Commentary: Violent child disciplinary practices in low- and middle-income households

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Child discipline as exercised by caregivers is a universal aspect of child rearing in all cultures. It can be thought of as deliberate actions on the part of caregivers designed to teach children self-control and acceptable behaviour. Whereas the need for child discipline is generally recognized, the application of violent psychological and physical disciplinary practices is a matter of considerable discussion and debate. Definitions of child maltreatment differ significantly between countries and cultures. To compound this problem, few data are available to monitor how parents and other caregivers discipline children, by means of violent as well as non-violent methods, especially in low- and middle-income countries. This makes it difficult to describe the nature of child disciplinary practices, their extent and their consequences. It also makes it difficult to develop evidence-based strategies that can mitigate any harmful practices. The data on which the analyses of the report published in this issue of the IJE are based provide one of the few resources available to the field of child protection to help develop a more complete understanding of the prevalence of child disciplinary practices in a cross-national context.

Part of the mandate of United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), is to advocate for the protection of children’s rights, including rights with respect to practices by caregivers. Although UNICEF has been collecting household data since the mid-1990s, data on violent and non-violent child disciplinary practices has not always been part of that data collection effort. To address the need for more specific data on this issue, UNICEF included an optional module on child discipline during the third round of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), which was completed in 33 of over 50 countries in the survey. This effort made MICS the most comprehensive effort to collect data on child disciplinary practices from low- and middle-income countries. The MICS child discipline module is a modified version of the Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC).2 The CTS-PC and its earlier version (CTS1) have an extensive history of use, including hundreds of peer-reviewed articles. Several of these studies have been conducted on the use of the measure in countries outside the USA, validating its use in other contexts and across multiple types of informants (i.e. both children and caregivers).3–5 The child discipline module in the MICS survey measured both violent and non-violent disciplinary methods employed by all caregivers in a household towards one randomly selected child 2–14 years of age. Violent
disciplinary methods included forms of psychological aggression and corporal (or physical) punishment. The questionnaire also examined mothers’ or primary caregivers’ attitudes towards the need for physical punishment. The first report to present that data concurrently for all countries, including two Demographic and Health Surveys countries implementing the same questionnaire (United States Agency for International Development) covered prevalence of various forms of violent and non-violent child discipline, as well as risk and protective factors ranging from family wealth to education of caregivers to positive parenting practices. Given the inclusion of risk and protective factors in the MICS (e.g. age, sex, wealth, education, child and maternal health), antecedents and consequences of violent child discipline can begin to be sorted out once longitudinal data on the matter are available beginning with the fourth round of MICS (2009–11). The longitudinal data will provide the information necessary to understand the natural course of the problem, as well as to effectively guide prevention policies and future interventions. The exhaustive nature of the complete MICS data set makes it useful yet tremendously complex.

The authors of the article in this *IJE* issue do an exceptional job of clearly and succinctly summing up what are truly key issues across such a large amount of information from the MICS data set, and effectively shed light on several factors contributing to the use of violent discipline. By combining African countries into one group, countries from the CEE/CIS (Central and Eastern Europe/ Commonwealth of Independent States) into another (labelled ‘transitional countries’ by the authors), and the remaining countries into a final category, the authors were able to effectively capture regional differences, at least for the African and CEE/CIS regions. Overall across the African countries there were the highest prevalences of attitude that physical punishment is necessary, including psychological violence, moderate physical violence and severe physical violence. Concomitantly, the prevalences were the lowest for all of these variables across the ‘transitional countries’ of the CEE/CIS. On the other hand, the combined data for ‘all remaining countries’ are not representative of a single region, and so interpretation of those results is questionable. Although other countries which are part of North Africa and The Middle East (UNICEF groups the two into one region) were not part of the analyses in the article in this issue of the *IJE,* it is noteworthy that a similarly high level of violence was found with belief in physical violence, psychological violence and severe physical violence in Syria and Yemen. Additionally, whereas the report published in this *IJE* issue does not use the definition of severe physical discipline put forth by the original CTS-PC short form, where there are only two and not three indicators of severe physical child discipline [i.e. hit or slapped him/her on the face, head or ears; beat him/her up with an implement (hit over and over as hard as one could)], the results are very similar across analyses of severe physical discipline in the current study and analyses of severe physical discipline in the UNICEF report which follows the customary scoring procedure.

In addition to the overall analyses, several risk factors for increased prevalence of violent child discipline are highlighted in the article in this *IJE* issue, including family wealth, child gender and number of household members. It is important to note that the MICS child discipline questionnaire measured violent and non-violent practices employed by all caregivers in a household towards one randomly selected child. As a result, the inclusion of all caregivers in the home inherently increases prevalence. This is not a problem per se, as violence by any and all caretakers in the home is the indicator of choice by UNICEF, and surely of importance to the well-being of children. Nonetheless, it comes to bear when we consider that higher prevalence occurs with risk factors such as a higher number of household members, as was the case in both the article in the current issue as well as in ‘some’ (less than half) within-country analyses in the UNICEF report. However, we also analysed the association between the number of children in the home and prevalence of violent discipline and found a similar finding, whereby more children were associated with higher prevalence. Interestingly, the authors of the article in this journal make several useful points with respect to this issue. For example, there are other factors which may be behind the association, such as frequent change in family composition or the presence of distant relatives or unrelated adults. The authors of the current study were also creative in their approach in looking comprehensively at interactions, such as that poverty had a moderating effect on results. It is clear that further multivariate analyses would help to highlight the intricate nature and interactive effects of various risk and protective factors on child disciplinary practices.

What can be said from the child discipline analyses that have been conducted to date is that there is widespread use of violent discipline cross-nationally, making it common and, to a certain extent, appears to be accepted across the world. Additionally, psychological and physical discipline greatly overlap, as analysed in the UNICEF report. As a result, we need to combat all forms of violence in the home. Finally, whereas a median of only 27% of parents actually condone the use of physical punishment as reported in the UNICEF report on child discipline, over twice that amount engage in the use of physical punishment (62%; author’s analysis of the compiled data set used for the UNICEF report). The authors of the article in this *IJE* issue state that addressing attitudes could help, and would in a small percentage of cases. However, caregivers are engaging in physical violence not because they believe in it, but perhaps because
they do not know a different way to parent—a focus for preventive efforts.

As stated earlier, there is a lack of social consensus as to what constitutes unacceptable forms of caregiving. Nonetheless, children, in large part because of their vulnerability, need to be provided special care and protection against all levels of violence. Protection is especially necessary within the home, where most violence against children takes place. As a result, countries have a great need for quality data on child discipline in the home. The data provided by UNICEF’s MICS are an important source of information for policy-makers, health and social service practitioners, researchers and the general public. The data have clear and important country-specific and global policy implications for preventing violence against children. Data on the nature and prevalence of child disciplinary practices worldwide, as presented in the article in this issue of the IJE, are needed to establish baselines, inform the development of more effective parenting strategies and monitor progress. The results of such data guide the development and improvement of educational campaigns, laws, regulations and services, and are an inherent part of the strategy to contribute to the improvement of children’s well-being.

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**References**


