Child Abuse & Neglect 48 (2015) 131–139

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

Research article

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

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 November 2014
Received in revised form 22 April 2015
Accepted 27 April 2015
Available online 17 June 2015

Keywords:
Corporal punishment
Children's voices
South Africa
Intervention challenges

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.

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

☆ This research was supported by the National Research Foundation, South Africa, the Harry Crossley Foundation and the South African Medical Research Council.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.022
0145-2134/

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