



## Mothers' self-reported violence toward their children: A multifaceted risk analysis<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

The universal aim of decreasing parental violence against children requires the detection of risk factors associated with violent behavior among parents. Although research has identified a number of such risk factors, these findings are scattered and a comprehensive picture is lacking. In the present study, 20 child-, parent- and family-related factors have been included in a combined analysis to assess which of these may pose as risk factors for mothers' severe violent behavior toward their children. The study is based on a representative sample of 2,716 Finnish mothers with 0–12-year-old children and was conducted as an anonymous survey. Analyses were carried out using logistic regression models. 6% of the mothers had committed severe violent acts, i.e. slapped, hit, punched (with a fist), kicked, bit, hit/try to hit the child with an object or shook (under 2 year old) child at least once during the 12 months preceding the survey. Corporal punishment experienced by the mother as a child (OR 2.45, CI 1.55–3.88) or used by the mother as a method of discipline (OR 11.14, CI 5.95–20.87), strongly increased the likelihood of severe violent acts. Additionally, work- or family-related stress (OR 1.83, CI 1.24–2.73) and lack of help in dealing with parenting problems (OR 2.55, CI 1.66–3.90) were detected as risk factors for severe violent acts toward one's own child. The findings suggest that prevention of corporal punishment may be an important hinder to the transmission of experiences of violence from one generation to another, and that contextual and situational factors may overlap the influence of individual-related risk factors.

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### Introduction

Women's use of violence is a taboo in many cultures, and even more so if the violence is carried out by mothers toward their children. Such violence, however, is known to exist (Ellonen, Kääriäinen, Sariola, Helweg-Larsen, & Larsen, 2011; Gage & Silvestre, 2010). In addition to physical and emotional harm (Litrownik et al., 2005; Millsa et al., 2013; Stockhammer, Salzinger, Feldman, Mojica, & Primavera, 2001), violence against children causes a substantial financial burden to society. For example, in The United States it has been estimated that the total lifetime cost of child maltreatment including health care, child welfare, criminal justice, and the value of lost future productivity is \$124 billion each year (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that children experience parental violence even in countries in which corporal punishment has been prohibited by law, such as the Nordic countries (Annerbäck, Wingren, Svedin, & Gustafsson, 2010;

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Ellonen et al., 2011; Janson, Jernbro, & Långberg, 2011). The present study, based on a survey addressed to the parents of a representative sample of 0–12-year-old children, has been conducted in Finland where such a law has existed for 30 years. This article focuses specifically on mothers' severe violent behavior toward their children and possible risk factors related to it. In the concluding remarks, suggestions for practice and policy are given.

### *The Occurrence of Parental Violence*

In the literature, several concepts are used to address violent behavior demonstrated by parents toward their children, such as child maltreatment (e.g. DiLauro, 2004; Stith et al., 2009) or child abuse (DiScala, Sege, Li, & Reece, 2000; Machado, Goncales, Matos, & Dias, 2007). The concept of physical violence is used in the present study to emphasize the physical harm caused by violence. Wolfner and Gelles (1993) defined physical violence toward children as being “carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person”. Definitions of severe physical violence toward children typically include punching, kicking, hitting, slapping, beating up, grabbing and choking (Clément & Chamberland, 2007; Miller-Perrin, Perrin, & Kocur 2009; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998).

The occurrence of physical violence against children has traditionally been studied based on register data such as police or medical reports (e.g. DiScala et al., 2000). It is known, however, that violence against children is not always reported to the authorities (Ellonen & Pösö, in press; Heinonen & Ellonen, in press; Tilden et al., 1994; Tite, 1993). In recent years, different types of surveys, especially child self-report questionnaires, have been developed to reach these unreported cases (Ellonen et al., 2011; Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005; Janson et al., 2011). Comparisons between findings based on register data and those based on self-report data from children have shown that the latter reveal a significantly higher prevalence of violence (Kuoppamäki, Kääriäinen, & Ellonen, 2011; Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). Based on child self-report data, 2% of Finnish and Danish ninth graders (born 1992–1993) reported having experienced severe physical violence (punched or kicked, hit with a fist or belt, slapped on the face, beaten up, choked, or threatened with a knife or gun) by their parent, during the previous 12 months prior to the study (Peltonen, Ellonen, Larsen, & Helweg-Larsen, 2010). Recent findings based on Finnish ninth graders (born 1997–1998) have, however, shown that the lifetime prevalence has decreased. In 1988, 24% of ninth graders reported having been slapped by their parents at any point in their lives, whereas in 2008 the proportion had declined to 10%, and in 2013 only 6% of adolescents reported such events (Fagerlund, Peltola, Kääriäinen, Ellonen, & Sariola, 2014).

The self-report data from parents have shown that the rates of using physical violence are significantly lower in the Nordic countries than in Canada (Clément & Bouchard, 2005), Portugal (Machado et al., 2007), England (Radford et al., 2011) and Italy (Bardi & Borgognini-Tarli, 2001). In Sweden, 2% of mothers and 3% of fathers reported having slapped their child (0–12 years) during the past 12 months (Janson et al., 2011). In Canada, 43% of mothers reported at least one episode of minor violence, and 6% reported at least one episode of severe physical violence by an adult toward a child living in the household, during the 12-month period preceding the survey. In Portugal, 12.3% of parents reported being physically abusive during the previous year. The current study utilizes self-report data from parents to clarify the prevalence of severe physical violence toward their own children.

The abovementioned studies show that physical violence against children is used throughout the world, even in countries where any kind of violence toward children is both prohibited by law and socially disapproved of (Durrant & Smith, 2011). This underscores the importance of identifying risk factors associated with parents' violent behavior in order to achieve the aim of decreasing the use of violence against children.

### *The Risk Factors of Parental Violence*

In the mainstream literature, the risk factors connected with violent parental behavior are usually divided into child-, family- and parent-related risk factors (see for example Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006). Several studies on child-related risks have shown that physical, mental, and developmental disabilities, chronic illnesses and behavioral characteristics that irritate the parent all increase the risk of the child becoming a victim of parental violence (Heinonen & Ellonen, 2013; Newton & Vandeven, 2005; Svensson, Bornehag, & Janson, 2011). There is some evidence that older children (13–17 year olds) are more likely to be targeted by parental violence than younger children (Finkelhor et al., 2005). Although gender has also been demonstrated as a risk factor in some studies (Janson et al., 2011), severe physical maltreatment has been reported by similar proportions of boys and girls (Macmillan et al., 1997).

Studies of family-related risk factors have focused mainly on socioeconomic characteristics. Register-based and survey-based data suggest that the risk of maltreatment, such as physical violence, is higher in families with large numbers of children, low income levels and parental unemployment (Clément & Bouchard, 2005; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993). These findings, however, have been challenged by recent research in Finland that has not demonstrated an association between parental unemployment or financial troubles and violent parental behavior (Ellonen & Salmi, 2011). Crises as well as various forms of domestic violence in the family have also been found to increase the risk of parents' use of violence (Clément & Bouchard, 2005; DiLauro, 2004; McAllister, 2000; Nair, Schuler, Black, Kettinger, & Harrington, 2003; Sprang, Clark, & Bass, 2005).

Literature on parent-related factors has shown that the risk of violent behavior toward a child is higher among young parents (Kivitiä-Kallio & Tupola, 2004; Nair et al., 2003), parents with a low level of education and single parents (Nair et al.,

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