

Physical violence and psychological aggression towards children: Five-year trends in practices and attitudes from two population surveys[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: To present prevalence rates of child psychological aggression and physical violence from a population survey conducted in 2004 and to compare the rates with the rates obtained in the 1999 edition of the survey.

Methods: The survey used a randomly generated telephone number methodology. Interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interview system with a representative sample of 3,148 mothers living in Quebec province, Canada. Responses relating to psychological aggression, minor and severe physical violence were collected using the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales.

Results: Eighty percent of the mothers reported the use of psychological aggression towards a child by an adult living in the household, 43% reported at least one episode of minor violence, and 6% reported at least one episode of severe physical violence. When compared to the 1999 surveys, mothers reported 5% less minor physical violence in 2004, a result that is counterbalanced by a similar significant increase in the report of repeated psychological violence towards children in a year. Results also reveal a significant decrease in attitudes favoring the use of violence for discipline purpose between 2004 and 1999.

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Conclusions: The trends observed in violence towards children over the 5-year period may partly be attributed to a change in mother's attitudes concerning methods of disciplining children. Findings support the need to promote alternative methods of firm discipline that do not involve violence.

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Introduction

Violence in the community and in the family has recently been officially recognized as one of the most important public health problems worldwide (resolution WHA 49.25, WHO, 2002). The public health approach to violence addresses the problem in a more comprehensive and holistic manner than do more traditional approaches to the issue. It provides empirical data aimed at identifying the problem, its prevalence, and its cause, and to the planning, testing, and evaluation of preventive responses (Kydd, 2003; WHO, 2002). The public health approach to violence in the community and in the family requires a greater number of reliable epidemiological studies than are presently available in order to document the breadth of the problem and to monitor its trends over time. To date, most Canadian epidemiological studies in this domain have been conducted in collaboration with child protective services (CPS). For this reason, the majority of available information pertains to the most severe forms of violence and abuse towards children (Trocmé, Tourigny, MacLauren, & Fallon, 2003). However, there have been recent efforts in Quebec to fill the gap in population data on family violence and to add to the information garnered from CPS, which up until now has been the only available indicator. The first population survey of family violence in the life of children took place in this predominantly French-speaking province of Canada in 1999 (Clément, Bouchard, Jetté, & Laferrière, 2000). This representative survey provided an initial snapshot of the annual prevalence of physical and psychological violence inflicted on children. It also included measures of mothers' attitudes toward verbal violence and corporal punishment and enabled the exploration of possible links between mothers' attitudes on one hand and physical and psychological violence towards children on the other.

With the aim of documenting both the magnitude of the problem (annual prevalence) and the changes observed in attitudes and in violent practices against children over a 5-year period, the Quebec Statistic Institute conducted the survey again in 2004 using a method similar to the one employed in the original investigation. This paper reports the major findings of these two studies, with a particular focus on the annual prevalence of family violence and the trends observed in various parental attitudes and practices regarding the use of physical and psychological violence in child rearing.

In the current Canadian legal context regarding the use of corporal punishment on children, the present study constitutes a pertinent and up-to-date portrait of the attitudes and practices of parents in Quebec with regard to the discipline and corporal punishment of children. Even though the Quebec Civil Code abolished the provision that gave parents the right to "moderately discipline their children" in 1994, Section 43 of the Canadian Criminal Code (which stipulates that "Every school teacher, parent, or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction towards a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances") still holds jurisdiction. Moreover, in a recent decision, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld Section

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