

Understanding the dynamics of corporal punishment: Knowledge, consequences and associated factors of corporal punishment among students aged 15 - 19 years in Colombo and Kegalle Districts, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Corporal punishment is the commonest form of disciplinary measure implemented in schools. The distinction between corporal punishment and child abuse is contentious. The aim of this study was to describe the knowledge and consequences of corporal punishment among students in schools aged 15-19 years and associated factors in Colombo and Kegalle districts.

Methods: This is a descriptive cross-sectional study of 212 students aged 15 - 19 years. Convenience sampling was used to gather a representative sample via a self-administered online questionnaire. $p < 0.05$ was taken as the level of significance.

Results: Corporal punishment was experienced by most of the study population (86.4%). Being ordered to kneel (87.8%) and stand on a chair (87%) were the most frequent methods of punishment. Most study participants were aware that corporal punishment is illegal (42.9%), but a similar proportion were ignorant (41.6%). More than half of the study population had felt physical discomfort (59.2%) and believed that increased aggressiveness and rebellious attitudes were outcomes of corporal punishment (53.1%). Majority of the students (76.7%) did not believe that corporal punishment was acceptable. Only 29% stated it had a positive influence. A significant 13.1% responded that consumption of alcohol/substance abuse as a social consequence of this type of punishment. The association between the mother's employment status and overall knowledge regarding corporal punishment was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

Conclusions: Knowledge regarding corporal punishment was poor. Consequences were found to be physically, psychologically and socially profound.

Keywords: *Consequences, Corporal punishment, Knowledge, Students.*

Introduction

Corporal punishment is defined by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as, “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (1). The term corporal punishment encompasses a wide variety of methods of punishment including slapping, spanking, pinching, and striking with objects such as belts or canes. Corporal punishment is controversial as it is separated by a fine line from physical abuse or domestic abuse of minors (2).

Sri Lanka is a party to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is a legally binding international agreement that applies to every child. The convention specifically protects children from violence, abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, and other forms of exploitation. The legal framework in Sri Lanka prohibiting certain forms of corporal punishment is contained in several legislative enactments. They include the Penal Code, the Children and Young Persons Ordinance (CYPO), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act No. 56 of 2007, etc. These laws prohibit cruelty to children, assault and causing bodily hurt, sexual abuse, criminal force, child neglect, causing physical and mental derangement and mistreatment. However, the legal framework has not achieved its desired results due to the inability to repeal outdated laws, remove legal barriers, introduce new laws and norms to prohibit corporal punishment.

The Ministry of Education Circular No. 12/2016 states that corporal punishment is deemed to be an inappropriate and a damaging process on students in schools, and that alternative methods of disciplining should be employed. Despite all these laws and circulars, the Sri Lankan system has allowed corporal punishment under section 341 of the Penal Code which made exceptions for a schoolmaster while section 82 of the Penal Code made exceptions for an ‘act done in good faith for the benefit of a child or person of unsound mind, by or by consent of guardian.’ These provisions were amended to ban corporal punishment in all settings by the cabinet of ministers from 30th April, 2024 - the International Day to End Corporal Punishment (3). This study aimed to describe the knowledge and consequences

of corporal punishment and its associated factors among school students aged 15 - 19 years in the Colombo and Kegalle districts.

Methods

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in government and private schools in Colombo, and Kegalle districts among school students aged 15 - 19 years in the year 2021. Students attending international schools and those who did not have access to the internet were excluded.

Sample size was calculated using the formula for estimation of proportions in descriptive studies (4). Convenience sampling was used due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the time the study was conducted. A representative sample was obtained. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura (CM/57/2020) and administrative clearance was obtained from relevant school principals.

A self-administered online questionnaire in the form of a *Google*TM form was circulated. A comprehensive information sheet was provided along with the consent form. Those below 18 years of age were given a separate information sheet with a form of assent along with additional information to the parent. Parental consent for the study was obtained via email. Data was analysed using *SPSS*TM software version 26. Quantitative data were described using frequency distribution and mean values. Qualitative data were presented using percentages. The knowledge regarding corporal punishment was analysed and expressed quantitatively using a scoring system. Each adequate (good) response was given a score of ‘1’ and each inadequate (poor) response, a score of ‘0’. Based on the grading system that schools in Sri Lanka already utilise, which is a cut-off score of ‘50%’, respondents with a score greater than or equal to this were categorised as those with ‘Good knowledge on corporal punishment’ and respondents with a score less than 50%, ‘Poor knowledge on corporal punishment’. Associations were assessed using Chi-square test. Statistical significance was taken as $p < 0.05$.

Results

A total of 212 students formed the study sample. The mean (SD) age was 17 (1.41) years. Most were from government schools (84.8%). The categorisation of schools was gender-based (boys only, girls only and mixed) being 38%, 34.7% and 27.3% respectively. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1.

Table 2 shows that most of the study population had heard of the term “corporal punishment” (69.5%). Although most were aware that corporal punishment was illegal, an almost equal proportion of the population stated they were ignorant on its legal status (42.9% and 41.6% respectively). More than two thirds thought that it was important for students to be informed of their rights and the law (78.2%). Boys reported facing corporal punishment (92%) more compared to girls (80%).

At least one form of corporal punishment was experienced by most of the study population (86.4%). Kneeling (87.8%) and being told to keep standing/ standing on a chair (87%) were the most frequent methods that were experienced/ witnessed. More than half of the study population had experienced non-physical forms of punishment such as neglect and ignoring (59.6%) and name calling or cursing (52.2%). Majority of the students were subjected to corporal punishment due to bad behaviour (91.8%).

Majority of the study population had a poor knowledge regarding corporal punishment (60.8%). According to the results of the scoring system used to quantify knowledge as being ‘good’ or ‘poor’, the knowledge among female students (40.1%) was slightly better than that of males (38%). Students in the Colombo district (53.3%) had better knowledge on corporal punishment than those of Kegalle (46.7%). Students from government schools (52.48%) had better knowledge than those in private schools (47.52%).

More than half of the study population had felt pain or physical discomfort after being subjected to corporal punishment (61.2%). Nearly one fourth (28.2%) of the students had experienced or witnessed corporal punishment in the school that had caused physical injuries. Majority of the students (76.7%) did not believe that corporal punishment was acceptable. Only 29% of them were of the opinion that it had a positive influence.

Table 4 summarizes the association between knowledge on corporal punishment and socio-economic factors. Mothers who were housewives had better knowledge when compared to those who were employed (48% vs 35%) This was statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (in years)		
15	13	6.1
16	33	15.6
17	21	9.9
18	98	46.1
19	47	22.3
Gender		
Male	114	53.7
Female	98	46.3
Area of residence		
Colombo district	106	50.0
Kegalle district	106	50.0
Type of Neighbourhood		
Urban	63	29.8
Suburban	107	50.6
Rural	42	19.6
Ethnicity		
Sinhalese	206	97.5
Tamil	1	0.4
Muslim	2	0.9
Burgher	3	1.2
Religion		
Buddhism	190	89.7
Christianity/ Catholicism	19	9.0
Hinduism	1	0.4
Islam	2	0.9
Type of family		
Nuclear	168	79.4
Extended	44	20.6
Employment status of father		
Employed	196	92.6
Unemployed	16	7.4
Employment status of mother		
Employed	107	50.6
Unemployed	105	49.4
Monthly household income (LKR)		
<20,000	7	2.9
20,001 - 40,000	30	14.2
40,001 - 60,000	42	20.0
>60,000	133	62.9
Father's occupation		
Professional	158	81.2
Semi-skilled labourer	24	12.0
Unskilled labourer	14	6.9
Mother's occupation		
Professional	97	90.7
Semi-skilled labourer	4	3.7
Unskilled labourer	6	5.6

Table 2: Knowledge on corporal punishment in schools among study population

Knowledge on corporal punishment	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you heard of the term 'corporal punishment'?		
Yes	147	69.5
No	65	30.5
Do you think corporal punishment in schools is legal in Sri Lanka?		
Legal	33	15.5
Illegal	91	42.9
Don't know	88	41.6
Do you think it is important for students to be informed of their rights and the law?		
Yes	166	78.2
No	46	21.8
Have you experienced any form of corporal punishment in your school life?		
Yes	183	86.4
No	29	13.6
How often have you experienced corporal punishment in schools?		
Everyday	4	1.7
2 - 3 times per week	11	5.3
Few times per month	35	16.3
Rarely	136	64.2
Never	26	12.5

Table 3: Consequences of corporal punishment

Consequence	Yes		No/ Don't know	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Physical				
Pain or physical discomfort	129	61.2	83	38.8
Physical injuries; cuts, bruises, fractures, nerve/ muscle damage etc.	60	28.2	152	71.8
Psychological				
Feeling sad/ unhappy/ depressed	183	86.5	29	13.5
Humiliation, inability to face friends/ family	150	71.0	72	29.0
Shame/ self-doubt	170	80.4	42	19.6
Feelings of failure and lack of self confidence	119	56.3	93	43.7
Loss of self esteem	128	60.4	84	39.6
Fear or panic when given attention by teachers	117	55.1	95	44.9
Anger towards teacher/s or students involved	134	63.3	78	36.7
Social				
Increased aggressiveness and rebellious attitudes	113	53.1	99	46.9
Retaliation against a teacher	97	45.8	115	54.2
Consumption of alcohol/ substance abuse	35	16.3	177	83.7

Table 4: Association between socio-economic factors and overall knowledge regarding corporal punishment among study population

Characteristic	Good knowledge		Poor knowledge		Total		Statistical significance
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	
Father's Occupation							
Professional	63	40.14	95	59.86	158	100	$\chi^2 = 0.058$ df = 1
Non-professional	16	42.42	22	57.58	38	100	$p = 0.81$
Mother's employment status							
Employed	35	33.06	72	66.94	107	100	$\chi^2 = 3.945$ df = 1
Housewife	48	45.46	57	54.54	105	100	$p = 0.047$
Mother's Occupation							
Professional	30	30.6	67	69.4	97	100	$p = 0.151^*$
Non-professional	6	55.56	4	44.44	10	100	
Monthly household income							
<40,000	17	43.91	20	56.09	37	100	$\chi^2 = 0.465$ df = 1
>40,000	67	38.2	108	61.8	175	100	$p = 0.495$

*Fisher's Exact test was performed

Discussion

Our results revealed that most of the study population had a poor knowledge regarding corporal punishment (60.8%). Contrastingly, a descriptive study conducted in India revealed that 64.5% pupils were knowledgeable about corporal punishment (5). This may be due to the difference in assessment methods used. Majority of the students in our study, had heard of the term “corporal punishment” (69.5%). More than two thirds of our study population thought that it was important to be informed of their rights and the law (78.2%). This reflects on the overall impressions of students and the level of self-awareness among school students in Sri Lanka.

Although most study participants were aware that corporal punishment was illegal, an almost equal proportion of the population were ignorant (42.9% and 41.6% respectively). This indicates the need for better dissipation of knowledge especially as this is a matter that intimately affects all school children.

At least one form of corporal punishment was experienced by the majority (86.4%). Similarly, in a cross-sectional study carried out among 948 students and 450 teachers in Colombo, Galle, Monaragala, Trincomalee, Mullaitivu, and Nuwara Eliya districts, approximately 80% of students reported having experienced at least one episode of corporal punishment during the past school term (6). A Similar rate of corporal punishment was reported in our study which focused on the Colombo and Kegalle districts.

Kneeling (87.8%) and being told to keep standing/standing on a chair (87%) were the most frequent methods. A study conducted in Tanzania (7) found the most common type of corporal punishment used was caning (59.4%). Furthermore, research conducted in Northern Israel revealed that the commonest form of punishment was temporary or permanent removal of the student from the classroom and consulting external authorities (8). This can be attributed to differences in various cultures and the perception of teachers towards the use of corporal punishment.

More than half of the study population had experienced non-physical forms of punishment such as neglect (59.6%) and name calling or cursing

(52.2%). Majority of the students were subjected to corporal punishment due to ‘bad behaviour’ (91.8%). A school-based survey conducted in Southern China (9) cited the most common reasons for psychological aggression and physical abuse was poor academic performance (29.6 - 43.0%). These findings give an insight into the use of corporal punishment in different cultural contexts.

Most of the students (61.2%) have been subjected to punishment resulting in pain or physical discomfort and 28.2% had experienced or witnessed physical injuries. Another Tanzanian study revealed that 24% of primary school children experienced severe corporal punishment causing physical injury (10). Although such frequencies represent a minority, the prevalence indicates that there is physical abuse carried out in schools that use severe forms of physical punishment.

Being unhappy or depressed (86.5%), self-doubt (80.4%), humiliation (71.0%), and low self-esteem (60.4%) were common. Similar outcomes were revealed in a study in Pakistan (11).

Our study showed that 53.1% of students agree that corporal punishment can lead to increased aggressive and rebellious behavior. Similarly, a study done in Chicago, USA concluded that those who received corporal punishment displayed increased aggression and delinquent behaviour (12). Only 13% of our study participants agreed on alcohol and substance dependence as a long-term social consequence. This is an interesting observation that greatly contrasts to the study conducted in China where a strong link was identified between punishment and adulthood alcoholism (13).

The majority, regardless of age or gender, showed poor knowledge on this form of punishment. The knowledge of female students (40.1%) was slightly better than that of males (38%) but 92% of boys reported facing corporal punishment at least once in their school life compared to only 80% of girls. A recent study carried out in Sri Lanka (6) found that 90.5% of the boys had reported corporal punishment compared to 59.7% of girls.

Students in the Colombo district (53.3%) had better knowledge regarding corporal punishment than those in Kegalle (46.7%). Colombo, being an urban

district with recourse to broader resources would have given more access to knowledge and means of reporting an incident than other districts. Students from government schools (52.48%) had better knowledge than those in private schools (47.52%). A meta-analysis conducted by UNICEF has revealed that schools in India, Peru and Ethiopia had a higher number of cases of corporal punishment in government schools than in private schools (14). These findings may signify that the regular use of corporal punishment in government schools has led to greater awareness and knowledge regarding the use, causes and outcome of corporal punishment. A study conducted in Yemen revealed that poverty was associated with harsher punishment and better awareness (15). Previous experiences, awareness of the consequences and the outcome of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method results in good knowledge. This could be the case in students with a low socioeconomic background.

A statistically significant association was observed between the mother's employment status and knowledge on corporal punishment. Students whose mothers were housewives had a better knowledge (48%) when compared to those with employed mothers (35%). This may be because mothers who are mostly at home and children communicate with them frequently and therefore mothers are aware. This trend is especially seen in rural families as suggested by some studies (15). This would create a better understanding of corporal punishment in a child from a young age. A child from such a family is more likely to report school punishment and gain comfort and advice from a mother who is unemployed and available at home for the child.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The use of corporal punishment was found to be prevalent, with a poor knowledge. Awareness programmes on corporal punishment need to be introduced in the school education systems. Research and implementation of alternative methods of disciplining children in the school system and teachers' governing bodies is a must.

Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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Editorial Comment:

Recently corporal punishment has attracted both legislative and judicial attention in Sri Lanka.

Draft legislation in the form of the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill has been presented in the Parliament of Sri Lanka on 19th August 2025 to broaden the scope of legal provisions covering corporal punishment on children (including parents inflicting such punishments), enhanced penalties for voluntarily causing hurt or grievous hurt on children etc. (Published in Part II of the Government Gazette of 8th July 2025).

Moreover it needs to be noted that in the case of HM Karunapala, PD Kumudini, child petitioner (name withheld) v. JPK Siriwardhana and others (SC/FR/97/2017), the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka (SC) held on 12th February 2021 that corporal punishment inflicted by a teacher on a 15-year-old student, that caused a tympanic membrane injury, to be a violation of Article 11 of the Constitution - "No person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." While the Penal Code attaches criminality to this form of punishment, this SC judgment has defined a new dimension to corporal punishment defining it as a violation of a child's fundamental rights through cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.