

Use of corporal punishment on children by parents and their perceptions

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*A study on the perceptions of parents on the use of Corporal Punishment on
children in Colombo; Batticaloa; Galle and Polonnaruwa Districts.*

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Abstract

This study looks into the prevalence of corporal punishment in Sri Lanka, the types of corporal punishment that prevail, circumstances in which it is used, and why parents use corporal punishment. It also attempts to understand parent's beliefs on alternative methods of disciplining children and their awareness about the negative consequences of corporal punishment.

Information was collected from a total of 120 parents, from Colombo, Galle, Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa districts, using key informant interviews using a structured questionnaire and unstructured questions.

The study shows that, nearly three-quarter (74%) of parents use corporal punishment and believe that it is necessary to discipline children. Hitting with the hand and beating with a stick were the predominant methods used. Disobedience (30%) and stubbornness (14%) were the main reasons why parents used corporal punishment on their children.

A high prevalence of corporal punishment was seen in spite of a significant degree of awareness of the negative consequences of corporal punishment. Therefore, it is apparent that corporal punishment is a 'norm' deep rooted in the current culture. A combination of factors including passage of the practice from one generation to the next as a learnt response, inadequate incentives to change an age old practice and the lack of opportunities to learn about positive parenting skills appear to fuel the continuation of this practice. Popularizing positive parenting practices, creating an environment that is sensitive towards children and changing social norms are recommended as ways of addressing this issue.

Key words: corporal punishment, Sri Lanka, children, parents, perception

1. Background

Corporal punishment at global level

It is universally accepted that disciplining children is a key aspect of parenting. Psychologists and child care professionals emphasize a positive link between a child developing in a non-violent environment and the physical and mental well-being of the person. However, corporal punishment, in spite of being violent is still practiced in different degrees in many cultures.

Use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method is a much debated topic in parent-child relations. Corporal punishment is believed to have started in ancient times in different magnitudes. (Zoyza et al 2006) Greek society is considered as one of the early western cultures to have practiced physical punishment.

Dissenting views on the value of physical punishments on children also goes back to several centuries. Quintilian (35-100 AD), the Roman educationalist John Locke (1632-1704 AD) and Rousseau (1712-1778 AD), have advocated moderating the use of corporal punishment on children (Zoyza et al 2006)

There is no universal definition for corporal punishment. Therefore this study applies the definition adopted by de Soyza (2008) for the Sri Lankan context, which defines corporal punishment as “the use of physical force with the intension of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behavior”.

There is a slippery slope between corporal punishment which society considers legitimate and child abuse (Jayawardena, 2004). However the cardinal feature in physical child abuse is the presence of a diagnosable injury.

Psychological consequences associated with the corporal punishment

Child care professionals emphasize that corporal punishment bring harmful effects on the physical, psychological, emotional and social development of children (De Zoyza *et al* 2006 cited McLoyd et al, 1994). Effects of hitting a child may lead to fatal injury, physical health problems and psychological and emotional disorders. Other documented effects include childhood depression and distress (De Zoyza *et al* 2006), Aggression (Coie and Dodge, 1998), criminal and anti-social behavior and self destructive behavior in childhood and adult life (De Silva, 2007; De Zoyza *et al* 2006) Corporal punishment occurring in schools could lead to increase the school absenteeism and drop-out rates. Therefore, it is widely believed that corporal punishment is a wrong way to discipline a child.

Corporal punishment in the Sri Lankan context

De Silva (2005) and de Soyza (2008) reveal that king Voharika Tissa (214–236 AD), king Vijayabahu II (1186–1187) and king Vijayabahu III (1232–1236) three ancient rulers of Sri Lanka, have promoted non-violence principles and have prohibited any bodily harm, by way of punishment of children and adults. However, this attitude has changed during the period Sri Lanka was occupied by western colonizers (1505-1948). Corporal punishment was especially promoted as a norm in the interest of “discipline” and “education” (de Soyza *et al* 2006).

Prevalence of corporal punishment

De Soyza (2008) reveals that 70 percent of school children in the Colombo district had experienced at least one act of corporal punishment in the particular year recording an average of 12 acts in the year. Also, 37 percent of the children had experienced at least one act of physical abuse in the same year with an average of 11.6 such acts in the year.

Rationale of the study

Many studies reveal that corporal punishment is associated with adverse psychological and physical outcomes for children (de Soyza, 2008). Corporal punishment negatively impacts on children in many ways. In addition to the pain, sorrow and anger it causes at the time of infliction, there are effects that manifest in the future. Corporal punishment as a method of disciplining children is counterproductive. It promotes lying among children to avoid being beaten. A feeling of vengeance can occur which can cause long term psychological effects on a child. Physically abused children may, as adults, display anti-social and violent behavior (de Silva 2005). They may also learn to practice beating as a method of disciplining their own future children.

There is evidence to show that children who report a more positive relationship with parents report less psychological maladjustments. Unfortunately, the schools system of Sri Lankan does not appear to focus much on positive disciplining skills among its teachers. Therefore, it is timely to create awareness-raising and public education to promote positive, non-violent forms of child-rearing education. This research is a plenary to this.

2. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to identify prevalence and perceptions of Sri Lankan parents on corporal punishment.

The study inquires into the use of corporal punishment, the intensity of its use, types of corporal punishment used by parents and circumstances in which it is used. It also attempts to identify the expected results from the use of corporal punishment and parents understanding and beliefs on other alternative methods of disciplining children. The study also looks at the level of awareness among parents on negative consequences of corporal punishment.

3. Methodology

Sample selection

The study was conducted in the Colombo, Batticaloa, Galle and Polonnaruwa Districts. Colombo was selected as it is the Capital District where a multi-cultural society exists. Galle and Polonnaruwa were selected as they represent typical rural districts where the majority of the population are Sinhala speaking. Batticaloa district was selected in order to include a district where a substantial proportion of the population belong to the Tamil and Muslim communities. One or two Grama Niladhari Divisions were selected from each district for the study.

Sampling techniques and sampling frame

Rathanapitiya Grama Niladhari Division, Wandaduwa Grama Niladhari Division, Madirigiriya Grama Niladhari Division, Kattankudy Grama Niladhari Divisions were randomly selected to represent, the Colombo, Galle, Polonnaruwa and Batticloa Districts respectively. Thirty households that had children among its occupants were randomly selected using the household lists available with the Grama Niladharis leading to a total sample of 120 persons.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the field survey by four Research Assistants, who were trained on the subject matter, data collection techniques and research ethics. Data analysis was done using basic standard statistical software.

Table 1: Sample used for the study

District	Divisional secretary Division	Grama Niladhari Division	No.of respondent
Colombo	Piliyandala	Raththanapitiya	30
Galle	Balapitiya	Wandaduwa	30
Polonnaruwa	Madirigiriya	Madirigiriya	30
Batticaloa	Manmunai North	Kallady	30
Total			120

A limitations of the study included the fact that it was confined to 1-2 Gram Niladhari Divisions (GNDs) of a one Divisional Secretariat Division (DSs) in the selected districts.

4. Results and Discussion

(a) Demographic characteristics of the samples

Table 2: Characteristics of the sample

Features	categories	Colombo		Batticaloa		Galle		Polonnaruwa		Total	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No	%	No	%
Sex segregation	F	24	80	26	86	27	90	28	93	105	87.5
	M	6	20	4	14	3	10	2	7	15	12.5
Age group	18-20	2	7	1	3	1	0	0	7	4	3
	21-30	13	43	8	27	3	10	3	10	27	22.5
	31-40	9	30	16	53	12	40	12	40	49	41
	41-50	2	7	5	17	15	50	14	47	36	30
	50<	4	13	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	4
	Total	30	100	30	100	30	100	30	100	120	100
Education	Primary	2	7	2	7	0	0	3	10	7	6
	Secondary	3	10	6	20	3	10	2	7	14	12
	O/L	15	50	5	17	14	47	15	40	49	41
	A/L	8	27	15	50	12	40	10	33	45	37
	Degree & above	2	6	2	6	1	3	0	0	5	4
	Total	30	100	30	100	30	100	30	100	120	100
Income category	5000>	10	33.5	0	0	10	34	7	23	27	22.5
	5000-10000	10	33.5	2	7	10	34	8	27	30	25
	10000-15000	5	17	9	30	5	17	10	34	29	24
	15000-20000	3	10	10	33	3	10	3	10	19	16
	20000<	2	6	9	30	2	6	2	7	15	12.5
	Total	30	100	30	100	30	100	30	100	120	100

The table above shows the main characteristics of the sample. It is observed that 88 percent of the respondents were women. This is probably because the households selected were those that had children and the fact that women being more available than men at home for the interviews. It is also observed that a large proportion of the respondents belonged to the 31-40 years old category, representing 41 percent of respondents of the survey. The second highest category is 41-50 age group, representing 30 percent of total respondents. The educational level of most respondents were General Certificate of Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) accounting for 41 % and most of the respondents had an average income of Rs.5000-10 000 (25%).

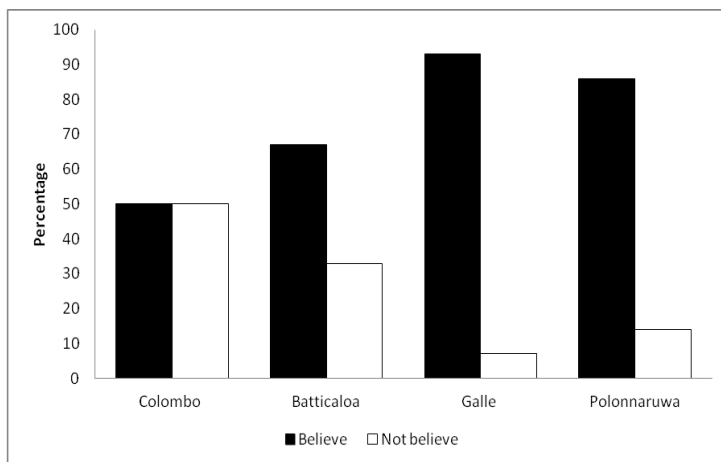
(b) Acceptance of Corporal Punishment

As shown in Table 03, eighty nine (89) respondents out of the total of 120 respondents in all 4 districts, that is 74 % of total parents admitted to the use of some form of corporal punishment. They believed that it is necessary to use some kind of punishment to discipline children. The highest prevalence (90%), was recorded from the Galle district. Polonnaruwa recorded 86% and it was 67% in Batticaloa. Corporal punishment was reported lowest in Colombo District (50%).

Table 3: Parents use Corporal Punishment by districts

Distict	Necessary	%	Not necessary	%
Colombo	15	50	15	50
Batticaloa	20	67	10	33
Galle	28	93	2	7
Polonnaruwa	26	86	4	14
Total	89	74	31	26

Figure 1: Percentage of parents use corporal punishment



(c) Types of corporal punishment practiced

Table 04 shows the types of punishments used by parents. Hitting with the hand accounted for 31% and beating with a stick accounted for 27%. These were the two most common methods used by respondents. The other methods were pulling the ear (13%), small punishment (not specified) (11.5%), hitting with a ‘ekal’ stick (10%) kneeling down (3%) canning (3%) and throwing whatever is around (a book, comb etc) at the child (1.2%) were other methods used.

Galle district records the highest number of cases of hitting with the hand (13 cases or 11%), while Colombo district receives the first place (8 cases or 7%) for beating with a stick. All of the above eight methods used by the parents in the Galle district. ‘Small punishment’ refers to hitting the child by using the hand or a small stick on the back side or legs or hands of the child.

In addition to the eight types of physical punishment described above, nearly one-fifth of parents mentioned that they use heavy scolding or verbal abuse as a punishment in combination with physical punishment. However, it is possible that the intensity of the corporal punishment is more extensive than reported, considering the fact that mothers are aware of the laws against child abuse. In addition, parents may have felt ashamed to admit to being violent.

Table 4: Types of punishments use by the parents.

Types of punishment	District				Total no.	%
	Colombo	Batticaloa	Galle	Polonnaruwa		
Hitting with the hand	2	2	13	5	22	31
Beating with a stick	8	3	4	4	19	27
Use of the cane	1	0	1	0	2	3
Hitting with a ‘ekal’	4	2	1	0	7	10
Throwing whatever is around	0	0	1	0	1	1.5
Kneeling down	1	0	1	0	2	3
Small punishments (not specified)	0	3	2	3	8	11.5
Pulling the ear	2	1	3	3	9	13
Total					70	100

*respondents were free to give any number of answers

(d) Circumstances in which parents use corporal punishment.

The circumstances in which parents used corporal punishment on children varied the child being stubborn to the child being naughty such as damaging household items. Children being disobedient (30%) and stubborn (14%) were the main circumstances in which parents hit children. Also, children were hit when they took chances where their acts exposed them to danger. Examples included running towards the road (risk of road accidents), touching electric items, climbing trees and jumping over walls. Sitting on walls or height places which the parents considered inappropriate for the age of the child were also reasons for punishing.

Table 5: Circumstances in which parents use corporal punishment

Ser /no	Factor	Colombo	B'caloa	Galle	P'naruwa	Total	%
1	Touching harmful matter/ impending danger	0	0	5	2	7	9
2	Stubbornness	2	0	2	7	11	14
3	Disobedient to parents	7	4	6	6	23	30
4	Avoiding studies/refusing to go to school	3	2	2	1	8	10
5	Frequently watching TV	2	3	0	0	5	6
6	Frequently playing	0	0	3	2	5	6
7	Fighting with siblings/friends	2	0	0	0	2	2.5
8	Shouting	0	0	1	0	0	1
9	Imitating TV programmes	0	0	1	0	1	1
10	Not engaging in daily routine (washing/ bathing)	0	0	1	0	1	1
11	Demanding things which parents cannot afford	0	0	1	0	1	1
12	Smoking	0	1	1	1	3	4
13	When mother is angry	0	0	2	0	2	2.5
14	Telling inappropriate words	0	0	2	0	2	2.5
15	Love affairs	0	0	2	0	2	2.5
16	Stealing	0	1	1	1	3	4
17	Damaging things (household/)	0	0	1	1	2	2.5
	Total					77	100

*respondents were free to give any number of answers

(e) Purpose or change expected by parents to result from corporal punishment.

The data (Table 6) suggests that the majority of the parents (31%) use corporal punishment to bring up their children in a ‘proper manner’. This shows an inherent problem with negative discipline as what is ‘proper manner’ or ‘correct way’ is only known by the parent. It does not tell the child how to behave, but only tells how NOT to behave. The reason that ranked next was educational purposes, or to get the child to study (29 %). Twenty percent (20%) of parents responded that they use corporal punishment to keep away the child from doing things that they felt wrong such as engaging in inappropriate associations, or relationships and also to deter them from repeating a mistake..

Table 6: Expected results by using corporal punishment

Factor	District				Total	%
	Colombo	Batticaloa	Galle	Polonnaruwa		
Bringing up the child in a proper manner	8	0	9	8	25	31
Keeping away from inappropriate relationships etc	2	6	5	3	16	20
Not to repeat the same mistake again	3	3	6	4	16	20
Stress the importance of the education	5	6	7	5	23	29
Total answers					80	100

* considered only the most prominent methods out of number of methods highlighted by the respondents

(f) How parents learnt to practice corporal punishment

The research attempted to see how the practice of corporal punishment was transferred from one generation to the next. It also attempted to assess whether parents still believe the practice is an effective method of disciplining children and to determine whether parents are aware of the negative consequences of corporal punishment.

It is seen that in all districts, transfer of knowledge from one generation to the other through parents is a significant way the practice propagates within generations. This has implications for action, in that if we halt the practice now, it will probably significantly reduce the prevalence of this practice in the next generation.

Influence of parents was 40% in Galle, 38% in and Polonnaruwa, 30% in Colombo and 20% Batticaloa. One being corporally punished in school teaches them to punish their children in a simiar way. This school factor played a significant role in Batticaloa (48%) in socializing corporal punishment among parents. In Colombo it was 30%, in Polonnaruwa 28% and in Galle it was 24%.

Figure 2: Methods parents learnt to practice corporal punishment

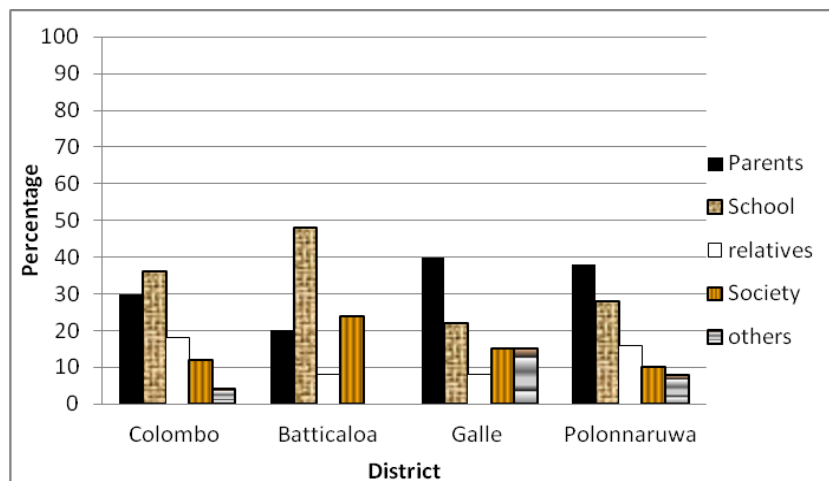


Table 7: Methods parents learnt to practice corporal punishment

Factor	Colombo		Batticaloa		Galle		Polonnaruwa		District results	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Parents	9	30	6	20	11	36	12	38	38	32
School	11	36	14	48	7	24	8	28	40	33
Relatives	5	18	3	8	2	8	5	16	15	12
Society	4	12	7	24	5	16	3	10	19	16
others	1	4	0	0	5	16	2	8	8	7
Total	30	100	30	100	30	100	30	100	120	100

(g) Awareness on negative outcomes of corporal punishment

Table 08 clearly shows that respondents are quite aware about the negative results of corporal punishment. This is in spite of the high prevalence previously described. The most notable was Galle district which had the highest prevalence of corporal punishment (90%) which also appeared to have the highest knowledge on its negative impact. Depression, mental disorders and aggression were some of the responses given by respondents as effects of corporal punishment.

Table 8: Negative outcome of the corporal punishment as understand by the respondents

Negative outcome of the corporal punishment	District				Total no.	%
	Colombo	Batticaloa	Galle	Polonnaruwa		
Depression/stress	1	7	4	2	14	14
Mental disorders	2	0	3	2	7	7
Aggression towards parents	5	4	12	3	24	24
Injuries/body harm	4	2	10	0	16	16
May cause to develop some disorders in future	2	0	11	0	13	13
May become more stubborn	6	5	5	2	18	17.5
Get on with bad society/people/left the home	1	0	2	6	9	8.5
Total no. of responses	21	18	47	15	101	100

*respondents were free to give any number of answers

5. Conclusions

Corporal punishment is a common practice among parents in Sri Lanka. No district under study was immune from it. Most parents believe that it is an integral part of disciplining their children. Hitting with the hand and beating with a stick are common methods used. Parents use corporal punishment when children are stubborn and they do not listen, to get them to study and also to discourage children from being in risky situations. One has reason to believe that the practice is culturally deep rooted as many parents were continuing to use it although they were quite aware that it was a harmful practice. The lack of awareness on alternate positive parenting practices may be another reason why they still resort to corporal punishment.

Popularizing positive parenting practices, creating an environment that is sensitive towards children and changing social norms are recommended as ways of addressing this issue.

6. Recommendations

(i) Agreement on Definitions

All stakeholders should agree on what is acceptable and not and define corporal punishment to include all punishment that are not only injurious and painful but those that are humiliating and degrading.

(ii) Awareness raising and public education

All partners in Child Protection should support public awareness and education campaigns to promote positive, non-violent methods of child-rearing (Save 2005).

To ensure that children are protected from corporal punishment in schools, the Sri Lankan Government should have a strict policy on this and allocate additional financial and human resources for implementation. Teachers should receive training on children's rights and alternatives to corporal punishment through teacher training institutions.

Training should include providing skills to teachers on they could manage classroom discipline in a positive, non-violent manner.

(iii) Legal Reform

Relevant Laws such as the Penal Code should be reviewed and appropriately amended to remove exceptions to the liability of parents when they hit children to discipline. Laws should be amended to prohibit symbols of corporal punishment from being displayed such as canes.

(iv) Working with the Media

The media should be mobilised to raise awareness on children's right NOT to be subjects of corporal punishment or other forms of humiliating and degrading punishment. Work with media producers including tele-drama producers should be encouraged to use their artistic talents to create art that discourages violence in general and corporal punishment in particular.

(v) Children's participation

Children have the right to be involved in deciding on matters that relate to them. Real life stories that they bring out may help policy makers understand how harmful corporal punishment is to children.

(vi) Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular surveys should be conducted to review the processes and monitor the reduction of prevalence of corporal punishment and to take appropriate remedial action if the rates are not going down.

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Annex 1:

Questionnaire used for the study

Perception of the people towards children's issues in Sri Lanka: corporal punishment, child rights and age of marriage

General information: Demographic, social and education related information

Name

Address.....

Contact no.....

I. District

Colombo	Galle	Polonnaruwa	Batticaloa
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II. DS Division

III. GN Division

IV. Sex:

Male	Female
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V. Education:

Primary	Secondary	GCE O/L	GCE (A/L)	Diploma/Degree, Post graduate
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VI. Age Group:

15-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	over 50
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VII. Marital status

Married	unmarried	Divorced	Widow
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VIII. Spouse's educational level

Primary	Secondary	GCE O/L	GCE (A/L)	Diploma/Degree, Post graduate
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IX. How many children you have?

X. Age of children (years)

0-5	6-10	11-15	16-18	18<
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XI. Do you employed

Yes	No
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XII. If yes, employment

Government	Private sector	Wage labour	Agriculture	Self employed
------------	----------------	-------------	-------------	---------------

XIII. Family income

5000>	6000- 10,000	11000-15000	16000-20000	25000<
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SECTION 01: What type of corporal punishments/physical punishment use by parents for their children, under what circumstances parents use corporal punishments what are the expected results and how do they feel it?

I. Do you use corporal punishments for your children to discipline them?

yes	no
-----	----

II. If yes, what types of punishments do you use

.....
.....

III. If yes, under what circumstances?

.....

IV. Do you believe that corporal punishment is necessary to discipline the children?

yes	no
-----	----

V. If not, what type of methods do use to discipline the children?

.....

VI. Do you feel that there are many other methods of disciplining children rather than physical punishments?

yes	no
-----	----

VII. If yes, what are they?

VIII. Do you believe that there may be any other methods of disciplining children rather than physical punishments?

yes	no
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IX. Is so, what types of methods can be use

X. What result would you expect from corporal punishment?

SECTION 2: Background and understand about the subsequences of corporal punishment and physical punishment

Objective: to understand the background of perceiving habit of using corporal punishment/physical punishment to disciplining children, what are the experience of parents on their childhood in relation to corporal punishment/physical punishment, do parents believe corporal punishment/physical punishment as a effective method of parenting, and do they aware about any negative outcomes of corporal punishment.

I. How did you learn to discipline the children through corporal punishment

My parents	School	Friends	Other
------------	--------	---------	-------

II. Do you believe that corporal punishment is a positive parenting method

Yes	No
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III. If yes reasons

IV. If not why

V. Do you know that corporal punishments/physical punishment bring some negative results?

Yes	No
-----	----

VI. If so, what are they

VII. Have your parents used corporal punishment to discipline you in your childhood

Yes	No
-----	----

VIII. If yes, what type of punishments?
.....

IX. Do you agree that, it was alright to use corporal punishments to discipline you?

Yes	No
-----	----

X. If yes, reasons
.....

XI. If not reasons
.....

Response	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is acceptable for parents and teachers to use corporal punishment for children					
It is acceptable for parents and teachers to scold seriously to children					
It is acceptable for teachers/parents to beat children in order to discipline them					