



Published in final edited form as:

*Child Abuse Negl.* 2015 October ; 48: 131–139. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.022.

## Children's experiences of corporal punishment: A qualitative study in an urban township of South Africa

Alison Breen<sup>1</sup>, Karen Daniels<sup>2</sup>, and Mark Tomlinson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Health Systems Research Unit, South African Medical Research Council, South Africa

### Abstract

Exposure to violence is a serious mental and public health issue. In particular, children exposed to violence are at risk for poor developmental outcomes and physical and mental health problems. One area that has been shown to increase the risk for poor outcomes is the use of corporal punishment as a discipline method. While researchers are starting to ask children directly about their experiences of violence, there is limited research with children about their perspectives on physical punishment, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). This paper begins to address this gap by reporting on the spontaneous data that emerged during 24 qualitative interviews that were conducted with children, aged 8–12 in South Africa. The themes that emerged indicated that corporal punishment is an everyday experience, that it has negative emotional and behavioral consequences, and that it plays a role in how children resolve interpersonal conflicts. The study highlights the challenges for violence prevention interventions in under-resourced contexts.

### Keywords

Corporal punishment; Children's voices; South Africa; Intervention challenges

### Introduction

There is a considerable literature documenting the detrimental effects of exposure to violence on children (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Child maltreatment, peer victimization, and exposure to family and community violence have been repeatedly demonstrated to be associated with developmental difficulties, problem behavior, and a range of physical and mental health effects, extending throughout the lifespan (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Wynkoop-Simmons, 2003; Danese et al., 2009; Sachs-Ericsson, Blazer, Plant, & Arnow, 2005; Widom, DuMont, & Czaja, 2007).

There are challenges facing preventative efforts to decrease children's exposure to violence and abuse (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, & Tol, 2013). One of these areas is the use

of corporal punishment as a discipline method (Asawa, Hansen & Flood, 2008). The association between the use of corporal punishment at home and at school and poor child outcomes has been demonstrated (Gershoff, 2013), including mental health problems and later aggressive behavior (Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2013; Ma, Han, Grogan-Kaylor, Delva, & Castillo, 2012). The use of physical discipline methods has also been shown to increase the risk for more severe forms of abuse (Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, & Mhlongo, 2015). Corporal punishment continues to be prevalent in many countries around the world, both in the home and in schools (Akmatov, 2011; Hecker et al., 2013). In a report on corporal punishment in 35 low-and middle-income countries (LMIC), 6 of the 10 countries in which corporal punishment was found to be very prevalent are in Sub-Saharan Africa with more than 80% of children in these countries reporting being beaten at home (UNICEF, 2010).

While the use of corporal punishment is often attributed to individual causes, such as the characteristics of the child or parent/teacher, it is equally important to understand the societal enablers (Straus, 2010). At a societal level, cultural norms approving violence, legality of corporal punishment in homes and schools and cultural beliefs about the necessity and effectiveness of physical punishment, can contribute to corporal punishment use. Thus the nature of the society raises or lowers the probability that a parent or teacher hits a child to correct misbehavior (Straus, 2010).

Researchers who investigate corporal punishment, frequently include questions in their studies that ask parents about their attitudes and experiences (Dawes, Kropiwnicki, Kafaar, & Richter, 2003), focusing on the effectiveness of discipline measures from the parent's point of view (Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Increasingly, there is a recognition of the importance of eliciting children's views about their experiences (James, 2007). This is particularly important in the case of corporal punishment, as, when children are asked about their experiences, there are often discrepancies with parental reports (Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Studies where researchers investigate discipline measures solely from the parents point of view lead to an incomplete picture, as children and parents often interpret events differently (Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Discrepancies have been found in how children and parents define spanking (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004; Willow & Hyder, 1998), with parents defining it as "a gentle tap or a loving smack", whereas children defined it as a "hard hit" or a "very hard hit" (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004, p. 376). Many children also report that parents usually hit when they were very angry, however the parents report that they do not hit while angry (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004). In order to get a more complete picture of the context and experiences of discipline, it is important to understand children's perspective.

When children are asked about their experiences of corporal punishment, many report being hit with objects (Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2006; Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006). Several studies in which children were interviewed report that these children do not agree with the use of physical punishment as it causes physical and emotional pain (Dobbs et al., 2006; Saunders & Goddard, 2007; Willow & Hyder, 1998) and that it is the least fair discipline method, when compared to other methods such as reasoning, time out and withdrawing privileges (Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Children also show high levels of confusion in trying to make meaning of their parents actions and their own views about

corporal punishment (Dobbs, 2007), with some children expressing strong negative feelings toward the adult who hit them (Gershoff, 2002).

There is a dearth of research from LMIC on children's experiences in contexts of violence and adversity. The present study aimed to contribute to increasing this yield. The aim of the study was to elicit children's experiences of daily life in South Africa, a country facing a significant burden of morbidity and mortality arising from violence and injury (Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009). While the interview guide did not contain questions pertaining to corporal punishment, it emerged as a major content area during the analysis of the children's narratives. In light of this, the focus of this paper is on children's experiences of corporal punishment.

## Methods

### Study Setting

The study was conducted in Khayelitsha, a peri urban township near Cape Town, with an estimated population of approximately 400,000. Housing is both formal and informal (homes which consist of shacks, either in a formal dwelling backyard, or as a stand-alone structure), unemployment levels (at 38.2%) (SDI & GIS, 2013) considerably higher than the national average of 24.3%. 74% of households are estimated to have a monthly income R3200/month or less (approximately \$280) (SDI & GIS, 2013). Many residents do not have access to running water, electricity and sanitation. There are high levels of violence and crime, however this is not the area with the highest crime rates in Cape Town (Crime Stats SA, 2014). In 2014, there were 233 sexual crimes reported in Khayelitsha, 144 attempted murders, 687 assaults with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, 774 common assaults, and 1,185 reported robberies with aggravating circumstances (Crime Stats SA, 2014).

### Study Design and Sample

In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 Xhosa speaking children (11 boys and 13 girls), aged 8–12 years old (mean = 9.4 years) living in and attending school in the same setting. Forty six percent lived with their mothers and fathers (45.8%), 33.3% lived with their mothers but not their fathers, and 20.8% lived with other relatives such as grandparents and aunts. The children had been zero to 5 siblings (mean = 1.6) and the mean number of other children living with the children in the sample was 2.0. Sixteen percent (15.9%) lived in households where three household members were working, 29.1% had two members who worked, 20.8% had 1 household member who worked, 8% had household members on social support grants, and 25% appeared to have no means of formal income. Three primary schools, which served children from different areas of Khayelitsha were selected as sample sites. All three schools were no fee, under-resourced and overcrowded facilities, with over 1,000 children registered. There were up to 6 classes per grade and between 40 and 50 children per class to one teacher. One school primarily served an area where the children lived in informal dwellings, one where most of the children lived in formal dwellings, and the final school served children in both formal and informal dwellings. Children from these schools were invited to participate, using a purposive sampling process. Permission to do research at the schools was sought from the

provincial education authority, and from the schools' principals. The researcher and interviewer then met with the teachers of the relevant grades to explain the study aims and process. We asked the teachers to include children who they would describe as "good", "bad" and "troubled" in the sample, in an attempt to ensure that teachers did not over select from one group. Consent forms were then sent home with the children for their caregiver's to sign and return. However, in the end, the only sampling criteria that was relevant was the return rate of the consent forms with parental authorization. Return rates of forms sent home from school were reportedly very poor and so in order to ensure a sample of at least 20 children, 40 consent forms were sent home, 24 of which were returned by the caregivers with their signed authorization to take part in the interviews.

### **Ethical Approval and Issues**

Ethical permission was granted by the Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee (N10/02/058). Permission to conduct research with school learners was also granted by the Western Cape Department of Education and all school principals. All of the children provided written assent in addition to written informed consent from their caregivers.

The interviewer was trained in emergency procedures in the event of children becoming upset or distressed, and in the case of abuse being reported or suspected. As reporting of suspected or confirmed abuse is mandatory in South Africa, the interviewer was to make contact with AB if she identified a case. Children were given a number of the local social services if it was suspected that it was necessary.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were conducted between June and July 2010. The first two interviews served as a pilot and were conducted at a community support center in the setting. The remaining twenty-two interviews were conducted at the children's schools. The decision to conduct the interviews at school was based on both convenience and child safety, so that the children would not have to travel unescorted from the school to the venue and be exposed to risk on the way. The interview was conducted in a private room that ensured complete confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min. Children were given the choice of participating in which ever language they felt comfortable. All of the children chose to have the interviews conducted in Xhosa. The interviewer was a Xhosa speaking woman in her mid-20s, with extensive experience in qualitative interviews with children. The interview guide included questions about children's experiences at home, at school and in their communities (Web Appendix A). Questions were open ended, leaving room for other areas to be explored that had not been included in the interview guide.

Prior to starting the interviews, the interviewer received further training from AB in qualitative data collection techniques, interviewing children and the interview guide. AB was present during the pilot interviews. But after this it was decided that the children would feel more comfortable in the remainder of the interviews with only the interviewer present. The interviewer explained that the children were participating voluntarily, that the information was confidential, and that they could terminate the interview at any time. At the end of the interviews, the children received age-appropriate World Cup memorabilia (the

interviews took place during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in Cape Town). As the sample had been predetermined, this did not affect the sample and children had not been told before the interviews that they would be receiving the incentive.

The interviewer and AB met after each data collection day to discuss the interviews and emerging themes and adjust the interview guide if necessary, using a constant comparison approach to data collection and preliminary analysis (Glaser, 1967), and the data appeared to be saturated for the study purpose, as described by Bowen (2008).

### **Data Analysis and Validation**

With permission, the interviews were audio-taped. They were then translated and transcribed verbatim into English by an experienced bilingual translator. In order to check the accuracy of the transcripts the transcripts were reviewed by the interviewer and researcher before being analyzed. Memos (reflexive notes about interviews) and field notes were attached to the interviews. These translated transcripts were analyzed by AB using the content analysis approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The analysis started with data immersion, with AB reading all of the verbatim transcripts in order to get an understanding of the whole, followed by further re-reading with annotations in relation to study aims and research question. The data were then illustrated diagrammatically in order to visually map the initial categories. The text was then divided into meaning units which were labeled with a code. These codes were created by staying close to text, in regular consultation between AB and KD. This was followed by the development of themes and subthemes. Data were continuously compared in order to triangulate and validate the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team, with experience in qualitative health research, child development and public mental and physical health (AB, KD and MT), met regularly to organize and discuss the emerging themes, and for KD and MT to verify AB's analysis. The results are presented below using data extracts to illustrate key themes. All names have been changed to protect the children's identity, and any names which appear in the text are made up. The number at the end of each extracts is the respondent's gender, age and participant number.

### **Results**

Analysis of the content related to corporal punishment revealed 3 themes. Corporal punishment (1) is an everyday experience, (2) has negative emotional and behavioral consequences, and (3) plays a role in how children resolve interpersonal conflicts.

#### **Corporal Punishment is an Everyday Experience**

Corporal punishment emerged as an everyday reality for the children. They were either the recipient of physical discipline methods at home or school, or they witnessed the use with siblings at home or with peers at school. Other family members such as older siblings and aunts and uncles were also involved in administering corporal punishment, in most cases, in addition to the primary caregivers.

Thirteen of the children (boys = 5, girls = 8) spoke about their parents or caregivers use of corporal punishment. In three cases, children spoke about their caregiver's use of corporal punishment as either the first thing they mentioned, or very early on in the discussion.

One children responded to the question: “Tell me about your grandmother?”

“My grandmother is the kind of person who hits” (G, 10yr, 20).

Another child, when asked about what he liked about his mother, responded:

“It’s beating me.... it’s being beaten, that’s what I don’t like” (B, 9yr, 2).

The type of transgressions for which they were beaten included returning home late, not doing chores, breaking things by accident and fighting with siblings.

“She’s [mother] been beating me for a long time...[for] doing wrong...when I had played with her cosmetics and spilt them” (B, 8yr, 22).

“[She beats me] when I mess up...maybe when I take her tea while she is drinking it” (G, 8yr, 5).

The use of objects in the beatings such as belts, whips, towels and shoes were common.

“If you don’t do that [arriving home by curfew] you get scolded or you get a beating.... you get beaten with a belt” (G, 12yr, 12).

“I get beaten up when I bring friends home, with a towel or a belt” (G, 10yr, 20).

It was not only primary caregivers that delivered the punishment. Older siblings, aunts, uncles or grandparents, would also use physical methods, in some cases in addition to parents.

“He [grandfather] hits me on the head [when] I forget to sweep away food”. (B, 8yr, 22).

While two children denied that they themselves were beaten, they described how their siblings were. These two boys reported that their mothers would use corporal punishment with their younger siblings, but not with them.

Although most of the narratives involved children’s own experiences of being punished in the home, two spoke about their friend’s experiences. One girl described how her friend was beaten by her mother when she missed the bus and didn’t tell her teacher.

“She missed the bus, and she stayed at school and her mother went to look for her..... and she saw her and she asked her why she didn’t ride in the teacher’s car, why she didn’t tell the teachers that she missed the bus and she said, she didn’t say anything and kept quiet and then at home she got a beating” (G, 9yr, 3).

While corporal punishment was common at home, 19 children (girls = 10, boys =9) spoke about their teachers’ use of corporal punishment at school. Similar to when asked about their homes, two of the children immediately spoke about their teacher’s use of corporal punishment when asked the question “Tell me about your school, what kind of school is it?” “[At] my school, when a child doesn’t listen they get beaten up...with a stick (B, 10 yr, 14)”.

Another responded:

R: “Oh, they beat you at this school”. I: “Who is that?”

R: “The teachers and the mistresses.” (B, 9yr, 17).

The type of transgressions that led to corporal punishment included coming in late from break, not doing school or homework, bringing cell phones to school, not listening to teachers, not knowing the answers or making mistakes, and making a noise during class.

“Miss came and beat me, she asked me why I hadn’t done the homework and I said that I forgot it” (G, 10yr, 15).

Teachers were also described as using objects such as sticks, planks (small thin pieces of wood), pipes, and belts in administering the punishment.

“Miss hits with anything, including a plank” (G, 9yr, 9).

When asked about teachers at school who were good or helpful, 5 children also described good teachers as not beating at all or as much as the other teachers.

“She is kind.... she doesn’t hit too much like the other Miss..... she doesn’t often do this thing of saying “hey, come here” and beat you when you do something wrong”. (B, 10yr, 14).

“When they are teaching they want you to answer, but they want you to answer even if it’s the wrong answer because they say you will not be beaten” (G, 8yr, 1).

This was in contrast to other teachers.

“There is one ma’am there on some days would slap you in the face.... if you don’t write your work she will slap you” (G, 9yr, 3).

Teachers also used corporal punishment as a discipline measure to deal with children who bullied or stole things from other children.

“They took away his food... he reported to the mistress... the miss bought a stick and beat him [the one who stole the food]” (B, 8yr, 8).

### **Negative (Emotional and Behavioral) Consequences of Corporal Punishment**

The emotional and behavioral consequences of being beaten, in many cases, were negative. Feeling sad was a common response to being beaten at home for not doing their chores.

“She [my mother] beats me and I cry and I become sad” (G, 9yr, 9).

Sometimes children would think of how they wouldn’t be beaten if the circumstances were different.

“I sit and think, and think of my mother [who had passed away], if she was here this wouldn’t happen” (G, 11yr, 7).

Children had different ways that they coped with their feelings after being beaten. Some described seeking comfort from older sisters or aunts who would comfort them, while one reported that her mother would comfort her after beating her.

“When I cry – when she beats me she also comforts me” (G, 9yr, 16).

While some children would be comforted by these people, other caregivers would respond by retaliating (or threatening to retaliate) against the parent who had administered the

punishment. One girl would tell her father after her mother beat her. He father's response was to tell her he would beat her mother, but she didn't believe him:

“He tells me that he is going to beat her, and yet he is lying” (G, 9yr, 16).

Being left to manage their feelings alone was one consequence for children who did not have people to approach for comfort. Going to sleep, going out or just keeping quite were some of the ways they tried to cope.

“She [aunt] beats me when I didn't sweep.... I cry and then keep quiet” (G, 10yr, 11).

Anxiety at the anticipation of being beaten was another emotional consequence of being beaten. One of the effects of this anxiety was that some children did not ask their caregivers for help when they needed to.

“If I had fought with another child I am afraid to tell my father, it's like he will beat me or insult me” (G, 10yr, 18).

One girl described how her fear of being shouted at prevented her from asking for her grandmother, her primary caregiver, to escort her to go to the bathroom at night. The toilet was situated out of the house and therefore she stayed in bed. She reported how she had wet her bed and was then afraid of telling her grandmother for fear of being beaten. She described the incident:

“Because – because when I peed on the bed.... I was pressed and it was at night at I was afraid.... I was unwilling to wake her [grandmother] up.... I was unwilling because she would shout at me.

Q. Okay so what happened then, when you woke up having wet your bed, what did she do to you? She beat me” (G, 9yr, 3).

While sadness was the most common described emotional response to being beaten at home, anxiety at the prospect of being beaten was more prevalent at school. When asked about what worried them in their lives in general, many children reported worrying about being punished at school.

“It sometimes happens when someone is going to get beaten, I become anxious as if I am the one who is going to be beaten”. (G, 8yr, 5).

“When I do not do my homework I fear that I will be beaten” (G, 10yr, 15).

Although sadness was reported far less commonly, a few children did describe feeling sad after being beaten at school.

“I cry and then keep quiet..... because no one will comfort me” (G, 10yr, 15).

Copying each other's homework was one of the strategies that children described as a means of avoiding being beaten.

“We say, “hey did you write the English homework?” and she says no, and we then say “we are going to get a beating” and she says “please help me copy it” and we help her copy” (G, 10yr, 6).



## Corporal Punishment by Parents and Teachers Plays a Role in How Children Solve Interpersonal Problems

Corporal punishment use by teachers and caregivers played a role in how children solved their interpersonal difficulties. At home, disputes between siblings over possessions such as toys or school books could end with the older sibling telling the parent. The parent would then beat the younger sibling.

“Siya [5 year old brother] takes my school things and throws them away.....I report him [to mother].....She beats him up” (B, 8yr, 22).

There were far more examples of this relationship at school. Monitors (children who were appointed by the teacher to report children who made a noise in class) would threaten making false allegations which would lead to their classmates being beaten if they did not do what the monitor asked of them. One girl described an incident at school where her friend who was a monitor forbade her from sharing her apple with another one of her friends. The monitor threatened that she would write her name on the board so she would be beaten if she shared her apple with the other friend.

“When we fight sometimes she writes me down... then she said I will see, I will also write you [write your name on the board], I will show you” (G, 9yr, 3).

Reporting peers to teachers for bullying was another way that children used to solve problems.

“We were playing skip and rope where you count and then whisper to someone else, and then we were playing with another child, now I was counting and then he beats me and says I should not count, I am making noise. I went to report him to the teacher and the teacher beat him with a pipe” (G, 9yr, 3).

“I do not fight, I let a person hit me and then report him .... I don't feel hurt, I just laugh at them because I know I am going to report him” (B, 10yr, 14).

Finally, the wish to be able to beat other children the way they had been beaten emerged. One child expressed the wish to be a teacher when she grew up.

“I also want to beat the children, because I too was beaten when I was young” (G, 9yr, 16).

## Discussion

Despite not being an area specifically addressed by the interview guide questions, the use of corporal punishment by teachers and caregivers emerged as a key experience in these children's lives, and in some cases, was the first thing that they spoke about when asked broad questions about their caregivers and schools. The ubiquity of corporal punishment by parents in these children's lives is in line with global findings (UNICEF, 2003). The prevalence of our participants' experience of corporal punishment at school is also in line with findings from rural and poor schools in South Africa (Kipperberg, 2007; Ward, 2007), as well as other countries in Africa (Hecker et al., 2013; Slonim-Nevo & Mukuka, 2007).

Many of the children in this study report commonly being hit with objects like belts, whips and planks, both at home and at school for minor transgressions, similar to reports in other studies (Hecker et al., 2013; Sanapo & Nakamura, 2011). This places them at an increased risk for physical abuse (Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008), in a country where the rates of child physical abuse are already very high (Meinck et al., 2014), with some studies indicating prevalence rates as high as 19% (Madu, 2003) and 43% for orphan and other vulnerable children (Thurman & Kidman, 2011).

While the children in this study did not disclose experiences of injury as a result of beatings, it is possible that physical abuse and injury as a result of beatings are only reported in severe cases (DSD, DWCPD & UNICEF, 2012). Beliefs about the necessity and appropriateness of corporal punishment play a key role in determining whether any resulting injury is perceived as abuse (Gracia & Herrero, 2008). The children in this study did not express their views about whether they believed that it was necessary or appropriate, but many did highlight a sense of responsibility for having beating beaten, the result of them having done something wrong or in the very least as their own fault. This may reflect that, despite them not liking being beaten, they see it as appropriate similar to views reported in previous studies (Simons & Wurtele, 2010). While the children did not report physical injury as a result of corporal punishment, they did report what might be described as emotional injury. The sadness and anxiety that they experienced when exposed to corporal punishment at home and at school, as reported in others studies (Dobbs, 2007; Sanapo & Nakamura, 2011), often led to children in the study avoiding asking their caregivers for help. Children's attachment relationships are key protective factors for positive outcomes in adverse contexts (Masten, 2011). Damage to the parent-child relationship is a well-established outcome of exposure to corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2002), and our data showed how this impacts on how children make use of potential resources. Previous research has shown that the painful nature of corporal punishment can evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, anger in children, which, if generalized to the parent can lead the child to avoid and be fearful of their parent (Gershoff, 2002). As reported above, in some cases, punishment was as the first thing that came to mind when discussing their relationship with the adults in their lives. This has implications for children's brain development in contexts of chronic stress. When children's stress response systems are frequently activated without the buffering protection of adult support, the resulting experience of toxic stress disrupts their brain architecture, placing them at risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment (Shonkoff et al., 2009).

At school, children were more trusting of teachers who did not make use of, or were less frequent users of corporal punishment. The accounts given by the children in this study shows that children may even put themselves at risk to avoid corporal punishment, like going to the toilet unaccompanied in the middle of the night, as for many children, toilet facilities are either on their property in a separate building, or in a communal area. If these children were able to feel safe in their relationships with their primary caregivers, and able to ask for help when they needed it, this could help mediate the effects of their exposure to violence in other areas such as their neighborhoods (Shields, Nadasen, & Pierce, 2008).

Children who are exposed to corporal punishment are more likely to use aggressive conflict resolution strategies with the siblings and peers (Simons & Wurtele, 2010). The children's

narratives showed how they would use their parents' and teachers' use of corporal punishment as a way of resolving interpersonal conflict, at times even fabricating problems so that others would be beaten. This is consistent with social cognitive theory which highlights the role of observational learning, through both direct and vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986). When children see the adults in their lives using physical methods, they are more likely to view it as normative (Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

## Implications for Interventions and Future Research

South Africa illustrates the complexity of implementing policy changes in the absence of other structural changes. The South African Schools Act of 1996 outlawed corporal punishment in schools. Yet, the practice of corporal punishment persists. South Africa is a highly inequitable society and this inequality is reflected in the education system (Spaull, 2013). The middle class, formerly white schools no longer use corporal punishment as a discipline method (Morrell, 2001). However, in poor and rural schools its use is still common practice (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). In these schools, classrooms are overcrowded and under-resourced, and teachers are often under-qualified and overworked (Makgato & Mji, 2006). There are also huge problems with violence by learners toward other learners and teachers, and teachers feel ill-equipped with viable alternative discipline methods to maintain a safe and secure environment to facilitate learning (Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). Other factors which have been indicated to play a role in the on-going use of corporal punishment include the legacy of authoritarian education practices and parental use and support of its use at school (Morrell, 2001).

Campaigns for the prohibition of corporal punishment in the home are ongoing in South Africa, as well as other African countries including Angola and Tanzania (PAN: Children, 2012). Corporal punishment in both the home and school are prohibited in five African countries (South Sudan, Kenya, Tunisia, Togo and the Democratic Republic of Congo) (PAN: Children, 2012).

Child rearing attitudes are rooted in cultural discipline practices, which either favor corporal punishment as appropriate or not (Bell & Romano, 2012). Where corporal punishment is seen as appropriate it may also be deemed necessary and viewed as a way to protect children from danger (LeVine et al., 1996). Many of the children in our study reported being beaten when they came home after their curfew. Being out after dark places them at high risk for exposure to other forms of violence, and parents may believe that using corporal punishment is what they need to do to keep children safe. Parental use of corporal punishment is also associated with lower economic status and large household number (Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

Parents are also more likely to use corporal punishment if they themselves were exposed during their own childhood (Gage & Silvestre, 2010). While we did not interview these children's parents, we can hypothesize based on our experience as authors, of growing up in vastly different South African settings, that it is likely that they also were recipients of corporal punishment. Mothers who have been exposed to physical and emotional violence in their current relationship or with someone else, also have a significantly increased risk of

using corporal punishment with their children (Gage & Silvestre, 2010). Again, we can hypothesize, given the high levels of interpersonal violence in South Africa (Kaminer, Grimsrud, Myer, Stein, & Williams, 2008) that many of these mothers have at some stage experienced some form of abuse, and that within cramped living conditions their children are likely to have been witness to this.

Advocates of ending corporal punishment suggest policies which make the use of corporal punishment illegal (Lansford & Dodge, 2008; Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). However, as this study illustrates, the case is more complex. While programs that help parents and teachers develop alternative methods of discipline are effective and needed, given the prevalence of the practice, it is unlikely that these will have much impact in the absence of policy changes and interventions targeting change of a broader societal level (A Dawes, Kropiwnicki, Kafaar, & Richter, 2005; Lansford & Dodge, 2008). Potential interventions need to target the people who influence parents around corporal punishment use such as religious leaders, and educate parents, teachers and the general public around the high risk/benefit ratio of using corporal punishment, in order to have an impact on social and cultural norms (Lansford & Dodge, 2008; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011).

Our study has a balance of strengths and limitations. The children were purposively sampled and we may therefore not have accessed children who were severely abused. The interviews were also conducted with an adult interviewer in the school environment. We took care to create an environment where the children would feel comfortable, with the interviewer being sensitive to the children's needs. Our choice of interviewer had advantages and disadvantages. As a young woman, who spoke the same language and lived in the same area as the children, she was more likely to have been seen as an older sister figure than a teacher or parental authority figure, and therefore facilitated trust. However, in spite of training and experience in interviewing children, she came across at times as judgmental. For example, in one case a girl spoke about being beaten by her father for breaking something from his car. Her response could have given the child the message that it was appropriate for her to be beaten as she had been the one to take the item from the car. Another potential limitation was the translation from Xhosa into English. Although measures were taken as described in the methods section, language nuance and specific meanings may have been lost. For instance, the word "beating" may cover a wide range of behaviors, however, in discussion with the interviewer and translator, the English word beating does have resonance with the Xhosa words the children used. Despite these limitations, the children were able to express themselves and share their experiences openly, giving us insight into their world from a perspective that is not commonly accessed. The research team brought different perspectives, and engaged in a process of constantly questioning interpretations. During the data analysis, it was easy to become overwhelmed by the sadness of these stories, but having three people to work with, two of who were more distant from the data, helped bring perspective so that we could consider the public health implications and not be drowned by the narratives.

The study highlights the importance of speaking to children directly about their experiences. This methodology also has potential in being used as part of advocacy and change interventions.

It is suggested that future research is needed to develop sensitive methods to explore and measure trends of corporal punishment in South Africa.

## Conclusion

There is a dearth of good quality data on the prevalence of corporal punishment in South Africa, and this knowledge gaps weaken efforts to develop viable interventions to address this form of violence against children (Dawes et al., 2005). Given that discrepancies exist between adult and child reports of corporal punishment (Vittrup & Holden, 2010), eliciting children's experiences helps provide a more complete picture of what is happening in their everyday lives. Further research is needed to build on this study, to understand more about children's experiences in other contexts as well as develop child-centered, sensitive methodologies to explore these issues. Research with parents, teachers and other key role players is also needed to understand their experiences and the beliefs that maintain this practice.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by NIH/NIAAA (R24 AA022919), the National Research Foundation, South Africa, the Harry Crossley Foundation and the South African Medical Research Council.

## References

- Akmatov MK. Child abuse in 28 developing and transitional countries—Results from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. *International Journal of Epidemiology*. 2011; 40:219–227. [PubMed: 20943933]
- Asawa LE, Hansen DJ, Flood MF. Early Childhood Intervention Programs: Opportunities and challenges for preventing child maltreatment. *Education and Treatment of Children*. 2008; 31:73–110.
- Bandura, A. *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; 1986.
- Beazley, HS.; Bessell, L.; Ennew, J.; Waterson, R. What children say: Results of comparative research on physical and emotional punishment of children in Southeast Asia. *East Asia and the Pacific*. 2006. Retrieved from Save the Children website: <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/1397.pdf>
- Bell T, Romano E. Opinions about child corporal punishment and influencing factors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 2012; 27(11):2208–2229. [PubMed: 22258077]
- Bensley L, Van Eenwyk J, Wynkoop Simmons K. Childhood family violence history and women's risk for intimate partner violence and poor health. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2003; 25:38–44. [PubMed: 12818308]
- Betancourt TS, Meyers-Ohki S, Charrow AP, Tol WA. Interventions for children affected by war: An ecological perspective on psychosocial support and mental health care. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*. 2013; 21:70–91. [PubMed: 23656831]
- Bowen GA. Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research*. 2008; 8:137–152.
- Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006; 3(2):77–101.

- Crime Stats SA. Worst ten precincts: Largest number of crimes reported in the Western Cape. 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.crimestatssa.com/toptenbyprovince.php?ShowProvince=Western%20Cape>
- Danese A, Moffitt TE, Harrington H, Milne BJ, Polanczyk G, Pariante CM, Caspi A. Adverse childhood experiences and adult risk factors for age-related disease: Depression, inflammation, and clustering of metabolic risk markers. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. 2009; 163:1135–1143. [PubMed: 19996051]
- Dawes A, Kropiwnicki ZDS, Kafaar Z, Richter L. Survey examines South Africa's attitude towards Corporal Punishment. 2003:2–4.
- Dawes, A.; Kropiwnicki, ZDS.; Kafaar, Z.; Richter, L. Corporal punishment of children: A South African national survey. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council; 2005.
- Dobbs T. What do children tell us about physical punishment as a risk factor for child abuse? *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*. 2007; 30:145–162.
- Dobbs TA, Smith AB, Taylor NJ. No, we don't get a say, children just suffer the consequences. *International Journal of Children's Rights*. 2006; 14:137–156.
- Dobbs T, Duncan J. Children's perspectives on physical discipline: A New Zealand example. *Child Care in Practice*. 2004; 10:367–379.
- DSD DWCPD UNICEF. Violence against children in South Africa. Pretoria: Department of Social Development/Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities/UNICEF; 2012.
- Finkelhor D, Turner HA, Shattuck A, Hamby SL. Violence, crime, and abuse exposure in a national sample of children and youth: an update. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2013; 167(7):614–621. [PubMed: 23700186]
- Gage AJ, Silvestre EA. Maternal violence, victimization, and child physical punishment in Peru. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2010; 34:523–533. [PubMed: 20605631]
- Gershoff ET. Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2002; 128:539–579. [PubMed: 12081081]
- Gershoff ET. Spanking and child development: We know enough now to stop hitting our children. *Child Development Perspectives*. 2013; 7:133–137. [PubMed: 24039629]
- Glaser, B. *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter; 1967.
- Gracia E, Herrero J. Beliefs in the necessity of corporal punishment of children and public perceptions of child physical abuse as a social problem. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2008; 32:1058–1062. [PubMed: 19027163]
- Graneheim UH, Lundman B. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*. 2004; 24:105–112. [PubMed: 14769454]
- Hecker T, Hermenau K, Isele D, Elbert T. Corporal punishment and children's externalizing problems: A cross-sectional study of Tanzanian primary school aged children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2013:1–9.
- James A. Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials. *American Anthropologist*. 2007; 109(2):261–272.
- Kaminer D, Grimsrud A, Myer L, Stein DJ, Williams DR. Risk for post-traumatic stress disorder associated with different forms of interpersonal violence in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2008; 67:1589–1595. [PubMed: 18774211]
- Kipperberg, E. The TRC structures and resulting violence. In: Burton, P., editor. *Someone stole my smile: An exploration into the causes of youth violence in South Africa*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; 2007.
- Lansford JE, Dodge KA. Cultural norms for adult corporal punishment of children and societal rates of endorsement and use of violence. *Parenting, Science and Practice*. 2008; 8:257–270.
- LeVine, R.; LeVine, S.; Dixon, S.; Richman, A.; Leiderman, P.; Keefer, C., et al. *Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa*. Cambridge University Press; 1996.
- Ma J, Han Y, Grogan-Kaylor A, Delva J, Castillo M. Corporal punishment and youth externalizing behavior in Santiago, Chile. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2012; 36:481–490. [PubMed: 22766372]

- Madu S. The relationship between parental availability and child sexual, physical and emotional abuse: A study among a sample of university students in South Africa. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. 2003; 44:311–318. [PubMed: 12887552]
- Makgato M, Mji A. Factors associated with high school learners' poor performance: A spotlight on mathematics and physical science. *South African Journal of Education*. 2006; 26:253–266.
- Maphosa C, Shumba A. Educators' disciplinary capabilities after the banning of corporal punishment in South African schools. *South African Journal of Education*. 2010; 30:387–399.
- Masten AS. Resilience in children threatened by extreme adversity: Frameworks for research, practice, and translational synergy. *Development and Psychopathology*. 2011; 23:493–506. [PubMed: 23786691]
- Meinck F, Cluver LD, Boyes ME, Mhlongo EL. Risk and protective factors for physical and sexual abuse of children and adolescents in Africa: A review and implications for practice. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*. 2015; 16:81–107.
- Morrell R. Corporal punishment in South African schools: A neglected explanation for its persistence. *South African Journal of Education*. 2001; 21:292–299.
- PAN: Children. Prohibition of corporal and humiliating punishment in the home. 2012. Retrieved from PAN: Children website: <http://children.pan.org.za/node/9402>
- Sachs-Ericsson N, Blazer D, Plant EA, Arnow B. Childhood sexual and physical abuse and the 1-year prevalence of medical problems in the National Comorbidity Survey. *Health Psychology: Official Journal of the Division of Health Psychology, American Psychological Association*. 2005; 24:32–40.
- Sanapo MS, Nakamura Y. Gender and physical punishment: The Filipino children's experience. *Child Abuse Review*. 2011; 20:39–56.
- Saunders BJ, Goddard C. Some Australian children's perceptions of physical punishment in childhood. *Children & Society*. 2007; 22:405–417.
- Seedat M, Van Niekerk A, Jewkes R, Suffla S, Ratele K. Violence and injuries in South Africa: prioritising an agenda for prevention. *Lancet*. 2009; 374(9694):1011–1022. [PubMed: 19709732]
- Shields N, Nadasen K, Pierce L. The effects of community violence on children in Cape Town, South Africa. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2008; 32:589–601. [PubMed: 18511114]
- Shonkoff JP, Boyce WT, McEwen BS. Neuroscience, molecular biology, and the childhood roots of health disparities: building a new framework for health promotion and disease prevention. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 2009; 301(21):2252–2259. [PubMed: 19491187]
- Simons DA, Wurtele SK. Relationships between parents' use of corporal punishment and their children's endorsement of spanking and hitting other children. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 2010; 34:639–646. [PubMed: 20638720]
- Slonim-Nevo V, Mukuka L. Child abuse and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes and behavior among adolescents in Zambia. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2007; 31:143–159. [PubMed: 17303239]
- Spaull N. Poverty & privilege: Primary school inequality in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 2013; 33:436–447.
- Strategic Development Information, & GIS Department. City of Cape Town–2011 Census Suburb Khayelitsha. 2013. Retrieved from City of Cape Town website: [http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/stats/2011CensusSuburbs/2011\\_Census\\_CT\\_Suburb\\_Khayelitsha\\_Profile.pdf](http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/stats/2011CensusSuburbs/2011_Census_CT_Suburb_Khayelitsha_Profile.pdf)
- Straus MA. Prevalence Societal Causes, and Trends in Corporate Punishment by Parents in World Perspective. *Law and Contemporary Problems*. 2010; 73
- Taylor CA, Hamvas L, Rice J, Newman DL, DeJong W. Perceived social norms, expectations, and attitudes toward corporal punishment among an urban community sample of parents. *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*. 2011; 88:254–269. [PubMed: 21336503]
- Thurman, T.; Kidman, R. Child maltreatment at home: Prevalence among orphans and vulnerable children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine*; 2011.
- Vittrup B, Holden GW. Children's assessments of corporal punishment and other disciplinary practices: The role of age, race, SES, and exposure to spanking. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 2010; 31:211–220.

- Ward, C. Young people's violent behaviour: Social learning in context. In: Burton, P., editor. *Someone stole my smile: An exploration into the causes of youth violence in South Africa*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention; 2007.
- Widom CS, DuMont K, Czaja SJ. A prospective investigation of major depressive disorder and comorbidity in abused and neglected children grown up. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. 2007; 64:49–56. [PubMed: 17199054]
- Willow, C.; Hyder, T. *It hurts you inside: Children talking about smacking*. London: Save the Children; 1998.
- Zolotor AJ, Puzia ME. Bans against corporal punishment: A systematic review of the laws, changes in attitudes and behaviours. *Child Abuse Review*. 2010; 19:229–247.
- Zolotor AJ, Theodore AD, Chang JJ, Berkoff MC, Runyan DK. Speak softly– and forget the stick. Corporal punishment and child physical abuse. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2008; 35:364–369. [PubMed: 18779030]