

# WHAT DO CHILDREN TELL US ABOUT PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AS A RISK FACTOR FOR CHILD ABUSE?

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## Abstract

This paper discusses children's views of family discipline and possible implications for policymakers. In 2004, 80 New Zealand children, between five and 14 years of age, took part in research eliciting their views on family discipline. In response to questions on family discipline children spontaneously revealed concerning levels of the frequency and severity of physical punishment, some of which would be identified as child abuse using any threshold. Children's reports of the context in which physical punishment was delivered by parents was also of concern. Many children reported high levels of confusion when trying to link their own views of physical punishment with the actions of their parents.

## INTRODUCTION

Gaining knowledge of children's views on family discipline is important to develop effective discipline practices, and to gain a balanced perspective on the controversial policy issue of how the state should better protect children from harm (Dobbs et al. 2006). Adults debate the best methods of disciplining children and their views influence law and public policies, but children's voices are not heard. Holden (2002:593) argues that "investigating discipline through the eyes of children rather than adults is needed. To better explain how discipline affects children now and in the future it is important to understand how children react to the disciplinary incident".

The use of physical punishment as a form of family discipline is of particular interest in this study, since it is a commonly used but contentious form of family discipline. While most of the general population may agree that harsh physical punishment is harmful to children and can be easily defined as abusive, many argue that there is a distinct difference between parents using physical punishment and child abuse, and that there is no association between the two. The main issues or justifications for its use

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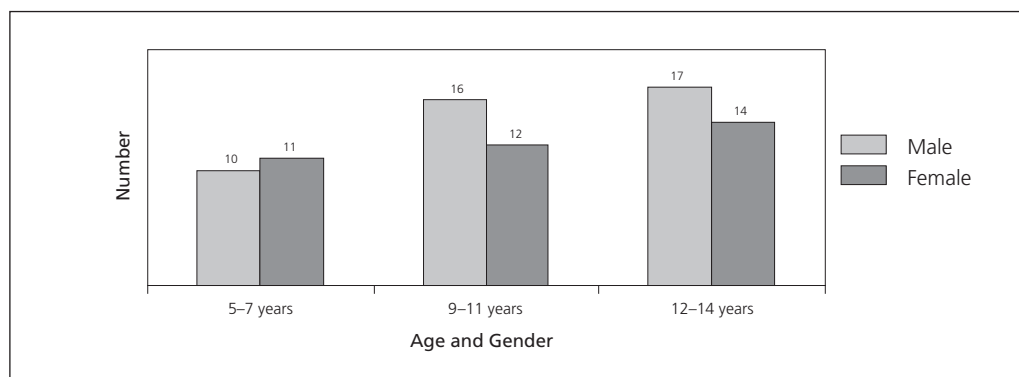
are that physical punishment is not related to child abuse because physical punishment is used only as the last resort, physical punishment comprises “a loving tap”, parents administer physical punishment in a climate of control and warmth, and physical punishment is an effective discipline method that does children no harm. This paper will in part present 80 children’s views on these issues.

The aim of this study was to examine the meaning of family discipline and physical punishment and the context in which it takes place, from children’s perspectives. The methodology attempts to put children in the role of experts about their own experiences in family life, which has the advantage of placing children’s experience in context.

### STUDY DESIGN

Eighty children aged between five and 14 years of age participated in the study between April and September 2004. The criteria for children to participate in the study were that they had no known or alleged history of child abuse or neglect and that they had sufficient verbal skills to participate in a focus group discussion. The children were selected from schools in five different areas of New Zealand reflecting the diverse socioeconomic and ethnic make-up of New Zealand. Ten schools were selected in all, two from each area. There were slightly more boys (n = 43) than girls (n = 37) in the sample, (see Figure 1), and the children came from three age groups: 5–7 years, 9–11 years and 12–14 years.

Figure 1 Total Number of Children, by Age and Gender



Data were also collected from the children in relation to their place in the family and their family structure (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 Family Structure

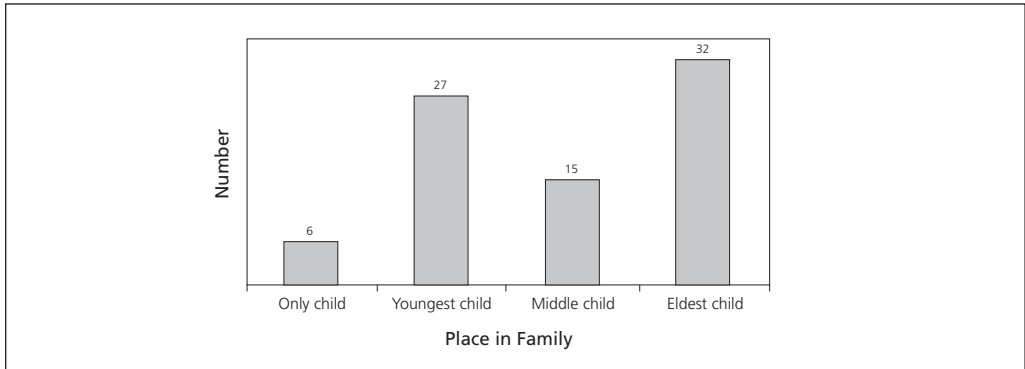
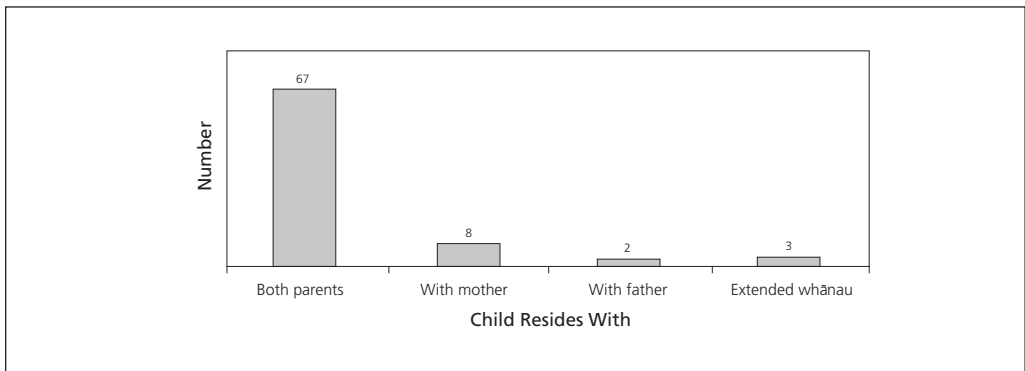


Figure 3 Family Situation



Children were recruited through their parents with the help and consent of school principals. Parents, who were approached by the principals, gave consent for their child's participation. In addition to gaining formal written consent from children, the researcher explained to the children when she first met them who she was, the purpose of the study, and the topic that was going to be discussed. The children were given an information sheet as part of this explanation and were told that their parents had agreed to their participation but that they did not have to participate. Confidentiality and safety procedures were explained to the children by the researcher and within their consent forms.

Splodge (a fictional alien from outer space) was introduced to the children (5–11 years) as being very curious about life on Earth. They were told that Splodge did not know much about life on Earth and wanted to know about lots of things. Splodge was especially interested to know about family discipline and thought that children would be the best people to ask. The children were asked if they could help

Splodge by answering the questions in the Splodge storybook. Spike was introduced to the older children (12–14 years) as having just landed on earth from the planet Nostro to complete a homework assignment. The homework assignment was about what children on Earth think about family discipline. The older children were asked if they could assist Spike in completing the homework assignment by answering some questions. The questions Spike asked were the same as those asked by Splodge. Both presentations were adapted from the 1998 Willow and Hyder study. The focus group discussions were 60 minutes long on average. The discussions were audiotaped and later transcribed and analysed thematically.

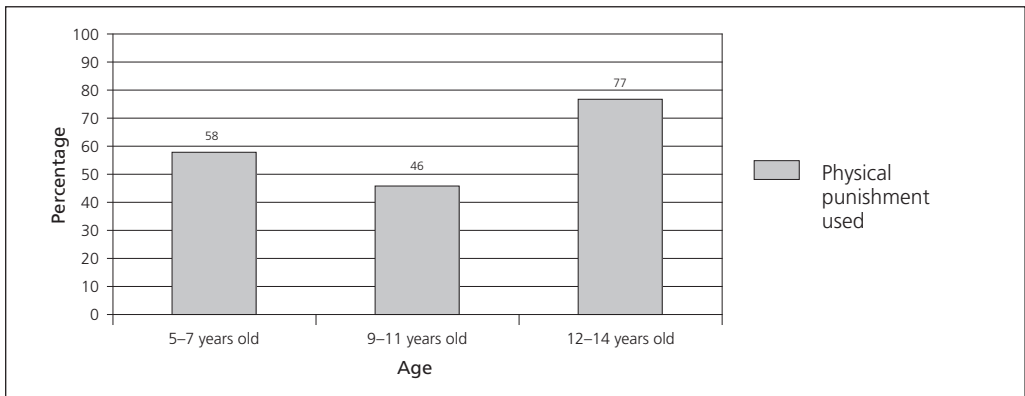
## FINDINGS

This paper summarises selected findings from the 80 children's views and experiences of family discipline. The full results are reported elsewhere (Dobbs 2005a, Dobbs 2005b). Not every child answered every question so the numbers and percentages reported represent those children who did answer a particular question. We have to be cautious in our interpretation of these findings of children's explanations of concepts and events to a fictional character. These questions were asked about children in general, rather than their own individual experiences. On the other hand, the children's verbatim responses indicate that they are generally talking about their own subjective experiences within their families (Dobbs et al. 2006).

To find out what children's definitions of family discipline were, and the range of parental discipline techniques used within families when children transgressed, children were asked to explain to Spike or Splodge what children "should" and "shouldn't" do at home. Children reported that things they should do included chores like doing the dishes, making the bed, clearing the table and mowing the lawns. Things they should not do included verbal and physical aggression, such as using swear words, pinching or kicking siblings, or making fun of them. Other things reported by children were not playing with fire (and other unsafe activities) and not meeting strangers alone.

When asked what happened when children did things they should not, a surprising number of children reported that many parents responded by using physical punishment. This question was very open-ended and the use of physical punishment had not been discussed by the researcher, or by Spike or Splodge. As can be seen from Figure 4 the majority of children (except for the 9–11-year-olds) said that the parental discipline consisted of some kind of physical punishment.

Figure 4 What are Some of the Things that Happen to Children When They Do Things They Shouldn't?



"You get a smack in the mouth." (seven-year-old boy)

"A smack on the butt and sent to your room." (10-year-old boy)

"You get a clip on the ear." (10-year-old girl)

"Sometimes my sister drops something like really valuable or she drops a really new bottle of milk and she gets yelled at or gets hit around the head." (11-year-old girl)

In addition to physical punishment, children reported being put in time out, grounded, having privileges withdrawn or having to do extra chores. Of the 12-14-year-olds, 29% (n = 9) reported that physical punishment followed transgressions at their present age. Of the 12-14-year-olds, 51% (n = 16) also mentioned being yelled or screamed at by parents for their transgressions.

Children were asked a series of direct questions about the use of physical punishment. These questions were directed at identifying the frequency, severity and impact of physical punishment, and the associated child and parent behaviours when this form of family discipline is used.

#### Do Children Get Smacked Sometimes When They Do Things They Shouldn't?

"All us at home do, sometimes." (seven-year-old boy)

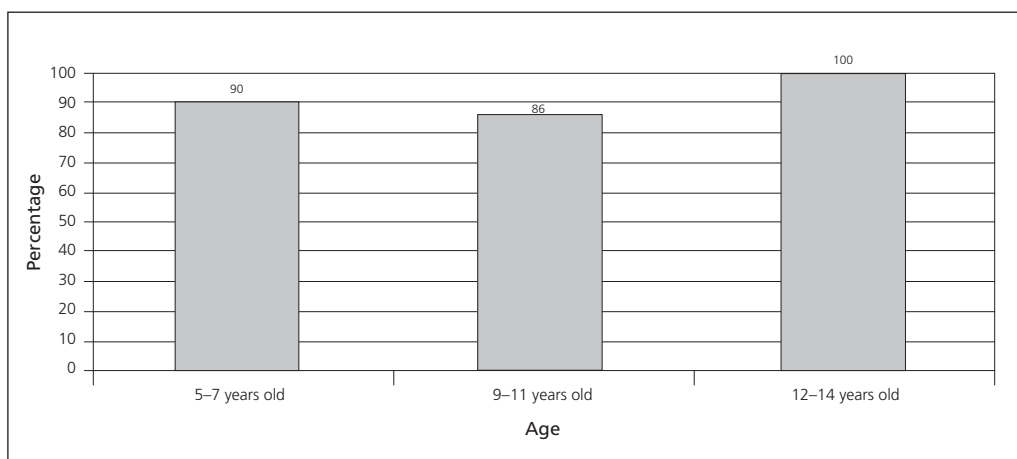
"We used to have these shoe horns but it was a long one and it was green one and we called it the 'whacker' and you had lie on the bed so you couldn't run away and my Mum and Dad would go whack and whack like that." (13-year-old girl)

"Yeah we get hit we dirtied the washing the other day and we got the triple cane the next morning." (13-year-old boy)

"My parents don't like smacking, they don't believe in it." (10-year-old girl)

Ten per cent (n = 2) of the 5–7-year-olds and 14% (n = 4) of the 9–11-year-olds said they were not smacked. These children reported this was because their parents did not believe in this form of discipline. Out of all the children in this study, 92% reported that children were physically punished. All the children in the oldest age group reported that they had been physically punished, while 90% of the 5–7-year-olds and 86% of the 9–11-year-olds reported that parents physically punished children (see Figure 5). Regardless of how this qualitative data is interpreted, it was of concern and somewhat surprising that such large numbers of children expected that physical punishment was the disciplinary technique most often used in most families, and was often used first rather than as a last resort.

**Figure 5** Do Children Get Smacked Sometimes When They Do Things They Shouldn't?



Children were asked: Where do children get smacked?

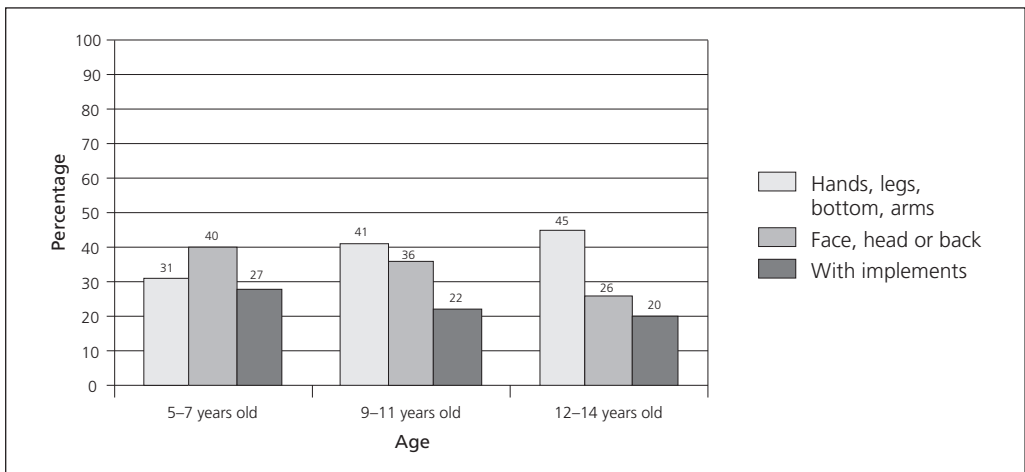
- “On the bottom sometimes.” (five-year-old boy)
- “Backs of the leg where it hurts the most.” (13-year-old boy)
- “You get a slap across the face or a clip round their ears.” (14-year-old girl)

Children described the implements used in smacking:

- “The spatula gets used in our house.” (six-year-old girl)
- “My Dad uses the tennis racket.” (seven-year-old boy)
- “Dads belt, that’s what we get.” (13-year-old boy)
- “If you swear you get your mouth scrubbed out with soap.” (13-year-old boy)
- “My cousin gets mustard in her mouth.” (14-year-old girl)

Given the acknowledged dangers of hitting children on or about the head, it was concerning that relatively large numbers of all age groups and both genders in this study reported that children are smacked or hit on or around the face, head and back. That children were being hit with implements and made to ingest mustard was also a concern. This is yet another contradiction of the view that most physical punishment involves a gentle tap. Lansdown (2000) says that it is a myth that “most discipline is gentle and cannot be compared to the broad understanding of abuse of children” (p.418). Lansdown also asserts that parents not only use physical punishment with frequency, but many use levels of force that could significantly harm children, and these events are happening in ordinary families. The findings from this study support her opinion. New Zealand child abuse statistics are a major concern and this study suggests that such abuse may often originate in physical punishment.

Figure 6 Where Do Children Get Smacked?



Children were concerned about the potential harm caused by adults smacking children, and the consequences of this. Many described the smacking becoming harder and harder over time.

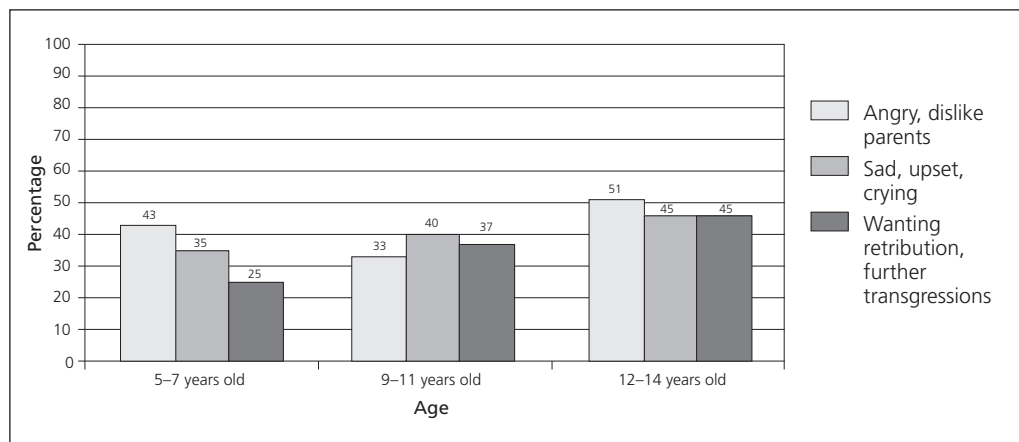
“Sometimes with my parents it just depends on if we’ve done it before or if it’s the first time. If it’s the first time, they [parents] are not so hard on us but if we’ve done it many times before then they [parents] start to get more angrier and angrier and harder punishment.” (10-year-old boy)

“Adults hit in anger, they may not mean to hurt the child but they do.” (13-year-old girl)

Children associated physical punishment with anger. In the children’s view both parents and the child were angry when physical punishment occurred. Effective discipline cannot be achieved when both the child and parent are in a state of high

arousal (Grusec and Goodnow 1994, Smith et al. 2004). Children reported that when they had been hit they experienced a desire to take “revenge” and “take it out” on parents and siblings.

Figure 7 How Do Children Act After Being Smacked?



How Do Adults Act after They Have Given a Smack?

“You know they are angry at you because they give you the evil eye.” (10-year-old boy)

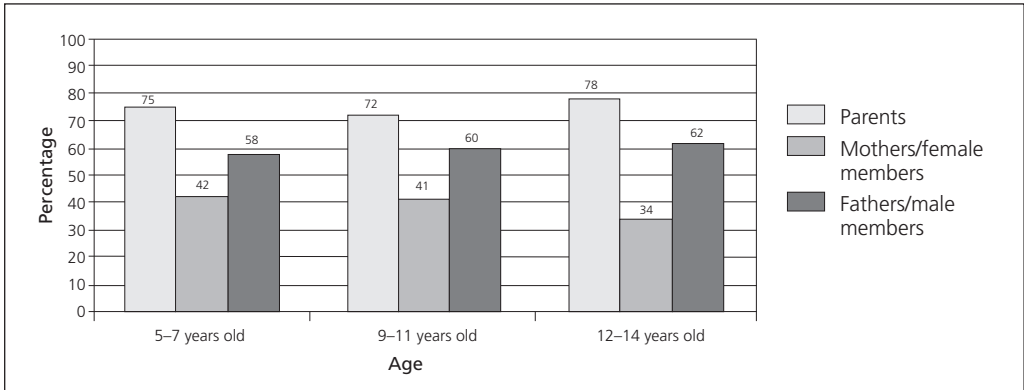
“I think when they [parents] get so angry they just do it [smack] and then afterwards they think; oh I shouldn’t have done that.” (13-year-old girl)

These comments challenge the view that smacking is an effective method of discipline and a positive influence on children’s learning. Most smacking occurs when parents are angry, and in that context parents may get emotional release and satisfaction from smacking, which can be confused with effectiveness. Gough and Reavey (1997) indicate that parents admitted that hitting their children met their own needs for the release of stress. This raises questions about who benefits from hitting children. There is an adult assumption that when parents smack or hit their children it is done in a controlled manner. Children in this study tell us this is not the case. In contrast, children are aware that parents feel regret after using physical punishment. Clearly, parents are sometimes aware that their behaviour is harsh, unhelpful and inappropriate, and may be more open to using other disciplinary methods if they were available to them.

Children reported being hit more often by their fathers and male members of their household than their mothers and female members of the household. Given that fathers generally have less contact with their children than mothers, it appears that they may use physical punishment more often than mothers. This topic needs further research. It has implications for parenting education and for issues of positive male role modelling.



Figure 8 Who Usually Smacks Children?



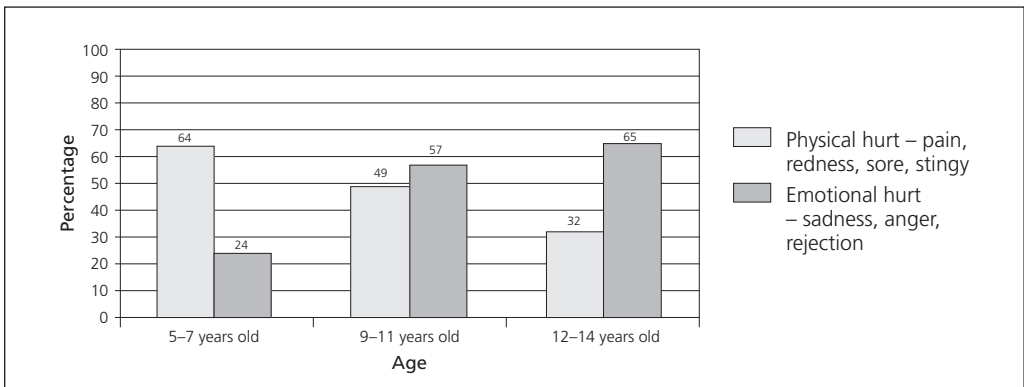
While adults may have many definitions to describe a smack, it is important to elicit children's definitions. The younger children were clear that a smack is a hard hit that hurts both physically and emotionally. Some of the older children said a smack was not as hard as a hit.

"A smack is a nasty hit." (nine-year-old girl)

"A smack is like a tap and a hit is really hard." (12-year-old boy)

"Smacking is violent." (11-year-old girl)

Figure 9 What Does it Feel Like to be Smacked?



Some children described the physical pain in the following ways:

"It hurts you all over." (seven-year-old boy)

"It's like a burning pain, it all goes red." (12-year-old boy)

"One time my Mum was really angry and she like slapped me in the face and that really hurt and she called me a bitch and stuff and there was a hand mark." (13-year-old girl)

Comments about emotional pain included:

"The thing that makes you cry is that if you don't see them and they go 'whack'. That's what makes you cry, even if it's a light one you can just get scared cause you never know when it's going to come." (10-year-old boy)

"It feels like they [parents] don't love you anymore." (nine-year-old girl)

"You feel real upset because they are hurting you and you love them so much and then all of a sudden they hit you and hurt you and you feel like as though they don't care about you because they are hurting you." (13-year-old girl)

Fear and pain may or may not contribute to short-term compliance, but in the long term these emotions are unlikely to contribute to positive behavioural outcome or promote children's learning.

Children were asked why children get smacked. A nine-year-old summed up the majority of the children's responses by saying, "Most kids get smacked for hurting someone, like kicking your brother or sister". Other responses were:

"Like if you beat up your brother your Dad goes smash." (13-year-old boy)

"Sometimes if we talk back we get slapped." (nine-year-old boy)

Children are most often smacked for hurting others. Very few described any other form of punishment for hurting others. It is interesting to consider the impact of this contradictory message children experience when they are told that it is wrong to hurt someone else and then they are hurt in response to hurting others (Willow and Hyder 1998).

It is unlikely that smacking is the most appropriate method of discouraging children from using violence. Children growing up experiencing violence are more likely to resort to violence as a normal response to conflict and crisis (Leach 1999). It was of great concern that some of the older boys reported their fathers encouraging them to physically punish younger siblings.

"If she like deserves it and Dad says 'oh she's done this to you and you've done nothing to her, you can sort it out' but I don't like to hurt her, I just hold her down on the ground until she cries." (13-year-old boy)

"Yeah, like if my sister really pisses me off and like Mum won't stop her, Dad just goes 'oh if Mum doesn't stop her, you can deal to her'." (13-year-old boy)

### Is it Okay to Smack or Not Okay to Smack?

Age and gender differences in children's attitudes to physical punishment emerged from this study. As children's age increased their acceptance of the use of physical punishment increased (Figure 10) and they began to justify their parents' behaviour in using physical punishment. Older boys endorsed the use of physical punishment more than girls of any age. Many children reported high levels of confusion when trying to link their own views of physical punishment with the actions of their parents. Such confusion may lead to diminished internalisation of the disciplinary messages.

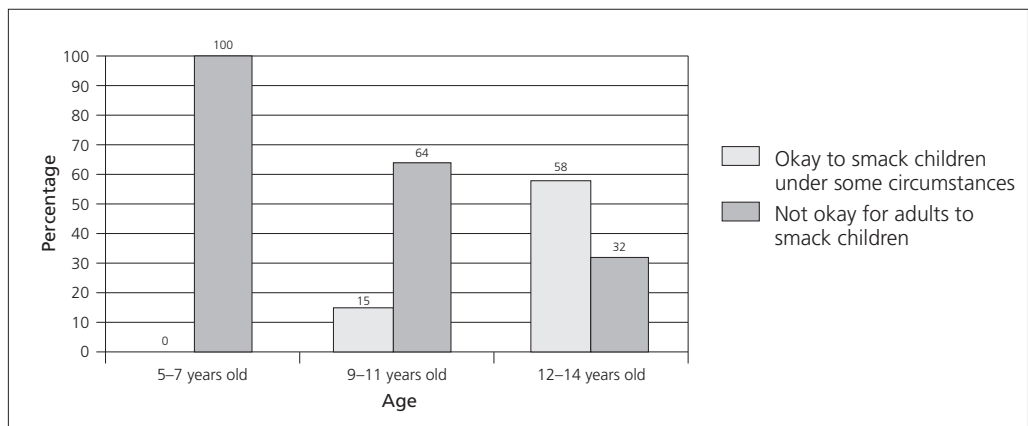
"Well some people do think it's okay but some people don't. The children that are getting hit don't think it's okay even if they've been naughty." (10-year-old girl)

"Not hits, smacks can be alright when you're younger." (13-year-old girl)

"It's okay but only responsible people should give it." (nine-year-old boy)

"There's got to be some other ways to discipline rather than hitting kids. You never forget what happened when you were younger." (14-year-old girl)

Figure 10 Is it Okay to Smack Children or Not Okay to Smack Children?



### When You are an Adult Will You Smack Children?

“No, because it hurts.” (five-year-old girl)

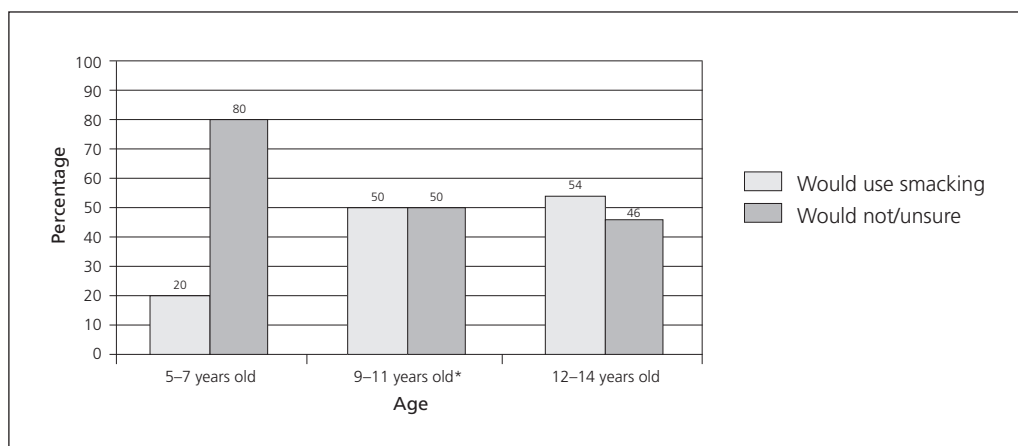
“No, because you have been through it and you know how much it hurts and you know how angry it makes you feel inside so you would never do it to your child.” (13-year-old girl)

“Not sure, maybe.” (12-year-old girl)

“I probably will smack my kids.” (12-year-old boy)

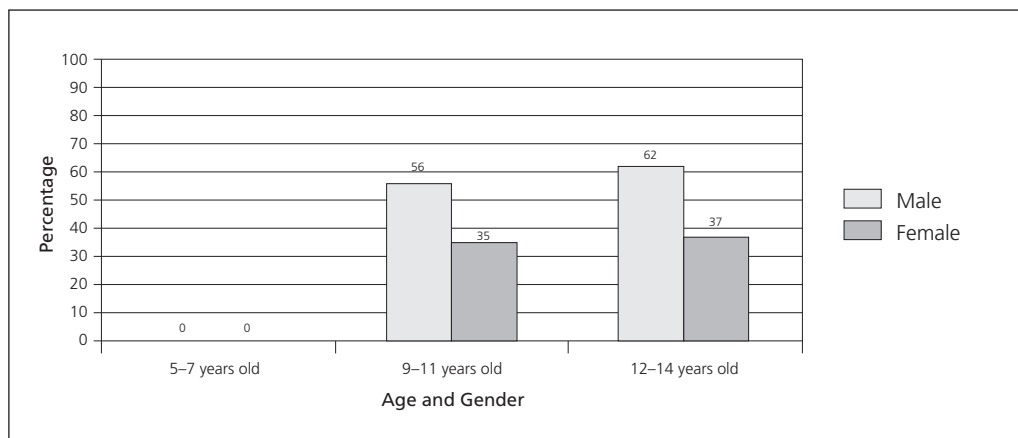
“It depends, maybe.” (11-year-old girl)

Figure 11 When You are an Adult will You Smack Children?



\* The 9-11-year-olds were very much undecided about whether they would use smacking as a form of family discipline or not, changing their views throughout the focus group discussion around this question.

Figure 12 Age and Gender of those Children Who Endorsed the Use of Physical Punishment



Throughout the focus groups children expressed concern over the inter-generational nature of physical punishment. Children identify with their parents (Leach 1999), so children may see physical discipline as the only form of discipline available to them. Berger et al. (1988, cited in Leach 1993) give a possible explanation for this inter-generational acceptance of physical discipline by stating that “the recipients of punitive physical discipline are the least likely to recognise its inappropriateness” (p.260). Leach (1999) suggests that by the time children reach adulthood, subjective recollection has softened the punishments received and many adults gratefully ascribe their good character to their parents’ good discipline. This phenomenon, Leach suggests, is not just confined to children that have been excessively punished. Even those who receive no more than smacks that are seen to be normal in most families are likely to incorporate the justice and rightness of such punishment into their adult self-images and belief systems.

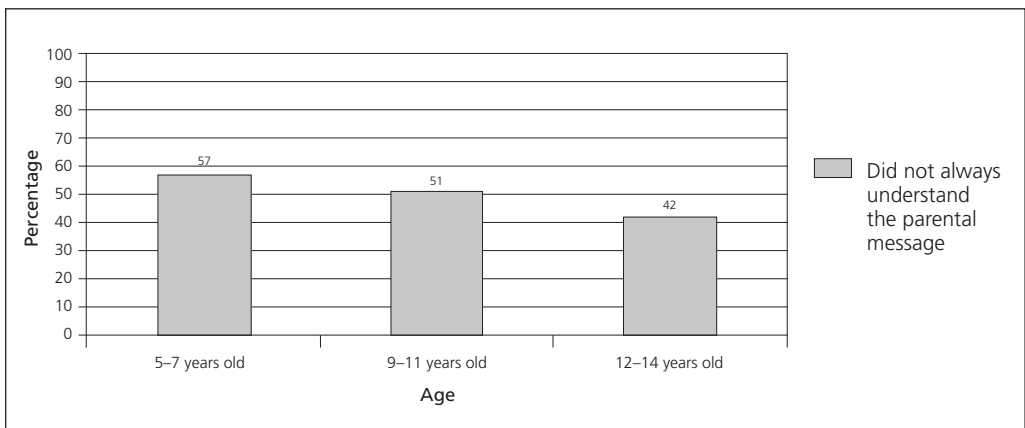
The next section of this paper reports on children’s experiences of family discipline in terms of parental consistency, fairness and understanding. It is important to place the use of physical punishment within this context. Children were asked if children understood why they should or shouldn’t do things.

“Sometimes they just hit you and you don’t have a clue why.” (12-year-old boy)

“Sometimes parents use words that kids don’t understand.” (nine-year-old boy)

“Because parents wouldn’t actually tell you straight away that you’ve done something wrong, parents don’t always tell you why they are growling.” (11-year-old girl)

Figure 13 Understanding the Parental Message



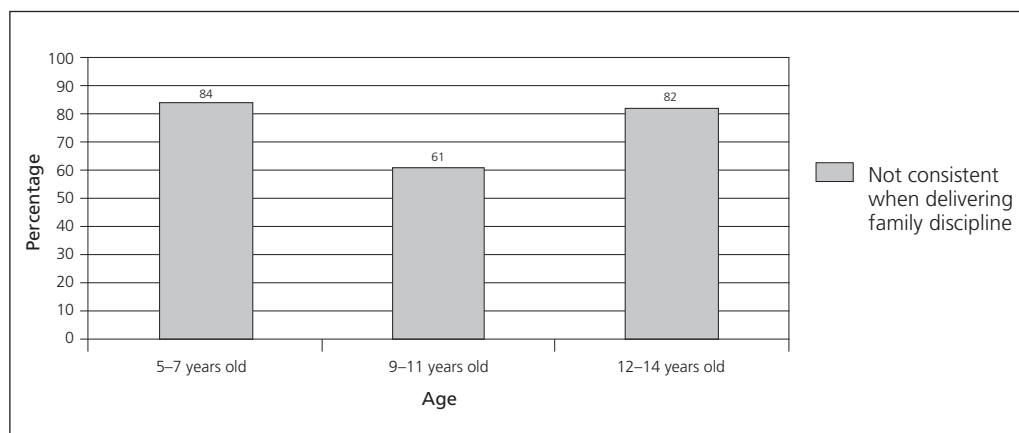
These findings have implications for children’s moral internalisation of behavioural values critical to children’s social and moral development. Children who understand and accept their parents’ disciplinary requests are more likely to comply with them and, as a result, to behave in socially appropriate ways (Grusec and Goodnow 1994, Smith et al. 2004). Children indicated that they want explicit and consistent instructions. The children reported that they did not always understand the parental disciplinary messages, which were often delivered in an inconsistent manner and without explicit instruction to children.

“Sometimes they [parents] smack you on the bottom for not picking up your toys and sometimes they don’t.” (seven-year-old girl)

“They do act differently sometimes, don’t know why, it’s confusing.” (seven-year-old girl)

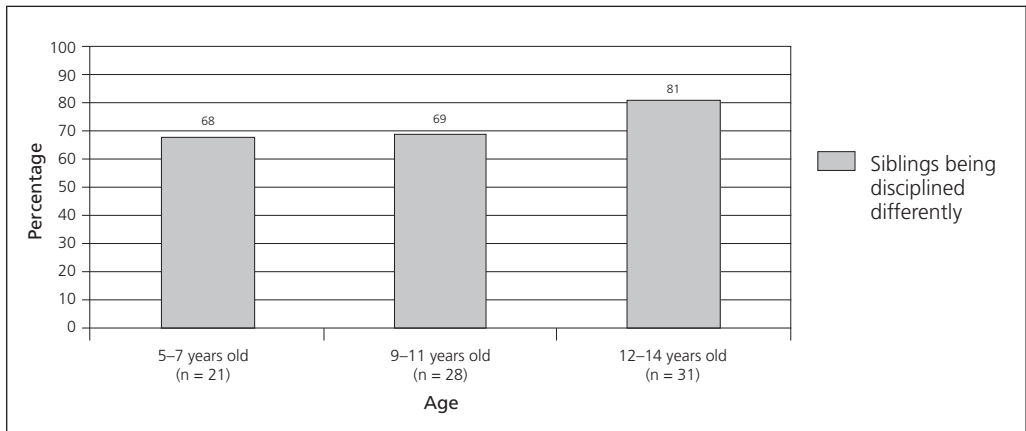
“Like if you hit your sister, you get hit back but if you are calling names at her you get told to go to your room.” (13-year-old girl)

Figure 13 Parental Consistency



Findings indicated that children were more likely to reject the parental message (not do what they were told) if parents were inconsistent in what they required of them. Fairness was an important issue for children in this study. Children were clear that being treated unfairly did not promote their learning and in many cases made their behaviour worse. Children believed that if they understood the disciplinary message and agreed that the discipline was fair, they would not be motivated to respond with further transgressions and would learn from their experiences. However, if they believed that they were punished for something they did not do or did not understand, they might further transgress on purpose. Children being punished for things their siblings had done was a recurrent theme in all focus groups.

Figure 15 Consistency and Siblings



### What Happens if Children Think Parents are Being Unfair?

"It's unfair if you don't hear your parents' properly and if you don't understand." (six-year-old boy)

"If it was really your brother did it and you get a smack that is not fair and they [parents] don't believe you." (six-year-old boy)

"If you get caught doing something that's fair." (10-year-old girl)

### Children's Responses to Unfairness

"If it's fair then I don't get back at my Mum and Dad." (9-year-old girl)

"You go beat up your little brother." (13-year-old boy)

"If you knew you did something wrong and you are going to get punished for it you don't try and get them back, but if you didn't do something wrong and you get punished for it you want to get back at them." (13-year-old boy)

Children reported that few parents engaged in an inductive parenting style (explaining, reasoning and setting limits) when conflict arose, but rather used more power assertion (insisting on obedience without explanation) in such circumstances. Conflict resolution is an important social skill. It appears that in many cases these skills are not being taught or modelled. Children gave clear advice about effective parenting techniques. Children were clear that the use of time out, having privileges removed or being grounded were far more effective means of discipline than the use of physical punishment.

"Time out's okay; it's better than smacking." (nine-year-old girl)

"The thing that doesn't work is smacking." (11-year-old boy)

"Grounding and not being allowed things is better than smacking and hitting." (13-year-old boy)

Most children emphasised that the use of physical punishment was the worst disciplinary measure parents could use. Children expressed a clear wish that parents should stop being angry when disciplining children. Clear and explicit parental communication with children was requested. Children also pointed out that misunderstandings over the rules, conflict over discipline options, lack of understanding of the parental message and unfairness could be avoided with better communication.

“Yeah talk nice, talk nice so we understand.” (five-year-old girl)

“Talk when you did something wrong and not get smacked.” (six-year-old girl)

“I think just communicating because sometimes they [parents] go ‘You’ve done this wrong’. They need to explain why it’s bad.” (12-year-old girl)

Older children thought that hitting was worse if the child was young and discussed how ineffective physical punishment was as a teaching method.

“Smacking is worse than grounding, worse than time out, worse than taking PlayStations away.” (14-year-old boy)

“Some parents have had it [physical punishment] done to them but that’s no excuse to keep on using it.” (12-year-old boy)

“My parents said, I was asking them about discipline, and my Mum said she would never hit us because she knows what it was like, because she used to get the belt and stuff and she said she would never put her children though it because it was just so painful.” (13-year-old girl)

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study indicate that children who live in homes where physical punishment is used are more at risk of child abuse than those that do not. The use of physical punishment raises the threshold for the tolerance of violence and violence is normalised. It is a risk factor for children, both physically and emotionally, and may reduce children’s moral internalisation of the parental message. Long-term goals of child-rearing, such as problem-solving, communication, attachment and trust, internalisation, empathy and pro-social learning, are difficult to achieve when physical punishment is used. This study suggests that children’s experiences of family discipline, especially the role of physical punishment, are at odds with and challenge adult assumptions on its use.

Children tell us that physical punishment is not an effective parenting technique, is not used as a “last resort” but is often the first parental response, and is delivered in too many instances by angry parents with severity that places children at risk of abuse under any threshold. It is difficult to be “reasonable” when you are angry and it is



clearly a risk factor for injury (abuse) of children. Children frequently described acts of physical force that cannot be deemed reasonable.

The children in this study suggest that when parents physically punish their children, many are inconsistent and unfair and do not explain the reason for the punishment, and that this adversely affects their relationship with their parents. Clearly the parental discipline message cannot be taught under these circumstances. We must then ask the question: what moral and societal values are we teaching children when physical punishment is administered?

Children identify with their parents, so they may continue to see physical punishment as the only form of discipline that will be available to them as adults. An increased emphasis on parental education – including fathers and young men – and active efforts to discourage the use of physical punishment (e.g. the repeal of section 59) will contribute to a more positive view of children and their place in society. Within parenting programmes (such as SKIP – Strategies for Kids, Information for Parents), inclusion of children's experiences of family discipline would be valuable.

A priority issue for policymakers is ensuring children's voices inform the policy process and that those policies affecting children are developed with children centrally involved in that process. There needs to be a fundamental shift in adult thinking towards what children can offer to the policy process, and that while adults can reflect and be informed by their own interpretation of a situation or consequence of events, it is the children's immediate experience and current understanding of a situation or circumstance that is valuable and most useful. Adults need to be better equipped and informed on both the value of such information and on how to gather and interpret children's views and knowledge. Resources also need to be put into the additional time and skills needed to enable children to participate meaningfully in such processes.

Many provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are relevant to the issue of the physical punishment of children. In particular, Article 19 asserts the right of children to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse or maltreatment. Articles 12–14 highlight the rights of children to have a voice and deem children's subjective experience as valid and important.

Children's voices will not always prevail, but they should be heard. Voice implies participation, and a sense that others value one's opinions and sentiments. Indeed, we may learn much from children if we could only hear their voices (Taylor 1998). However, as Atwool (2000) points out, "When children are exposed to risk and trauma their voices are frequently not heard" (p.57).

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