, has thinking about child discipline changed since the end of the civil war, given the influence of IOs and NGOs?

3. Methods

This study is part of a larger, 16-year longitudinal research project by the senior author (Betancourt et al., 2010, 2015). The focus of this work was to generate data on what defines a “good parent” and to identify parenting norms through focus groups and key informant interviews. The study discussed here involved focus groups and key informant interviews in rural, peri-urban, and urban areas in the four districts of Sierra Leone. This study received ethical review and approval from the Institutional Review Board at Harvard University. All participants were fully informed about the study before consenting to participation. The research team took steps to ensure anonymity in the analysis and reporting of the data, though the focus group format precluded complete confidentiality and anonymity within the community for those participants.

3.1. Sample

Data were collected from 12 focus group discussions and 21 key informant interviews. Focus groups were comprised of 4–11 participants each (n = 92) and addressed topics of

[1]Organizations working in the realm of child protection in Sierra Leone in the post-conflict period have included Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, UNICEF, and Defence for Children International (Thompstone, 2010).

parenting and changes in traditional child rearing. Of the 12 groups, four were composed of mothers, three of fathers, four of grandparents, and one of community elders. The local chiefs' offices helped research assistants identify participants on the basis that they were considered by community members as knowledgeable about positive and negative caregiving traits and the influence said traits had on child development. All participants were identified as a caregiver of at least one child under the age of 18. The key informant interviews (76% female) were conducted with adults aged 19–65 (mean = 35.5 years). Participants were adults in the community who were considered knowledgeable about "good" parenting, and included individuals who were directly involved in social welfare and development activities, such as social workers, police officers, and teachers. Participants in the focus groups and key informant interviews were identified through convenience samples of urban and rural individuals within a given group type in each region.

3.2. Procedures

Focus groups were organized and led by trained research assistants. The audio from these meetings was digitally recorded, and later transcribed and translated by fluent Krio- and English-speaking research assistants. Participants initially were asked to give general information about themselves, including their names, where they were from, and the names and ages of their children before being asked about child rearing norms, including parenting roles, roles of non-biological caregivers, physical and emotional interactions between caregivers and children, communication with children, age and gender roles of caregivers and children in interactions, and typical disciplinary approaches with children. General questions on parenting in Sierra Leone included "How do parents take care of their young children?" "How, if at all, do parents communicate with their children?," and "How, if at all, do parents react when a child misbehaves?" The notes and transcripts were then analyzed and used to formulate key informant interview guides, to probe further into prominent parenting themes and to better understand how "good" parenting is defined within this context.

Four rounds of key informant interviews were conducted by pairs of trained research assistants, one of whom led the interview while the other took notes. Interview guides were iterative, with each round of key informant interviews using subsequent focus group and key informant interview findings to formulate the interview guide. Participants were asked to define what a good relationship between a caregiver and child looked like, how to tell if a parent is "good," what a "good parent" thinks about their child, feels about their child and does with their child, and what a parent can do to ensure a strong and close relationship between themselves and their child. Questions included "How does good parenting look?" "What does a good parent do?" and "When someone is a good parent, how can you tell?" Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and translated by fluent Krio- and English-speaking research assistants.

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to analyze the key informant interviews. The two first authors read all interviews, identified patterns and developed a code book. The codebook was reviewed for contextual validity by two additional coauthors,

one of whom is a Sierra Leonean psychologist. The authors then coded English transcripts jointly, both individually and in pairs, until a high degree of inter-coder reliability was reached. Subsequently, the remaining interviews and focus groups were double coded, with all discrepancies discussed by the team. In cases where translations were unclear, the Krio transcripts were examined by two of the co-authors, who are fluent in Krio.

After coding was complete, the authors examined the most prevalent codes to identify key themes for analysis. Particular attention was given to themes that converged with and diverged from the parenting characteristics identified in the existing literature, as well as discussions of changes in parenting in Sierra Leone since the war, especially as relevant to disciplinary practices and forms of punishment.

4. Results

The Sierra Leonean caregivers in our sample conceptualized parenting as including both biological and non-biological caregivers. In this context, “parenting” does not necessarily mean caring for a biological child. Respondents in our sample instead expressed a community-based understanding of parenting, with various individuals bearing differing levels of responsibility for children. Thus, in the analysis and discussion section, specific caregiver terms (e.g. “parent,” “mother,” “grandparent”) are used contextually, and unless specified, do not necessarily indicate a biological relation to a given child. It was common for participants to be the primary caregiver for the children of relatives for various reasons, including better access to schools and severe poverty facing family members; most respondents had either sent their children to live with someone else for a time and/or had fostered someone else’s child.

4.1. Sierra Leonean caregivers’ beliefs and practices regarding appropriate discipline of children

The parents interviewed for this study were generally on the authoritarian side of the parenting spectrum—they expected their children to listen and follow instructions without debate, particularly younger children—and physical punishment was often discussed as an approach to ensuring compliance and promoting “good manners.” Sierra Leonean caregivers generally saw physical punishment as a normal part of childhood that fosters long-term positive behavior. One parent explained, “If my child does wrong, I would warn him for the first time. If he does it again I would again warn him for the second time… If he repeats for the third time I would heavily flog him.” Caregivers generally saw the use of physical punishment as something that was the child’s fault, rather than a conscious choice of their own. As one explained. “If you beat the child it is because the child misbehaves.”

After the provision of basic needs, guarding children’s physical and moral safety was the second most common type of response to the questions regarding components of good parenting. Parents worried about adolescent pregnancy, drug use, and criminal behavior driven by poverty, and this influenced how they handled conflict with their children. They also discussed the risks to children of exposure to violence or pornography on television or in movies. In many cases, caregivers’ response to these worries was to keep children physically close to home. As one participant said, a good parent “does not leave the child

to move all about." A mother said, "if she wants to go somewhere bad, I will sometimes beat her not to go." While many parents reported enforcing children's movements through punishment, other parents took a less punitive approach, regularly "checking in" with their children, ensuring that they were not engaging in undesirable activities.

Parents expressed strong opinions as to which kinds of youth their children could be friends with, with hopes of avoiding any "bad influences" on their own children. One participant explained that, "if you start to tolerate a child's bad friends, he will be a bad child. Maybe that child is not a bad child but because the child has joined bad friends, whatever he sees he will adopt it." A father stated when children started to have negative peer influences, "you need to correct him instantly and ensure that he has the right friends."

Participants' discussions over safety and monitoring were related to their children's gender. While boys still faced dangers outside of the home, parents were generally far more concerned about their daughters, particularly regarding boyfriends and pregnancy. One parent said that while she was concerned with her children's behavior generally, "for my daughters I always monitor their movement and I always take them to the hospital for pregnancy tests." Parents knew that early pregnancy typically meant an end to schooling and possible upward mobility, and therefore had strong incentives to try to avoid this outcome for their daughters. One mother explained that she monitored her female children more closely "because when you allow your daughter to grow up badly, in the future you the parent would feel the pain." This monitoring was a less punitive form of discipline, seen as heading off potential behavioral issues that could have negative consequences.

One unique attribute of attachment in Sierra Leone is the idea of being "close, but not too close." Parents generally wanted a close relationship with their children, both to show their love for their children and to be better able to monitor their activities. Several parents noted that they take time out of the day to be "at home, to sit down and talk to them, to know about them" which prevents the child from "go[ing] out of control." A challenge of living in poverty, however, is having to work long hours to be able to attain adequate resources to pay for essential needs. This problem was exacerbated for parents living separately from their children.

While having a good relationship was desirable, as the children become older, caregivers described a difference in the closeness of the relationship, and how being too close can result in challenges with discipline. This was sometimes related to the gender of the parent and child. One female caregiver noted that "I don't play with my child because when you play with him they would tend to be insolent… it is their father that sometimes sits and talks to them with stories." Another said "I mingle with my children, at times we play music and dance, but not always because if you always play with the child, he or she might tend to disregard you."

It was relatively rare for parents to mention strategies to enforce discipline other than "beating" or "flogging." One method that was brought up several times in interviews and focus groups was withholding food. As one mother said, "When you misbehaved… I would deprive you from eating, you won't eat that day." Another elaborated on this approach:

> Don’t give him food, when you cook don’t give him food, let him sit down at the house, don’t allow him to go anywhere, because if he goes to [a] neighboring house they would give him food… Put him in the house, you lock [him in].

This method was also used by a mother who had been arrested for beating her son after he lied about stealing. After being released, she said, “I don’t give him food for three days, [and] now he has changed. What he has been doing, [he] is not doing it again.” One caregiver simply said, “You don’t flog the child.”

4.2. Changes in child discipline since the civil war: the influence of IOs and NGOs

The caregivers in our study believed that the war had changed young people’s behaviors and relationships with others in the community, even those who were born after the war ended. As one focus group member shared,

> Before the war, it was not difficult to bring up children, your child will ask for your permission when he or she is going to the street to play ball, you say to him that you don’t want him to go and play ball in the street, he can say yes. And my own experience before the war when your child is giving you problems, and you talk to him and tell him the truth, he can listen to you and sometimes he says, ‘sorry mum.’ But during the war and after the war, it is like the children have gone wild, they don’t have sympathetic feeling for you, is like the war have an impact on them.

One focus group participant said that some parents had reason to fear their children. “The war has given them the mind or made them fearless and the street has disturbed them, the war has given them strength, now a child can take knife to stab his father.” Other caregivers placed the blame for these changes on parents rather than on the children. One said, “The way parents and caregivers raise their children has changed after the war.” She explained, “Now parents or caregivers no longer have time to raise their children properly. For instance, most children now care for themselves and become street children.”

Despite the traditional norms around physical punishment, Sierra Leone’s status as a post-conflict country was reported as an influence on how parents disciplined their children. Many interviewees discussed how the introduction of “human rights” NGOs after the civil war meant that they could no longer physically discipline their children without fearing repercussions. Children were more aware of their legal rights and there were organizations and government offices to assist them in defending those rights. This led to confusion and fear among some parents, who were left feeling that they had no means of addressing behavioral issues among children. As one parent explained, since the war,

> Changes have taken place a lot… Children were listening to us but now our children are not listening to us any longer… [Before] they will obey but after the war, they are not listening to us. Why, it is because of the coming of these human rights, it has spoiled our children.

Another explained,

> We fear because when you beat [children] they can go to human rights, he can go and report you and they will come and interview you as if you are not his or her parent. So now, if a child does something displeasing… we avoid them.

As noted in the previous section, one mother had indeed been arrested after beating her son, so parents' fears of repercussions were not unfounded.

Other parents, however, thought that the changes in parenting over the last twenty years were an improvement. As one said,

You do not need to harass the child. A child will not develop a good character by beating. Don't torment the child because that is not what will put him on a straight path. If you continue to torment the child, he will become nervous and this will affect his upbringing. He will never come out the way you want him to.

Another mother said that she saw the focus on human rights as an improvement.

The best way to bring a child up is exercise the child's rights but not to misuse her. Thank god now we know the child right as parents, not like the older people. Now through this right we are able to bring up our child in a well-civilized way.

Additionally, one parent pointed out that the focus on human rights since the war had led to other positive changes. "Before, people go to the provinces to take children just to sell for them, but after the war, when people go to take children they send them to school because they now know the importance of education." The increased focus on education may have also been due to programs run by UN organizations and IOs like the IRC, which supported schools and encouraged enrollment.

5. Discussion

The caregivers in our study described discipline as a central component of raising a child and ensuring safe and proper development. Generally, children were expected to be very obedient and respectful within their homes and communities, as in other African countries (Twum-Danso, 2010). Disrespect outside of the home was considered to reflect negatively on the family (Nwoye, 2006), and thus children who committed disrespectful acts, particularly against village leaders or elders, were punished. Many respondents indicated their preference for physical punishment, including "beating." Participants found corporal punishment to be effective, and relatively few—mostly younger caregivers— discussed other methods of discipline. After physical punishment, withholding food was the next most frequently mentioned means of discipline, but was discussed by only a handful of caregivers. This finding aligns with a previous study in Sierra Leone, which found that some parents punished their children by refusing to give them food, as an alternative to physical punishment (Thompstone, 2010).

Despite the ubiquity of physical punishment in Sierra Leone and many other countries in the region, the available evidence suggests that the practice may have long-term impacts on children. While we are not aware of any recent research on the effects of corporal punishment on children in Sierra Leone, studies in other low- and mid-income settings have identified a correlation between physical punishment and higher levels of child anxiety and/or aggression, despite varying levels of corporal punishment normalcy (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005; Lansford, Sharma et al., 2014). In Tanzania, parental stress was associated with higher risk of corporal punishment of secondary school-aged children,

suggesting a possible mechanism that may also be in play in conflict settings (Nkuba, Hermenau, & Hecker, 2018). The combination of exposure to violence during the war and the economic and security challenges faced in the post-conflict period may have led to higher levels of adult stress and other mental health challenges in Sierra Leone.

Other researchers have found that parents living in post-conflict settings are more likely to utilize corporal punishment, postulating that violence begets violence (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). Our data suggest that in Sierra Leone, parents may rely more strongly on discipline as a protective mechanism. Research participants noted two distinct reasons that they desired to keep their children in line. The first is so that their children do not become troublesome or truant in a way that is reminiscent of child soldier behavior (Thulin, McLean, Sevalie, Akinsulure-Smith, & Betancourt, in press). The second is that due to the high rates of poverty and risk of negative health outcomes, parents greatly want their children to be obedient to what the parent sees as their child's best interest (i.e. doing well in school, being able to cook well, staying clean so as to reduce risk of disease, etc.). Caregivers' focus on behavioral control of children as protection converges with research from Northern Ireland in the post-Belfast Accords period, where the degree of maternal control—both psychological and behavioral—of youth was associated with lower youth exposure to violence (Merrilees et al., 2011). However, in South Africa, Herrero Romero, Hall, Cluver, and Meinck (2018) found that parenting perceived by youth as supportive and positive may moderate the effects of overall violence exposure on schooling, suggesting that parent and child beliefs regarding disciplinary approaches may vary across cultures and contexts. Additional research is necessary to understand what contextual, parent/child behavioral, emotional or social attributes may influence severity and frequency of corporal punishment in this population.

Multiple caregivers negatively discussed the role of NGOs in promoting awareness and prosecution of "human rights" and "children's rights," which safeguard against corporal punishment of children, as Wessells et al. (2015) and Boersch-Supan (2012) also found in Sierra Leone. While this has been noted in non-conflict settings in sub-Saharan Africa as well (Frankenberg, Holmqvist, & Rubenson, 2014), the disconnect between local norms and outside influences seemed particularly acute in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Respondents identified what Shepler (2005) described as an inversion of the social order relative to parent and child power dynamics, stating that children feel able to go to the authorities if the caregiver uses physical discipline. Respondents noted that the international push toward child protection contradicts most caregivers' perspective that corporal punishment is an essential tool to garner children's respect and discipline. A potential cause of this disconnect between community perception and international programming is lack of effective government involvement in child protection (Akinsulure-Smith & Smith, 2012), and a disconnect between NGO and IO programmatic work and community perceptions and needs. Given multiple reports by parents that corporal punishment is necessary for proper child development, a belief also reported in studies elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Frankenberg et al., 2010) it seems that there may be an opportunity to increase education on alternative parenting strategies. In Liberia, Puffer et al. (2015) found promising results of a parenting intervention that decreased physical discipline, increased alternative parenting strategies, and promoted positive parent and child interactions.

The findings of this study, in combination with the literature reviewed above, suggest that interventions aiming to reduce physical punishment of children cannot focus solely on legal frameworks enforced by external organizations (Lansford et al., 2017). While such guardrails are a useful first step, programs must start from a culturally relevant stance in order to be effective and sustainable (Imoh, 2016). Otherwise, they risk making surface changes in behavior without changing underlying ideas about discipline and respect of authority, as shown in an evaluation of a program in Kenya (van Esch & de Haan, 2017). Instead, as Wessells (2015), p. 8) recommends, using "slower, community-driven, bottom-up approaches to child protection" are more likely to change long-held practices and beliefs. Additionally, there is a critical need for programs that address broader structural issues, such as poverty (Ismayilova & Karimli, 2018). As shown in the literature above, poverty is a severe parental stressor associated with the use of physical discipline. A multi-faceted approach developed in context, combining family livelihood support and parenting skills instruction, may be the most effective in the long run.

We note that the data collection for this study was conducted prior to the Ebola disease outbreak of 2014-15. The death and displacement caused by the outbreak likely put pressure on traditional caregiving systems, as caregivers of those infected were at greater risk of death, and families may have been unwilling to take in the children of those who died of Ebola due to the high stigma associated with Ebola victims, survivors and their families (Denis-Ramirez, Sørensen, & Skovdal, 2017; Mayrhuber, Niederkrotenthaler, & Kutalek, 2017). The dynamics of parenting in a post-conflict, extreme poverty region during a widespread public health emergency should be explored in future work, with the goal of better supporting affected families and children in such settings

6. Conclusion

In this study, we found that Sierra Leonean caregivers often use corporal punishment as a means of trying to keep their children safe. Caregivers are aware of IO and NGO work in Sierra Leone aimed at decreasing violent punishment through the advancement of policies against these practices. While the goal of these efforts is to reduce violence against children, the high rates of abject poverty in Sierra Leone mean that parents face a variety of barriers to raising their children to a healthy adulthood. Additional strengthening of social systems, including access to quality health care and education for all children, may help to reduce the use of violent punishment, by alleviating some of the risks and pressures that parents face in a system with poor infrastructure and low access to essential needs.

Acknowledgments

This project was funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (project number 5R01HD073349).

References

Akinsulure-Smith AM, & Smith HE (2012). Evolution of family policies in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 21, 4–13.

Bar-On D, Eland J, & Kleber RJ (1998). Multigenerational perspectives on coping with the holocaust experience: An attachment perspective for understanding the developmental sequelae of trauma across generations. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 22(2), 315–338.

Barber BK, Schluterman JM, Denny ES, & McCrouch RM (2005). Adolescents and political violence. In Fitzduff M, & Stout CE (Vol. Eds.), The psychology of resolving global conflicts: From war to peace: Vol. 2, (pp. 171–190). Westport: Praeger Press.

Barenbaum J, Ruchkin V, & Schwab-Stone M (2004). The psychosocial aspects of children exposed to war: Practice and policy initiatives. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 45, 41–62. [PubMed: 14959802]

Benton A (2012). Exceptional suffering? Enumeration and vernacular accounting in the HIV-positive experience. Medical Anthropology, 31(4), 310–328. [PubMed: 22746681]

Betancourt TS, Brennan RT, Rubin-Smith J, Fitzmaurice GM, & Gilman SE (2010). Sierra Leone's former child soldiers: A longitudinal study of risk, protective factors, and mental health. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 49(6), 606–615. 10.1016/j.jaac.2010.03.008. [PubMed: 20494270]

Betancourt TS, McBain RK, Newnham EA, & Brennan RT (2015). The intergenerational impact of war: Longitudinal relationships between caregiver and child mental health in postconflict Sierra Leone. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 56(10), 1101–1107. 10.1111/jcpp.12389. [PubMed: 25665018]

Boersch-Supan J (2012). The generational contract in flux: Intergenerational tensions in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The Journal of Modern African Studies, 50(1), 25–51.

Bolten CE (2018). Productive work and subjected labor: Children's pursuits and child rights in northern Sierra Leone. Journal of Human Rights, 17(2), 199–214. 10.1080/14754835.2017.1315296.

Bornstein MH (2012). Cultural approaches to parenting. Parenting, Science and Practice, 12(2/3), 212–221. 10.1080/15295192.2012.683359. [PubMed: 22962544]

Bornstein MH, Putnick DL, & Lansford JE (2011). Parenting attributions and attitudes in cross-cultural perspective. Parenting, Science and Practice, 11(2-3), 214–237. [PubMed: 21927591]

Chêne M (2010). Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in. Sierra Leone: Anti-Corruption Resource Center.

Chibanda D, Benjamin L, Weiss HA, & Abas M (2014). Mental, neurological, and substance use disorders in people living with HIV/AIDS in low- and middle-income countries. JAIDS, 67(sup. 1), S54–S67. [PubMed: 25117961]

Deater-Deckard K, & Dodge KA (1997). Externalizing behavior problems and discipline revisited: Nonlinear effects and variation by culture, context, and gender. Psychological Inquiry, 8, 161–175.

Denis-Ramirez E, Sørensen KH, & Skovdal M (2017). In the midst of a 'perfect storm': Unpacking the causes and consequences of Ebola-related stigma for children orphaned by Ebola in Sierra Leone. Children and Youth Services Review, 73, 445–453. 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.11.025.

Duggan MB (2014). Prevention of childhood malnutrition: Immensity of the challenge and variety of strategies. Paediatrics and International Child Health, 34(4), 271–278. [PubMed: 25161059]

Ehrensaft MK, Cohen P, Brown J, Smailes E, Chen H, & Johnson JG (2003). Intergenerational transmission of partner violence: A 20-year prospective study. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Pyschology, 71, 741–753.

Ember CR, & Ember M (2005). Explaining corporal punishment of children: A cross-sectional study. American Anthropologist, 107(4), 609–619.

Fergusson DM, & Horwood LJ (1998). Exposure to interparental violence in childhood and psychosocial adjustment in young adulthood. Child Abuse & Neglect, 22, 339–357. [PubMed: 9631247]

Frankenberg SJ, Holmqvist R, & Rubenson B (2010). The care of corporal punishment: Conceptions of early childhood discipline strategies among parents and grandparents in a poor and urban area in Tanzania. Childhood, 17(4), 455–469. 10.1177/0907568209349314.

Frankenberg SJ, Holmqvist R, & Rubenson B (2014). 'In earlier days everyone could discipline children, now they have rights': Caregiving dilemmas of guidance and control in Urban Tanzania. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 24(3), 191–204. 10.1002/casp.2160.

Frongillo E, Kulkarni S, Basnet S, & Castro F (2017). Family care behaviors and early childhood development in low- and middle-income countries. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 26(11), 3036–3044. 10.1007/s10826-017-0816-3.

Gershoff ET, Grogan-Kaylor A, Lansford JE, Chang L, Zelli A, Deater-Deckard K, & Dodge KA (2010). Parent discipline practices in an international sample: Associations with child behaviors and moderation by perceived normativeness. Child Development, 81(2), 487–502. [PubMed: 20438455]

Harkness S, Mavridis CJ, Liu JJ, & Super CM (2015). Parental ethnotheories and the development of family relationships in early and middle childhood. In L. H. Jensen (Ed.). The Oxford handbook of human development And culture: An interdisciplinary perspective (pp. 271–291). New York: Oxford University Press.

Hart T, Hadley S, & Welham B (2015). Use of country systems in fragile states. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Hecker T, Hermenau K, Isele D, & Elbert T (2014). Corporal punishment and children's externalizing problems: A cross-sectional study of Tanzanian primary school aged children. Child Abuse & Neglect, 38(5), 884–892. 10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.11.007. [PubMed: 24360761]

Herrero Romero R, Hall J, Cluver L, & Meinck F (2018). Can supportive parenting protect against school delay amongst violence-exposed adolescents in South Africa? Child Abuse & Neglect, 78, 31–45. 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.09.025. [PubMed: 28964563]

Hewlett BS, Lamb ME, Shannon D, Leyendecker B, & Schölmerich A (1998). Culture and early infancy among Central African foragers and farmers. Developmental Psychology, 34, 653–661. [PubMed: 9681257]

Imoh AT-D (2016). Tackling the physical punishment of children in resource poor contexts. International Journal of Children's Rights, 24(2), 469–487. 10.1163/15718182-02402005.

Institute for Economics & Peace (2018). Global Peace Index 2018: Measuring peace in a complex world Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace.

Ismayilova L, & Karimli L (2018). Harsh parenting and violence against children: A trial with ultrapoor families in Francophone West Africa. Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 1–18. 10.1080/15374416.2018.1485103. [PubMed: 28574780]

Jewkes RK, Dunkle K, Nduna M, Jama PN, & Puren A (2010). Associations between childhood adversity and depression, substance abuse and HIV and HSV2 incident infections in rural South African youth. Child Abuse & Neglect, 34(11), 833–841. [PubMed: 20943270]

Jordan BK, Marmar CR, Fairbank JA, Schlenger WE, Kulka RA, Hough RL, & Weiss DS (1992). Problems in families of male Vietnam veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Pyschology, 60, 916–926.

Kerestes G (2006). Children's aggressive and prosocial behavior in relation to war exposure: Testing the role of perceived parenting and child's gender. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 30, 227–239.

Lansford JE, Cappa C, Putnick DL, Bornstein MH, Deater-Deckard K, & Bradley RH (2017). Change over time in parents' beliefs about and reported use of corporal punishment in eight countries with and without legal bans. Child Abuse & Neglect, 71, 44–55. 10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.10.016. [PubMed: 28277271]

Lansford JE, Chang L, Dodge KA, Malone PS, … Oburu P, Palmerus K, Quinn N (2005). Physical discipline and children's adjustment: Cultural normativeness as a moderator. Child Development, 76(6), 1234–1246. 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00847.x. [PubMed: 16274437]

Lansford JE, Deater-Deckard K, Bornstein MH, Putnick DL, & Bradley RH (2014). Attitudes justifying domestic violence predict endorsement of corporal punishment and physical and psychological aggression towards children: A study in 25 low- and middle-income countries. Jornal de Pediatria, 164(5), 1208–1213. 10.1016/j.jpeds.2013.11.060.

Lansford JE, Sharma C, Malone PS, Woodlief D, Dodge KA, Oburu P, … Di Giunta L (2014). Corporal punishment, maternal warmth, and child adjustment: A longitudinal study in eight countries. Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 43(4), 670–685. 10.1080/15374416.2014.893518. [PubMed: 24885184]

Lindblade KA, Odhiambo F, Rosen DH, & DeCock KM (2003). Health and nutritional status of orphans < 6 years old cared for by relatives in western Kenya. Tropical Medicine & International Health, 8(1), 67–72. [PubMed: 12535253]

Madu S (2003). The relationship between parental physical availability and child sexual, physical, and emotional abuse: A study among a sample of university students in South Africa. Scandanavian Journal of Psychology, 44, 311–318.

Madu S, Idemudia S, & Jegede A (2003). Some perceived parental undesirable behaviours predicting child abuse: A study among a sample of university students in South Africa. The Journal of Social Science, 7, 111–119.

Mayrhuber EA, Niederkrotenthaler T, & Kutalek R (2017). We are survivors and not a virus:" Content analysis of media reporting on Ebola survivors in Liberia. PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases, 11(8), e0005845. 10.1371/journal.pntd.0005845. [PubMed: 28837554]

Meinck F, Cluver LD, Boyes ME, & Mhlongo EL (2015). Risk and protective factors for physical and sexual abuse of children and adolescents in Africa:A review and implications for practice. Trauma, Violence & Abuse, 16(1), 81–107. 10.1177/1524838014523336.

Merrilees CE, Cummings EM, Goeke-Morey MC, Schermerhorn AC, Shirlow P, & Cairns E (2011). Parenting control in contexts of political violence: Testing bidirectional relations between violence exposure and control in Post-Accord Belfast. Parenting, Science and Practice, 11(4), 308–325. 10.1080/15295192.2011.613726. [PubMed: 22523479]

Nkuba M, Hermenau K, & Hecker T (2018). Violence and maltreatment in Tanzanian families-Findings from a nationally representative sample of secondary school students and their parents. Child Abuse & Neglect, 77, 110–120. [PubMed: 29324272]

Nwoye A (2006). A narrative approach to child and family therapy in Africa*. Contemporary Family Therapy, 28(1), 1–23. 10.1007/s10591-006-9691-6.

Oburu PO, & Palmérus K (2003). Parenting stress and self-reported discipline strategies of Kenyan caregiving grandmothers. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 27(6), 505. 10.1080/01650250344000127.

Pace GT, Lee SJ, & Grogan-Kaylor A (2019). Spanking and young children's socioemotional development in low- and middle-income countries. Child Abuse & Neglect, 88, 84–95. 10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.11.003. [PubMed: 30448642]

Puffer ES, Green EP, Chase RM, Sim AL, Zayzay J, Friis E, … Boone L (2015). Parents make the difference: A randomized-controlled trial of a parenting intervention in Liberia. Global Mental Health (Cambridge, England), 2. 10.1017/gmh.2015.12. e15–e15 [PubMed: 28596863]

Shepler S (2005). The rites of the child: Global discourses of youth and reintegrating child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Journal of Human Rights, 4, 197–211.

Sherr L, Cluver LD, Betancourt TS, Kellerman SE, RIchter LM, & Desmond C (2014). Evidence of impact: Health, psychological and social effects of adult HIV on children. AIDS Care, 28, S251–S259.

Sherr L, Hensels IS, Skeen S, Tomlinson M, Roberts KJ, & Macedo A (2016). Exposure to violence predicts poor educational outcomes in young children in South Africa and Malawi. International Health, 8(1), 36–43. [PubMed: 26678567]

Sherr L, Macedo A, Cluver LD, Meinck F, Skeen S, Hensels IS, … Tomlinson M (2017). Parenting, the other oldest profession in the world – A cross-sectional study of parenting and child outcomes in South Africa and Malawi. Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine, 5(1), 145–165. 10.1080/21642850.2016.1276459. [PubMed: 30221074]

Statistics Sierra Leone, & ICF International (2013). Sierra leone demographic and health survey 2013. Sierra Leone and Rockville, Maryland: SSL and ICF International Freetown.

Stein A, Krebs G, Richter L, Tomkins A, Rochat T, & Bennish ML (2005). Babies of a pandemic. Archives of Disease in Childhood, 90(2), 116–118. [PubMed: 15665160]

Strauss AL, & Corbin JM (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Tamis-LeMonda CS, & McFadden KE (2010). Fathers from low-income backgrounds: Myths and evidence. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.). The role of the father in child development (pp. 296–318). Hoboken, N. J: John Wiley.

Thompstone G (2010). Mapping and analysis of the child protection system in Sierra Leone. Hong Kong: Child Frontiers.

Thurman TR, & Kidman R (2011). Child maltreatment at home: Prevalence among orphans and vulnerable children in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. New Orleans: Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Twum-Danso A (2010). The construction of childhood and the socialisation of children in Ghana: Implications for the implementation of article 12 of the CRC. In Percy-Smith B, & Thomas N (Eds.). A handbook of children and Young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice (pp. 133–140). London: Routledge.

UNICEF (2017). Violent discipline database. Retrieved from:https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-discipline/.

Valentin K, & Meinert L (2009). The adult North and the young South: Reflections on the civilizing mission of children's rights. Anthropology Today, 25(3), 23–28. 10.1111/j.1467-8322.2009.00669.x.

van Esch R, & de Haan M (2017). Implementing parenting programmes across cultural contexts: A perspective on the deficit narrative. The European Journal of Development Research, 29(5).

Wessells MG (2015). Bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems: Placing children, families, and communities at the center. Child Abuse & Neglect, 43, 8–21. 10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.006. [PubMed: 25980376]

Wessells MG, Lamin DFM, King D, Kostelny K, Stark L, & Lilley S (2015). The limits of top-down approaches to managing diversity: Lessons from the case of child protection and child rights in Sierra Leone. Peace & Conflict, 21(4), 574–588. 10.1037/pac0000130.

Williamson J (2005). Reintegration of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Washington, D.C: USAID.

World Bank (2015). World development indicators online database. Retrieved fromhttp://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators.