



# Preventing physical child abuse by legal punishment and neighbor help

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## ABSTRACT

How helpful legal punishment and neighbor help are in preventing parents' physical child abuse in the real-life setting has been uncertain and suspicious. The question is of concern considering prevailing advocacy for preventing child abuse in the community. To address this question, the study examines the preventive effects with a survey of 1956 high school students in the Chinese metropolis of Shanghai. Results reveal the significant preventive effects of legal punishment and neighbor help on physical abuse by the father and mother respectively. In addition, legal punishment on the mother tended to reduce the father's physical abuse in the presence of neighbor help. These results support ecological theory, which posits the joint contribution of complementary resources obtained from different sources. The results imply the merit of orchestrating support from parents, neighbors, and legal authorities for preventing child abuse.

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Child abuse, as an unjustified hurtful treatment by parents, requires efforts for prevention and related research (van Dijken, Stams, & de Winte, 2016). Such prevention notably includes punishing the perpetrating parents and mobilizing community support for the prevention (Fantuzzo, Stevenson, Kabir, & Perry, 2007; van Dijken et al., 2016). One putative way of community support is neighbors' help to the child and punished parent to maintain their healthy functioning (Bazemore & Schiff, 2005). The support and punishment, nevertheless, has not clearly demonstrated their helpfulness in preventing child abuse, despite some mixed findings (Casanueva, Martin, Runyan, Barth, & Bradley, 2008; Chan, 2011; De Li, 2000; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007). These research findings thus indicate a need for clarifying the helpfulness. For such clarification, the present study surveys children in China to reveal their real-life experience regarding child abuse prevention. The clarification is necessary to inform the formulation of workable prevention (Sanders & Cann, 2002). For the prevention, the study needs to address issues concerning child abuse, legal punishment, and neighbor help.

Child abuse or its physical form particularly requires prevention because of its corrosive consequences (Huang, Ososkie, & Hsu, 2011). Obviously, physical child abuse, involving hitting, knocking, and injuring the child, is likely to breed physical debilitation, wounds, and scars that can be chronically traumatic (Chan, 2011). In addition, physical child abuse can foment psychological suffering, which in turn can take both internalizing and externalizing forms (Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). All these consequences can be lethal to oneself and others (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006).

Preventing physical child abuse, as well as other forms of child abuse, is therefore necessary (Ansary & Perkins, 2001). The prevention, nevertheless, is challenging, because of its difficulty to be effective (Berry, Charlson, & Dawson, 2003). Notably, the prevention, especially professional and institutional one, can face resistance from the family and community (Wattam, 1999). Informal prevention, such as through neighbors, tends to be more acceptable than is the formal one (van Dijken et al., 2016).

Child abuse, usually committed by the parent, reflects the deficiency in parenting (Conners, Whiteside-Mansell, Deere, Ledet, & Edwards, 2006). As both the father and mother can be the perpetrators of child abuse, both the father's abuse and mother's abuse are in need of prevention and research (Casanueva et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the father and mother may abuse their child for different reasons and thus require different resources to prevent the abuse (Cui, Xue, Connolly, & Liu, 2016; Schaeffer, Alexander, Bethke, & Kretz, 2005). For instance, the father may abuse for instrumental reasons, whereas the mother may abuse for emotional reasons (Cui et al., 2016).

Punishment by a certain legal authority on the perpetrator of child abuse is a common response to the abuse. Specifically, punishment can include cautioning, probation, surveillance, community service order, and imprisonment by the police, correctional, and other law enforcement agencies (Phillips & Erkanli, 2008; Sedlak et al., 2005). Nevertheless, legal punishment is rather controversial concerning its effectiveness and legitimacy. Regarding effectiveness, legal punishment may fail to show the desired deterrence when legal punishment is bearable (Harel, Safra, & Segal, 2005). Legal punishment may be illegitimate because of its affliction, and authoritarian and backward stances (Vaughan, 2002).

Neighbor help is natural as households are close to each other, as proximity is a determinant of helping (Grannis, 2009). The help can

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be multifarious, immediate, and convenient, covering childcare, safety watch, shopping, driving, lending, housekeeping, escort, and accompanying (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Drake, Greenspoon, Unti, Fawcett, & Neville-Morgan, 2006; Weatherburn & Lind, 2001). Essentially, neighbor help is a social resource that is useful because of its accessibility and stability (Cattell, 2004). This help can spontaneously emerge from interaction with neighbors (Grannis, 2009). The help has shown its contributions to the help recipient concerning the recipient's well-being, problem resolution, empowerment, and commitment to the neighborhood (Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Hays & Kogl, 2007). To parental abuse, neighbor help or intervention has also seemed to be relevant (Emery, Trung, & Wu, 2015b; Molnar et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the helpfulness of the help is uncertain because of its informal nature (Hays & Kogl, 2007). The informal help, lacking prosocial, professional guidance, may not be beneficial to society (Cattell, 2004).

Findings about the preventive effects of legal punishment and neighbor help on child abuse in the Chinese metropolis of Shanghai would be relevant to consolidation of knowledge, because of the global prominence of the metropolis (Liu, 2012). That is, Shanghai demonstrates rapid growth in globalization and global participation and reception of global admiration. Notably, the education and child development in Shanghai are drawing global attention (Deng & Zhao, 2014). Apart from such development there, child abuse is also of concern and criminalized in the modern Chinese context (Chan, 2012; Peng et al., 2015). Chinese parents abusing their children are thereby subject to legal punishment (Naftali, 2009; Peng et al., 2015; Qiao & Chan, 2005). Legal authority in Shanghai also enjoys high respect among citizens (Gallagher, 2006). The authority particularly emphasizes children's rights and prevention of child abuse in Shanghai, owing to the one-child policy, modernization, and globalization (Naftali, 2009). Meanwhile, neighbor relationships are remarkably close in Shanghai (Lee, 2015). Thus, the context of Shanghai would lend support for informal and formal social control and encouragement for youth development. Residents in the Chinese metropolis tend to recognize the importance of children's rights and prevention of child abuse, even though they do not seem to be ready to provide the control and intervention against the abuse among their neighbors (Naftali, 2009). The situation arises from clash between modern, liberal, and traditional, authoritarian orientations during the modernization of China (Peng et al., 2015). Physical child abuse is thereby likely to be culturally tolerable there (Cui et al., 2016; Liao, Lee, Roberts-Lewis, Hong, & Jiao, 2011). Nevertheless, modernization tends to encourage Chinese people to disclose information about child abuse, which was a secret in the past (Liao et al., 2011). Such information, as collected from a survey, would be useful for scrutinizing and corroborating the following knowledge that evolves from theory and research in the West, where legal and neighbor interventions operate as well (Berger, 2005; Molnar et al., 2016).

### 1. Preventing child abuse through legal punishment and neighbor help

Prevention of child abuse can build on ecological theory. The crux of the theory posits that one's living, functioning, and flourishing hinge on acquisition of various resources or elimination of risks from the environment as well as from oneself (McFarland, Moody, Diehl, Smith, & Thomas, 2014; McKown, 2005). The environment comprises parents, the family, community, organizations, government, and nature. Essentially, resources are complementary to each other in order to provide comprehensive support. For the complementarity, resource providers need to collaborate with each other. The case for child development is that parents, schools, and other resource providers need to share the same development goals and thus offer compatible advice, support, and other resources (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As preventing child abuse is integral to child development (Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002), pooling of complementary resources from various sources is also likely to facilitate the prevention. The complementarity

can arise from combining the work or resources of neighbor help and legal punishment, as well as parenting (Sidebotham, 2001). That is, ecological theory emphasizes the contribution due to the combination of resources from the neighbors and legal institution to parenting or childrearing to avoid parental abuse.

Legal punishment on the abusing parent would facilitate the parent's provision of resources rather than risks to the child, from the perspective of ecological theory. The facilitation is likely to stem from the deterrence effect of legal punishment to impede child abuse and thus restore favorable and supportive parenting. This deterrence effect happens because legal punishment is painful, costly, corrosive, and thus fearful (Harel et al., 2005). Alternatively, legal punishment can remove the risk of child abuse by incapacitation, such as separating the parent from the child (Walsh, 2014). What is more, legal punishment may consolidate the parent's sense of responsibility (Vaughan, 2002). The sense is a basis for the parent's supportive parenting (Fox & Bruce, 2001). Consistent with the view about the effectiveness of legal punishment, legal punishment has appeared to prevent crime, such as the violent one (Bennett & Williams, 1999; Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Danis, 2003; Davis, Johnson, Hilary, Liberty, & Randolph, 2004). Particularly, legal punishment on the parent for child abuse through an intervention program has appeared to prevent the parent's child abuse (Murray & Graves, 2013).

Nevertheless, the contribution of legal punishment to crime prevention is uncertain. From the perspective of ecological theory, legal punishment on the parent would reduce the involvement and thus provision of resources to the child (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009). This happens especially through the various means of incapacitation (Walsh, 2014). Consistent with this view, legal punishment has appeared to be ineffective (Greenwood, 1995; Piquero & Sealock, 2004). Rather, legal punishment has also appeared to perpetuate crime, such as theft (De Li, 2000; Johnson et al., 2011). Legal punishment on the parent may also reflect the parent's tendency of crime, which is a basis for parental abuse (Stith et al., 2009).

Neighbor help, with respect to ecological theory, would offer resources to prevent child abuse (White, Klein, & Martin, 2015). Possibly, the resources are helpful for childcare, need satisfaction, and empowerment in the family, which in turn facilitate family functioning and thus prevent child abuse (Harden & Koblinoky, 1999). At least, neighbor help can function as guardianship and counseling to the parent and child (Okwumabua et al., 1999). Such functions would prevent child abuse (Bouchard, Wang, & Beauregard, 2012; Stith et al., 2009). Alternatively, neighbor help can facilitate the child's development, including being proactive, assertive, and socially active (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002; Hallinan, 2009). Such development would help the child avoid, resist, and tackle abuse inflicted by his or her parent (Bouchard et al., 2012). Neighbor help generally but not specifically about parental abuse has thereby tended to impede the abuse (Emery et al., 2015b; Molnar et al., 2016). Social support more generally also has appeared to prevent the parent from abusing his or her child (Chan, 2011). Essentially, neighbor help such as providing social control has appeared to prevent violence (Emery, Thapa, Do, & Chan, 2015a). Social support also has appeared to prevent the child's suffering of abuse (Schwartz et al., 2009).

However, the preventive effect of neighbor help on child abuse is uncertain. From the perspective of ecological theory, neighbor help may not represent a professional and universally beneficial resource (Cattell, 2004). It has no guarantee for its effectiveness (Hays & Kogl, 2007). Unlike some previous work, social support, including that of neighbors, has also appeared to be unhelpful in preventing child abuse (Casanueva et al., 2008).

Legal punishment on the abusing parent and neighbor help are likely to prevent child abuse jointly, in light of ecological theory. Essentially, the theory posits that integration of complementary resources from various sources is crucial to realize the usefulness of the resources (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; McFarland et al., 2014). As such, the

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