

# Public opinion in Slovakia about physical punishment of children

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**Abstract.** Not so long ago, when the issue of physical punishment of children was not discussed at all. Progress occurred in the second half of the 20th century when children began to be perceived as authentic and legally protected beings. Over the past two decades we have seen an international shift in perspectives concerning the physical punishment of children. In 1990, research showing an association between physical punishment and negative developmental outcomes was starting to accumulate, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child had just been adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The aim of our research was to find out how citizens of the Slovak Republic perceive physical punishments of children and how they apply them in the educational process. We have found out whether opinions on physical punishments are varied according to gender, education and religion of respondents. The research has been conducted using a quantitative research strategy. In order to collect the data a questionnaire was used. The survey sample consisted of 168 respondents. The data obtained was processed and analyzed using the SPSS program. Significant differences were confirmed from the point of view of education – respondents with lower education preferred physical punishment more than respondents with higher education. It is important for parents, to realize that the use of educational methods, such as explanation, persuasion, demand, or personal example is the base for achieving educational goals.

**Key words:** children, child's right, physical punishment, negative pedagogical methods.

## 1 Introduction

All children misbehave. Every parent faces the challenge of how to discipline his or her child. It can be frustrating when a child acts out or has significant behaviour problems. Children need limits and rules. There are many ways to give children rules and help change their behaviour. Examples include convention, explanation, positive reinforcement, taking away of privileges, and physical punishment. Physical punishment, sometimes called corporal punishment, is anything done to cause pain or discomfort in response to child's behaviours. There are several definitions of physical punishment. Straus and Stewart [1] define physical punishment as the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury, for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviour. Lovasová, Schmidová [2] describe physical punishment as intentional or deliberate causing pain on the child's body, which interferes with his or her physical integrity, pushes the child to a primitive reaction, and thus hinders the development of his/her personality. The authors also emphasize that physical punishment increases the readiness for aggressive behaviour in the child's mind. The child perceives it as a form of social behaviour, as a

method of solving difficult life situations. Children can see it as a guide for their future. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child offers a more detailed definition of corporal punishment: *“Any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involve hitting (“smacking”, “slapping”, “spanking”) children, with the hand or with an implement – whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children’s mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment which are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child [3].* In general, physical punishment includes

- spanking (one of the most common methods of physical punishment),
- slapping, pinching, or pulling,
- hitting with an object, such as a paddle, belt, hairbrush, whip, or stick,
- making someone eat soap, hot sauce, hot pepper, or other unpleasant substances,
- wounds, caused by hitting with a ruler, splitting, pulling hair, dipping hands into hot or ice water [4].

Langmeier distinguishes two basic functions of physical punishments – positive and negative. The positive function of punishment makes children learn to understand the words “no,” “you can’t,” consequently they know what is wrong. Langmeier states that if children are punished for the bad and praised for the good, not just rewarded for the good, they learn to recognize more quickly between the right and the wrong. The speed of changing undesirable behaviour using punishment is advantageous in the situations where the change of child’s behaviour is urgent (for example, when a child runs out to the road to catch a ball, or if he/she physically hurts another child or animal). As a negative consequence of the use of punishment, Langmaier mentions child’s strong emotional responses, such as fear and anxiety, which can lead to the development of generalized anxiety and shyness or, on the contrary, sometimes defiance and antisocial behaviour. Furthermore, he claims that punishment leads to the suppression of undesirable behaviour, but the child does not learn the desired behaviour, so it is important to combine it with the remuneration system. Another negative point of punishment is that it interferes with relationships between the child and the parent, and children can resort to lying and hiding in order to avoid the punishment [5].

## **2 Reasons for punishment**

Parents apply punishment because they believe that punishment is a good method of education that teaches a child to behave properly and accept moral values. The reason for the use of punishment can also be a warning and guidance. Parents believe that after the punishment the child will not repeat bad behaviour. Using punishments, parents can also compensate for their own negative emotions, which result from the lack of control of the situation or their helplessness. Parents use the physical punishment when they feel completely helpless and use it as the last resort, when other methods of education have not helped [6]. Kopřiva [7] provides a systematic overview of why parents punish their child. She divides these reasons into the following categories:

### *Education*

- sense of responsibility; grasping the right principles, observance of the rules,
- awareness of the borders (“stop” signal),
- changing behaviour, correcting what they have done,
- for lesson,
- for warning of others,
- prevention – avoiding further negative behaviour.

### *Tradition, adopted social model*

- a model of education taken from own family; customs,
- obedience as educational value,
- social pressure (tradition of other adults to punish the child).

### *Emotions*

- emotional failure to manage the situation; deregulation of own negative emotions, bad mood,
- anger, fear about the child’s safety and health,
- ventilation of own problems.

### *Confirmation of power*

- recognition of authority; enforcing their truth,
- feeling of superiority,
- revenge, retaliation,
- satisfaction from the suffering of the other.

### *Ignorance*

- helplessness, ignorance of alternatives, inability to solve the situation differently,
- sense of helplessness.

### *Time stress*

- effort to respond to inappropriate behaviour of children.

### *Convenience*

- quick solution (“short process”),
- to act educationally without much effort,
- to have peace.

### *Personal issues*

- solving own problems,
- unfulfilled expectations,
- moodiness, weariness, irritability,
- communication problems.

Although punishments reduce undesirable behaviour, they also generate a series of negative emotions – fear, humiliation, anger. These emotions will manifest as aggression and violence in the future and, in addition, distorted perceptions of punishment may occur. The long-term consequence of physical punishment of children is trauma. Trauma is an overly stressful impact on a person. There are two types of trauma: 1. Unexpected and unpredictable trauma; 2. Frequent, painful, expected and degrading trauma. Usually physical punishments belong to the second group. For this type of trauma, predictable, painful and degrading experience for children is characteristic. This experience is accompanied by fear, sadness, shame, guilt, apathy. The children mobilize all defence mechanisms against humiliation. This can be a denial, suppression, identification with the aggressor or self-destruction behaviour [6]. Sometimes non-physical punishments have more serious consequences than physical punishments. Prohibition of games and television, forced to unpopular activity (e.g., cleaning as a punishment), causes feelings of guilt and inferiority. Parental insults are very harmful and painful to the child [2, 6].

## **2.1 Approaches to the use of physical punishment**

*Severe* [8] states that parents use punishments in three ways: impulsive, in anger and deliberately.

*Impulsive approaches* – this is a way of punishing when parents act almost automatically and impulsively. Impulsive punishment does not have lasting positive effect on the behaviour of the child. If parents repeatedly use a punishment, this punishment becomes insignificant. Many parents often hit children if they are doing something wrong. However, in this case, it is necessary for parents to explain what children have done wrong otherwise the children will not learn anything. If the parent is more irritated, the child will be hit for every little thing. This inconsistency is confusing for the child. Children, who are often impulsively hit, will begin to believe that physical punishment is a normal part of life. Importance of the education is lost. Frequent physical punishments do not lead to the goal of education – and that is, to teach the child a responsible decision.

*Punishment in anger* – this approach is the most harmful, especially because this way of punishment is impulsive, and it is likely that parents will not manage their behaviour and harm the child. This punishment creates strong negative emotions, both in parents and children. These emotions can interfere with the child's self-confidence. The child begins to be afraid of parents and loses confidence in them. In this way, parents teach the child to respond in anger with brutal force.

*Premeditated punishment* – this method of punishment involves warning to the child that if the child does some particular activity, a spanking will follow. For example, “if you speak unmannerly, you will get on your ass”. This type of punishment is the most effective, but as the author states, there is no evidence that physical punishment would lead to a greater responsibility of children. Moreover, the planned punishment is also a pattern of negative behaviour. Many parents forget that the planned education must contain positive solutions, not only the use of physical punishment, but also the use of motivation techniques.

It is necessary to understand that all physical punishments, however “mild” and “light”, carry an inbuilt risk of escalation: its effectiveness in controlling children's behaviour decreases over time, encouraging the punisher to increase the intensity of the punishment. The risk of escalation is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry: their anger can increase the level of force used beyond what was intended, and their intent may be retaliatory as well as punitive [9]. Physical punishment can reduce empathy and moral regulation. It does not teach children how to behave. Rather than helping children

to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, it teaches them that it is desirable not to get caught. Physical punishment may also decrease the likelihood of long-term compliance by damaging adult-child relationships and introducing fear [9]. Just the meaning of empathy is mainly in empathic communication and empathic understanding. The main tool of understanding and empathy is that through empathy, one person's feelings and different tensions are equipped with those of the others. This is a sense of empathy that requires the laying down of oneself [10].

### **3 Methodology**

The main aim of our research was to find out how citizens of the Slovak Republic perceive physical punishments of children and how they apply them in the educational process. We have found out whether opinions on physical punishment differ according to gender, education and religion of respondents. The research has been conducted using a quantitative research strategy. Questionnaire consisted of 24 questions. To assess participants' views on corporal punishment, we used a modified version of the *Attitudes toward corporal punishment questionnaire*. The questionnaire consisted of 9 closed-ended questions and then participants read 9 statements and indicated their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. The end of the questionnaire contained 6 demographic questions on participants' age, gender, religion, education, marital status and area of residence. In addition to the printed version the questionnaire was also conceived in an electrical form. The data obtained was processed and analyzed using the SPSS Statistic 20 – Kruskal Wallis test and Mann Whitney U test.

#### **3.1 Research sample**

The survey sample consisted of 168 respondents (75.4% women and 24.6% men). Majority of respondents were 31–40 years old (47.3%) and 18–30 years old (31.9%). In the range of 41–50 years old were 12.5% of respondents, 51–60 years old were 5.4% of respondents and over 60 years old were only 1.8% of respondents. Regarding the education, respondents were classified into six groups: PhD degree (4.2%), Master degree (55.4%), Bachelor degree (3.5%), post-secondary education (6.5%), secondary education (29.2%) and primary education (1.2%).

#### **3.2 Results**

86.9% of the respondents stated that their parents used physical punishment in their upbringing. Most often it was slapping the bottom (63.1%) and spanking (15.5%). 13.1% of respondents stated that their parents had never beaten them. Physical punishment was considered as effective for upbringing by 62.5% respondents. Total prohibition of physical punishment was supported by only 8.9% of respondents. As an alternative to physical punishment, the respondents mostly mentioned explanation (29.2%), prohibition of favourite activities (25.6%) and educational discussion of the situation (17.9%).

The first factor which we examined was gender. We wanted to find out whether there was a difference in views on physical punishment between men and women. We used the Mann Whitney U test ( $U = 2311, 500, P = 0.169$ ). The results did not show significant difference between men and women in opinion on physical punishments. Regarding the education of the respondents, we wanted to find out whether there were differences in views on physical punishment depending on education. We used the Kruskal–Wallis test.

**Table 1.** The results Mean Rank for education.

Ranks			
Education		N	Mean Rank
PP	PhD	8	57.25
	Master degree	93	87.55
	Bachelor degree	6	47.17
	Postgraduate	10	120.45
	Graduate degree	49	77.04
	Primary education	2	166.50
	Total	168	

The results showed differences in opinion on physical punishment according to education ( $\chi^2(3) = 18.944$ ,  $P = 0.002$ ).

The table shows (*a lower score indicates a lower degree of agreement to physical punishment*) that the lowest mean score was reported by respondents with university education – that means they prefer more alternative methods in upbringing to physical punishment. It suggests that people with university education can have more information about negative influence of physical punishment on children. Another factor that we examined was whether views on physical punishment are influenced by religion of respondents. Results showed that most of the respondents stated that they were believers and practised faith regularly (54.2%). 29% said they were believers, but did not practise faith, and 16.8% were unbelievers. We used the Kruskal–Wallis test again and we did not find out significant differences in opinion on physical punishment according to religion of the respondents ( $\chi^2(3) = 3.838$ ,  $P = 0.147$ ).

### 3.3 Discussion

Physical punishments in Slovakia were often used at schools or in families as an educational technique. However, what was considered to be educational in the past is taken as a limitation of children's rights and freedom nowadays. This study showed that majority of the respondents were exposed to physical punishment during childhood and they often use it in upbringing their children, too. This confirms the findings of Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children that have found that parents in households, where physical punishment was applied, are more likely to inflict physical punishment on their children and associate it with a belief that physical punishment is necessary in upbringing of children. From the above-mentioned findings, we can say that physical punishment in Slovak republic is still very widely used in upbringing. This is confirmed by the finding that only a small percentage of respondents agree with prohibition of physical punishment. However, studies show that in the states which have prohibited all kinds of physical punishment, the positive effects of it are becoming visible. A study in 2000, which examined the impact of the ban in Sweden, found that there had been a decrease in the number of 15 to 17-year olds involved in theft, narcotics crimes, assaults against young children and rape, and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people. Studies in Finland have found that there has been a clear reduction in all forms of corporal punishment and other parental violence against children since prohibition in 1983 and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered [9]. Next our finding is that education is a significant factor in the opinion on punishment. Physical

punishment can have a negative impact on children's cognitive development: associations have been found between physical punishment and lower IQ scores, smaller word stock, poorer cognitive abilities, slower cognitive development and poorer school marks. Similar associations have been found about physical punishment at school. Physical punishment at school violates children's right to education, including by creating a violent and intimidating environment in which children are less able to learn. This punishment is often a reason given by children for not attending or for dropping out of school. Even adults who experienced corporal punishment as children were less likely to graduate from college and to have high status and highly paid jobs [9].

Change from the traditional upbringing style to the collaborative one takes time, patience, and energy. Even so, collaboration does much more to help us achieve our long-term goals of facilitating the development of adults, who are driven to do good not for the sake of avoiding a punishment or getting a reward, but rather to do what is right [11]. Rewards and punishments seem, at first glance, two completely different concepts, but these are two sides of the same coin. Their similarity is that both are only an external impulse (incentive), which focuses on the external behaviour of the child. Both tend to have an immediate effect, which most people see as the primary result and never think of their long-term negative impact on personality development. The research results can be summarized in the clear findings by Čáp and Mareš: education based on rewards has better results than education based on punishments [12].

In Slovakia, no significant differences were found between men and women in the frequency of used punishment. However, in international research in seven of the nine countries, mothers reported spanking, slapping, or hitting their child significantly more frequently than fathers did in the same families. In Colombia and Kenya, this parent-gender effect was qualified by a significant interaction with child's gender. Mothers reported slapping or hitting daughters more frequently than sons, whereas fathers reported slapping, or hitting sons more frequently than daughters [13]. It can be caused by the fact that Slovakia is still a Christian country, in which both parents have the same position in upbringing.

## 4 Conclusion

Despite the fact that parents seek to follow humanistic principles in education, the results of our research have confirmed that in many families, negative pedagogical methods such as physical punishment are used. Significant differences were confirmed from the point of view of education – respondents with lower education preferred physical punishment more than respondents with higher education. However, these and many other negative sanctions are contrary to the child's fundamental right to respect for his personality. It is important for parents to realize, that the use of educational methods such as explanations, persuasion, demand or personal example is the base for achieving educational goals.

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