

Teen boys physically punished twice as often as girls: Study

Findings reflect common belief that boys require more forceful methods of discipline

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Adolescent boys were physically punished by their fathers twice as often as girls of the same age, reflecting a common belief that boys require more forceful methods of discipline to correct misbehaviour, according to a new study.

The study also found that mothers who were physically punished as children were more likely to view such punishment favourably, said Germaine Tng, a research fellow from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) who was the study's main researcher.

These mothers might feel that physical punishment could spur the child to do better in their studies, prevent them from becoming spoilt, or is simply a "normal" part of parenting. Such beliefs drove the mothers to use physical discipline.

The study, which was published in academic journal *Acta Psychologica* on June 16, examined 13-year-olds and analysed data from 542 mother-child pairs from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) study.

GUSTO is Singapore's largest pre-birth cohort study, tracking children over time to understand how conditions during pregnancy and early childhood affect the mothers' and children's health and development.

Tng said the study plugs a gap in local research about corporal punishment during early adolescence, a critical window when children experience significant social and emotional development, and start asserting their independence from their parents.

Being physically punished during this period, she said, may undermine the child's growing need for autonomy, erode the trust and bond between the parent and



The study is said to plug a gap in local research about corporal punishment during early adolescence, a critical window when children experience significant social and emotional development. PHOTO: ST FILE

child, and increase the child's risk of psychological difficulties.

She added that research done among Asian, American and European populations has linked physical punishment during adolescence to increased depressive and anxiety symptoms, and aggression.

The study was done by nine researchers from NTU, the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and other agencies, such as KK Women's and Children's Hospital and the A*STAR Institute for Human Development and Potential.

Its key findings include:

- About half, or 49 per cent, of

teens were severely punished physically in the past year.

Severe physical punishment included being hit with a fist, slapped on the face, or pinched.

- Slightly over half, or 53 per cent, of teens were physically punished in the past year. The punishments included being hit on their palm or buttock with a hard object, such as a cane, belt or another hard object.
- The two most common emotions teens felt after being hit were anger and hurt.
- About half of the adolescents said their parents lacked control of their emotions while disciplining them, while about a third said their parents felt

guilty after the episode.

- Boys were physically disciplined twice as often as girls, particularly by their fathers.

While it seems intuitive that children would feel hurt and anger when they are physically punished, the key issue is how such emotions affect the parent-child relationship and what the child learns, Tng said.

One of the study's main aims was to understand why corporal punishment is passed down across generations.

The researchers found that mothers who were physically punished as children did not automat-

ically use the same methods of discipline. Rather, what mattered was how those experiences shaped the beliefs they carried into parenthood.

Mothers who believe, for instance, that children would be spoilt without physical discipline are more likely to have a positive view of such methods and use them.

The study did not find any meaningful differences in the prevalence or frequency of corporal punishment across income groups.

Tng said: "While physical punishment is sometimes thought to be more common in lower-income households, often linked to greater financial stress or fewer resources for alternative disciplinary strategies, our findings suggest that financial stress alone does not appear to be the main driver of these practices.

"Instead, the consistency of corporal punishment habits across income groups points to the role of parents' shared cultural norms about how children should be corrected, often shaped by how they themselves were raised."

Tng said deep-rooted beliefs about physical punishment may override parents' unease or guilt about causing their child pain and fear. This is despite slightly over a third of the teens saying their parents felt guilty after disciplining them, she noted.

"In many Asian families, inculcating proper conduct in children is viewed as a core parental responsibility, and a child's behaviour and achievements are often seen as a reflection of the parent's competence, or even the family's social standing.

"The sense that a child's conduct is effectively the parents' report card can sustain the use of physical punishment, even when parents personally feel ambivalent about it," she said.

Tng said that changing parents' behaviour requires addressing the beliefs that underpin corporal punishment and exploring alternative ways of teaching the child, rather than simply telling parents to stop hitting their children.

Regarding boys receiving physical punishment more often than girls, Tng said this may reflect gender norms that boys are less sensitive to physical pain and need "tough love".

But repeated physical punishment can unintentionally send a signal that physical force is an acceptable way to assert authority or manage conflict.

Commenting on the study, Andrea Chan, group head of TOUCH Counselling and Psychological Services, said girls are typically seen as more compliant and more sensitive to physical pain, making forceful correction appear more harmful and less necessary.

Chan, who is not involved in the study, added that many parents feel pressure to raise sons to be future providers and protectors.

She said: "When a boy acts out, displays rude behaviour, or doesn't pay attention, parents often fear that he won't grow up right. This can lead them to resort to physical punishment as a quick, corrective measure to fix their behaviour early."

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DEEP-ROOTED BELIEFS

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