



# Corporal punishment and children's externalizing problems: A cross-sectional study of Tanzanian primary school aged children<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The adverse effect of harsh corporal punishment on mental health and psychosocial functioning in children has been repeatedly suggested by studies in industrialized countries. Nevertheless, corporal punishment has remained common practice not only in many homes, but is also regularly practiced in schools, particularly in low-income countries, as a measure to maintain discipline. Proponents of corporal punishment have argued that the differences in culture and industrial development might also be reflected in a positive relationship between the use of corporal punishment and improving behavioral problems in low-income nations. In the present study we assessed the occurrence of corporal punishment at home and in school in Tanzanian primary school students. We also examined the association between corporal punishment and externalizing problems. The 409 children (52% boys) from grade 2 to 7 had a mean age of 10.49 ( $SD = 1.89$ ) years. Nearly all children had experienced corporal punishment at some point during their lifetime both in family and school contexts. Half of the respondents reported having experienced corporal punishment within the last year from a family member. A multiple sequential regression analysis revealed that corporal punishment by parents or by caregivers was positively related to children's externalizing problems. The present study provides evidence that Tanzanian children of primary school age are frequently exposed to extreme levels of corporal punishment, with detrimental consequences for externalizing behavior. Our findings emphasize the need to inform parents, teachers and governmental organizations, especially in low-income countries, about the adverse consequences of using corporal punishment be it at home or at school.

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## Background

### *Prevalence of corporal punishment in Tanzania and other low-income countries*

The prevalence and effects of corporal punishment have been controversial topics for decades (Gómez-Guadix, Straus, Carrobes, Muñoz-Rivas, & Almendros, 2010; Gershoff, 2002, 2010, 2013; Straus, 2001). Corporal punishment is commonly

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defined as ‘the use of physical force with the intention of causing (bodily) pain, but not necessarily injury, for purposes of correction or control of the child’s behavior’ (Straus, 2010).

Research conducted in multiple countries has indicated that corporal punishment by parents is both more prevalent and more severe than is generally realized (Straus, 2010). In a study encompassing 32 countries on six continents, the rates of corporal punishment ranged from less than 20% in Sweden and the Netherlands to almost 75% in China. Research has shown the extensive use of corporal punishment in schools in resource-poor countries (Anderson & Payne, 1994). For example in a UNICEF report on the use of corporal punishment against children in 35 middle- and low-income countries, six of the 10 countries in which corporal punishment was found to be very common are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2010). In these countries more than 80% of the children reported frequent use of corporal punishment at home. In a study conducted in Nigeria, Ani and Grantham-McGregor (1998) described high levels of corporal punishment both at home and in school.

In Tanzania corporal punishment is still lawful not only at home but also at school. Although the law prohibits torture or other cruel or inhuman punishment, it allows corporal punishment as a means for justifiable correction. While only headteachers used to be allowed to punish corporally in Tanzanian schools, corporal punishment has just recently been re-introduced as a corrective measure usable by all teachers (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2012; Tanzania Daily News, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that only 28% of secondary school students strongly disagreed that they were spanked or hit often before the age of 12 (Straus, 2010). In a study conducted at secondary schools in Tanzania, 40% of the teachers reported the frequent use of corporal punishment, defined as more than ten times a week. Interviews with teachers and students confirmed that caning (i.e. being beaten with a stick) was the most frequently used method of corporal punishment in schools (Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010). In 2009, a national survey concerning violence against children with a representative sample of more than 3700 youths between the ages of 13 and 24 found that almost three-quarters of both girls and boys had experienced physical violence by a relative or an authority figure prior to the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2011). The vast majority of this corporal punishment consisted of being punched, whipped, or kicked. More than half of girls and boys aged 13–17 years reported that they had experienced physical violence by either a relative or authority figure during the past year. However, while much of the research has focused on the adolescent years little is known about the occurrence of corporal punishment at home for children of primary school age.

Proponents of corporal punishment have argued that the differences in culture and industrial development might be reflected in a positive relationship between the use of corporal punishment and improving behavioral problems in low-income nations. For example, Lansford (2010) argues that parents and children in different cultures may interpret corporal punishment as either an appropriate and effective discipline strategy or not, depending on the normativeness of corporal punishment within their group. She states that although corporal punishment is generally related to more behavior problems regardless of cultural group, this association is weaker in countries in which corporal punishment is the norm. Yet cultures in which corporal punishment is the norm also have higher levels of societal violence (Lansford, Malone, Dodge, & Deater-Deckard, 2010). Ellison and Bradshaw (2009) even claim that within cultural communities in which this practice is common and normative, its effects are less harmful. Vittrup and Holden (2010), however, have shown that children with high levels of exposure to corporal punishment were not likely to regard it as an effective disciplinary technique. Hence, they argue that the more prevalent the practice of corporal punishment is, the less likely it is that children perceive it as a fair and effective way to punish misbehavior. It may be perceived as too punitive if it occurs too often, and children who have many friends and siblings who experience corporal punishment may be exposed more to the negative comments about it from those friends and siblings (Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

Furthermore, frequent use of corporal punishment in Tanzania and other countries may also be reinforced by the belief of many parents that their children intentionally misbehave and need to learn to respect the parent’s authority to avoid long-term behavior problems (Burchinal, Skinner, & Reznick, 2010) as well as by conservative religious and sociopolitical beliefs (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009).

### *Externalizing problems in low-income countries*

Most studies on externalizing problems have been conducted in Western samples. However, one cross-cultural systematic review including different studies from Pakistan, Israel, Japan, and the United States concluded that many dimensions of aggressive behavior are universal. However, it also revealed some cultural distinctiveness, the most common type of aggressive behavior for example, as well as the meaning and the justification for the use of aggressive behavior (Severance et al., 2013). Savina, Coulacoglou, Sanyal, and Zhang (2011) suggested that children’s externalizing and internalizing problems also have some specific cultural features. Findings from DR Congo, Ethiopia and Nigeria showed that externalizing problems such as conduct disorder, antisocial disorder and hyperactivity are also a common phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa (Adelekan, Ndom, Ekpo, & Oluboka, 1999; Ashenafi, Kebede, Desta, & Alem, 2001; Kashala, Elgen, Sommerfelt, & Tylleskar, 2005). In a representative sample from Ethiopia using parent reports of 1477 children, Ashenafi et al. (2001) reported a prevalence rate of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder of 1.5% and of conduct disorder of 0.7%. Adelekan et al. (1999) indicated a prevalence rate of antisocial disorders of 8% in a representative sample from Nigeria consisting of 846 parent reports. Kashala et al. (2005) compared their findings in a study with a representative sample in DR Congo using the teacher report version of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998) with prior findings from Great Britain. They found that the mean scores of the conduct problems subscale and the hyperactivity subscale were significantly higher than the British mean scores of a comparable sample. Hence, Cortina, Sodha, Fazel, and Ramchandani (2012) concluded that

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