

Study: Nearly 45% of parents use physical discipline on kids

Reasoning and timeouts seen as a luxury that may not always be available in every situation

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Nearly 45 per cent of parents resorted to at least one form of corporal punishment like spanking or hitting the child with an object in the past year, a new study has found.

Close to 30 per cent of parents who use physical methods of discipline were found to do so frequently.

The study, which involved 747 parents, found that about eight in 10 parents used psychological meth-

ods of discipline, and almost all of them also used non-physical methods of discipline. As part of the study, 667 young adults were also polled on the disciplinary methods they experienced when growing up.

Published on Thursday, the study done in 2021 said psychological discipline referred to behaviour like shouting, yelling and insulting the child, while non-physical methods include reasoning and reward.

The Singapore Children's Society and Yale-NUS College jointly conducted the study to understand the prevalence of physical discipline

here, and the experiences of parents, caregivers and young adults. Most respondents were polled and a small number were interviewed for qualitative responses.

The study found about 28 per cent of parents said physical discipline was not effective, and about 43 per cent found it ineffective most of the time. Nearly 27 per cent said they considered physical methods unacceptable, and 49 per cent said they found physical methods unacceptable most of the time.

The children's society conducted two public surveys in 1994 and 2010 on whether various methods of physical punishment amounted to child abuse and neglect. There was a drop in the percentage of people who saw caning as abuse, from 27.9 per cent

in 1994 to 19.2 per cent in 2010.

When it came to locking a child in a room, 64.3 per cent of those polled in 1994 viewed it as abuse, compared with 51 per cent in 2010.

One thread that emerged from interviews with 20 parents in the latest study was that physical discipline was rarely an immediate response to children's behaviour. Instead, it was seen as a last resort.

A few parents justified the use of corporal punishment based on their childhood experiences, while others cited the authorities' use of judicial caning as justification.

Parents also said mood and stress levels were strong influences that may lead to impulsive physical discipline, as they acted out of anger and frustration. Non-physical methods

like reasoning and timeouts were seen as a luxury that may not always be available in every situation.

The study found that 40.6 per cent of parents of pre-schoolers were most likely to use physical discipline. Parents of infants were the next most likely, at 31.3 per cent, while parents of primary school-children – at 29.3 per cent – were slightly less likely to do so.

In Singapore, physical discipline is not illegal, except in pre-schools.

Young adults who were polled said they experienced lasting negative effects after being physically disciplined in their childhood.

These included strained parent-child relationships, challenges in managing emotions, and poorer social-emotional well-being.

One young adult said he needed therapy and his relationship with his parents remains strained. He said: "It's not that I hate my parents a lot. It's more about how they can't do anything to make me love them any more. The best they can do is to just keep a distance."

Singapore Children's Society chief executive Ang Boon Min said: "Parental disciplinary practices, in particular, physical discipline, have

always been a contentious issue in Singapore... Yet, no clear view has been established on parents' and caregivers' acceptance and use of this method, nor has the point of view been sought from those at the receiving end.

"Hence, it is important for us to have a clearer understanding of these practices. This local study, backed by data, contextualises such practices in our culture."

The study recommended more support for parents so they can better regulate their emotions. Parents need to have more knowledge of brain science to understand how their child develops over the years and tailor their disciplinary methods accordingly, it added.

Ms Vivyan Chee, deputy director of Singapore Children's Society unit Oasis for Minds Services, said changing mindsets can be a challenge due to intergenerational and internalised experiences. She said: "I feel it would make a difference if people can learn to pause between the trigger and their response, and think about what they want to do next."

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