Physical Punishment in Israeli Arab Families:
Attitudes and Behavior

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Abstract

The attitude to the use of physical punishment and its actual use as reported by Israeli Arab parents and their children is examined. Participants were both parents and one child in each of 50 Christian Arab families. The three questionnaires developed for this research are based on in-depth interviews conducted with 10 non-participant parents in the final study. The questionnaires are: Attitudes to Physical Punishment, Physical Punishment, and Children's Misbehavior. The main results show no difference in family members' attitude to the use physical punishment. Their mean scores indicate an ambivalent acceptance of this practice, but the great majority of the subjects report its use with some frequency. More than half the mothers and the children report the use of physical punishment at least 1-2 times a week. Mothers' and fathers' attitudes were found highly correlated and significant predictors of such behavior. By all three groups' accounts, mothers much more than fathers use physical punishment, while it is the fathers whom the children fear the most. Also, parents' most frequent reaction to all seven different categories of children's misbehavior is verbal violence. Their second most frequent reported reaction is physical punishment. All results are discussed in the context of Israeli-Arab culture, the social situation model, and the relevant research.

Adults' violence against children for the purpose of socializing them is probably as old as human history. Throughout, examples abound of children who were tortured, starved, and forced to labor in order to "teach them lessons" for life (Williams, 1976). From a social perspective, the use of

physical punishment was associated with the need to teach children to be obedient; and if obedience is an essential component of proper education, nothing is more effective than physical punishment to achieve that end. For centuries societies maintained the norm and often encouraged the use of physical punishment as an effective educational mean. Some theoreticians (e.g., Greven, 1991; Hyles, 1972; Straus, 1994) maintain that the use of corporal punishment has theological roots. In the major religions, they maintain, God demands of Man total obedience as a father does of his children, and the biblical texts call upon parents likewise to require their children to obey them and God. The consequence of the absence of such obedience is embedded in the idea of Hell and eternal suffering. The child who is so taught learns the painful cost of noncompliance, and the reward for obeying authority is ensconced in the idea of Heaven. Parents can keep their children away from Hell by teaching them unconditional obedience initially to themselves and ultimately to God. "He who hates his son spares the rod" (Proverbs 13:24), reads the Bible.

Given the above, no wonder that until very recently corporal punishment by parents was an accepted and legally sanctioned practice. Physical punishment of children became questionable, however, when children's rights arose as an issue and the connection between physical discipline and child abuse began to emerge and be addressed.

Physical discipline and child abuse

Most legal definitions of child abuse and neglect are general. In the USA, Public Law 92-247 describes them as follows: "*the physical and mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare, under the circumstances which indicate that the child's health and welfare are harmed or threatened thereby, as determined in accordance with*

regulations prescribed by the Secretary [of HEW]”. In Israel, Amendment # 26 (Provision 1), titled “Abusing minors and the helpless” (State of Israel, 1989), defines abuse as “*An act of physical, sexual or emotional maltreatment of a helpless person by a person responsible for that person's welfare*”. Although these and other similar definitions should have set the guidelines for a clear distinction between child abuse and physical discipline, decades of professional discussions failed to do so. The difficulty of the task is reflected in the fact that different researchers define both of these concepts differently (e.g., Greven, 1991; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Widom (1989), for example, defined physical abuse as "cruelty to children", while Straus and Gelles (1990) described physical abuse as "very severe violence" and physical discipline as "minor violence". Although using different terminology, researchers seem to agree that abuse involves lasting physical or mental injury to the child while physical disciple is the use of physical punishment that does not result in either. The central question, however, of where on this continuum discipline becomes abuse still remains open. Whipple and Richey (1997) attempted to answer it through a three-dimensional model. While this certainly added to the appreciation of the complexity of the issue these authors still concluded that the distinction "remains a challenge" (p. 435). The operational differentiation between the two constructs seems so elusive that what best applies is a remark by a Supreme Court judge with regard to pornography, namely that although he could not define it, he did recognize it when he saw it.

For the purpose of the present study, physical punishment is defined as intentional infliction of physical pain or discomfort on the child for the purpose of discipline. The punishment is in response to the child's misconduct and it includes actions such as grabbing, shoving, spanking, and slapping, but not those that cause injury or have any sexual overtones. We

are aware that the exclusion of caused injury from the definition of physical punishment is more than problematic. Many would argue, rightly, that all forms of physical punishment cause lasting harm. Many studies indeed show that any intentional infliction of physical pain on children is damaging, but alas not always visible or immediately noticeable (e.g., Greven, 1992; Farrington, 1995; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; Straus, 1994; Toth, Manly & Cicchetti, 1992). The above definition, like all others, still closely resembles that of violence, that is, the use of force to hurt, and it leaves the distinction between the two constructs blurred. Yet despite this common denominator in the two, societal attitudes to them differ. While physical punishment is commonly accepted and practiced, violence against children is often condemned (Greven, 1992; Straus, 1994).

Parental attitudes and practice of physical punishment

According to Straus (1994), some voices censuring the use of extreme violence against children were raised as early as in the 17th century. By the turn of the 20th century the degree of the shared Normative Beliefs (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977) reached the critical point at which the use of force against children became recognized as a social problem. Even then, however, the critics' intention was not to totally halt all forms of physical punishment but only to reduce its brutality. A sort of a turning point toward changing the social attitude to corporal punishment occurred in 1979, when Sweden became the first country to outlaw its use altogether. Other Western countries soon followed suit. The formal decrees notwithstanding, physical punishment is still widely used and accepted (e.g., Graziano & Namaste, 1990; Straus, 1994; Straus & Kantor, 1991). The National Family Violence Surveys of 1975 and of 1985 revealed that over 90% of American parents still use corporal punishment as a discipline technique. The great majority of parents believe that in moderation at least, hitting children is "sometimes

necessary" and it has few if any negative effects (Straus, 1991; 1994). These attitudes seem to cross national and cultural boundaries.

<u>The Arab Family</u>

The Israeli Arab minority (19% of the population) is religiously a heterogeneous group (80% are Muslims, 16% Christians, and 4% Druze). Yet despite these and other related differences (see Lustick, 1980) the three religious groups share common sociological characteristics. They differ from the Jewish majority in religion, language, and nationality. They are also a non-assimilating minority and have limited access to the country's opportunity infrastructure. In his analysis of Arab families' lifestyles Al-Haj (1989) noted that the typical Arab family, although affected by the process of modernization, maintains some significant characteristics of its traditions.

The family unit is hierarchic and patriarchal. Social norms prescribe different gender roles for the parents. The father bears the major social and economic responsibilities while the mother's domain is the house and the children. Parents are not expected to be their children's friends. They are expected to exert authority and demand respect. Love and affection are lavished on the children when they are infants but as they grow the parents, especially the father, adopt a tougher attitude, particularly to daughters. They expect their children to unconditionally obey, comply with, and fulfill their demands and expectations. When the need arise to ensure discipline and obedience, parents may resort to physical punishment (Haj-Yahaia, 2000). But while enhancing the children's obedience is the immediate and potentially noticeable intention of physical punishment, another important side effect of it is the reinforcement of the authoritarian family and social structure (Mari, 1974). Given the collective orientation of the Arab community and the importance attributed to its hierarchic structure and the family's, any adult member of the immediate family in the *hamula* is

obviously permitted to strike a child, and a teacher at school to use corporal punishment.

Physical punishment in Israel and the Arab family

The statistics on child abuse are general and given in absolute numbers. According to Israeli's Annual Statistics' report the number of criminal charges against persons abusing children increased by 68% from 1995 t0 2001. Based on self-report, in Haj-Yahia and Noursi's (1998) singular study of the subject, Arab adolescents related that 18% of their fathers, 16% of their mothers, and 13% of their brothers had physically attacked them with an instrument for a few minutes without interruption in the course of the previous 12 months. In addition, 38%, 35%, and 37% of the subjects reported that in that time span they had been subjected to "mild" violence by their fathers, mothers, and brothers, respectively. During the same period 18%, 17%, and 26% of the subjects reported being subjected, at least once, to "severe" violence by their fathers, mothers, and brothers, respectively. Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem, and Shah (1998) examined Kuwaiti parents' attitudes to physical punishment and likewise found that over 86% of them supported its regular use for rearing children. This is indeed a unique study. We could find no other and none in Israel. Accordingly, in the study reported here we investigated Israeli Arab parents' and children's attitudes to physical punishment and examined its actual use.

METHOD

Subjects

Fifty Christian Arab families living in two medium-size villages in northern Israel took part in the present study. . They were recruited through personal

contact by the second author. Over 90% of the families that were contacted and asked to participate in the study agreed to do so. A family's participation depended on the agreement of both parents and one of their children to respond to the study's extensive questionnaires. The participating families had at least two children (range of 2-5; $\underline{X}$=3.3) and their self-reported monthly income was normally distributed, but averaged almost 20% below the national income. The fathers' average age 38.8 years (range 32-47) and the mothers' 35.6 years (range 29-41). Six percent of the fathers and 10% of the mothers had less than 12 years' formal education, and 30% of the fathers and 16% of the mothers had an academic degree. Ninety-eight percent of the fathers reported earning an income (44% as self-employed) and 58% of the mothers reported having a monthly income. Average age of the children (25 boys and 25 girls) was 9.2 years (range 8-11); 6% of them were 2nd grade students, 46% were 3rd graders, 28% were 4th graders, and 20% were 5th grade students.

Instrument and Procedure

To construct the questionnaires for the study, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with parents (10 mothers and 10 fathers) in families compatible with those that were to take part in the study. The purpose was to extract contents and specific examples for the questionnaire items. Those who volunteered were informed of the purpose of meeting ("to learn about parents' use of disciplinary methods with their children") and were asked general and specific questions about their attitude to and actual use of physical punishment. The interviews, which lasted for 1.5-2 hours, were transcribed and content-analyzed. The results of the content analysis revealed three content-domains and were the basis for three corresponding

questionnaires; Attitude to Physical Punishment (APP), Physical Punishment (PP), and Children's Misbehavior (CM). The APP questionnaire consisted of 24 items such as "Parents have the right to physically punish their children", "Parents who never use physical punishment with their children neglect their parental responsibilities", and "Physical punishment is not a form of violence". Subjects were ask to rank their "degree of agreement with each of the statements on a scale of 5 (1- strong disagreement; 5 - total agreement)". Alpha reliability coefficients for the APP scale for the children, the mothers, and the fathers were .83, .87, and .89, respectively. A respondent's score on the APP scale was the mean of the items' ranks. The higher the score, the more favorable was the attitude to physical punishment. The PP questionnaire served to study the frequency (on a scale of 5; 1 - never, 5 - almost always) at which a parent used physical punishment (See Table 1). It consisted of five multiple-choice questions: (1) How often? (2) Who uses more physical punishment? (3) Whom does the child fear more? (4) Does the punishing parent aim to cause the child pain? (5) Does the punishing parent feels sorry afterwards?

The CM questionnaire likewise reflected the results of the content analysis of the parents' interviews, which revealed the following seven categories of children's misbehavior: (1) physical violence; (2) verbal violence; (3) disobedience; (4) performing forbidden acts; (5) rebellious behavior; (6) angering parents; (7) failing at school. In the CM questionnaire, each misbehavior category consisted of four items, each referring to a children's typical misbehavior. Examples are: "When the child hits his/her siblings"; "When the child plays dangerously"; "When the child does not obeying an adult's instruction"; "When a child curses". The parents mentioned most of the items (20), but to increase the content validity of some domains we added items to ensure four items per behavioral category. Respondents were asked to rank on a scale of 5 (1 - never, 5 - always) the

frequency of using one of four types of reactions: physical punishment; verbal violence such as insults or cursing; talk in the form of discussion and explanation; and no reaction. Alpha reliability coefficients for the physical punishment scale for the children, the mothers, and the fathers were .91, .94, and .91 respectively; for the verbal violence .87, .91, and .86 respectively; for the talk scale .89, .90, and .92 respectively; and for the no reaction scale .63, .60, and .70 respectively. The scores on these scales were the mean of the respective items' frequency rankings. The higher the score, the more frequent was the use of that response.

The children's questionnaires were of exactly the same content as their parents'. However, where necessary the wordings were slightly simplified to match the children's developmental stage. In general, we expected the results to show that children's attitudes to physical punishment were less favorable than were their parents' that they would report more use of physical punishment than their parents, and that parents' attitudes and gender were predictive of their use of physical punishment.

RESULTS

Attitude and behavior

Contrary to our expectation, analysis of the APP results revealed no difference in family members' attitudes to the use physical punishment. The children's, the mothers' and the fathers' mean scores of almost 3 ("partially agree") on a scale of 5 ($\underline{X}$=2.89, SD=0.37; $\underline{X}$=2.92, SD= 0.43; $\underline{X}$=2.83, SD=0.44, respectively) indicated an ambivalent attitude to the use of corporal punishment. Mothers' and fathers' attitudes were found, as expected, to be highly correlated (r=0.78;p<0.01 and r=60;p<0.01, respectively) and significant predictors (â=0.74<0.01; â=0.61<0.01, respectively – see Table 1) of their report of the frequency of using physical punishment.

Table 1

Regression analysis of physical punishment as reported by children, mothers, and fathers, on children's characteristics and parents' education and attitudes.

Variables	Physical punishment (PP)								
	Child's report			Mother's report			Father's report		
	B	SE	â	B	SE	â	B	SE	â
Child gender [a]	-.34	.13	-.31***	.05	.15	.04	-.03	.11	-.03
Birth order	-.06	.07	-.10	-.03	.09	-.04	.04	.06	.07
Mother education	-.08	.06	.20	.13	.08	.25	-.01	.06	-.02
Father education	-.01	.05	.01	-.01	.06	-.01	-.02	.04	-.06
Mother attitudes	.85	.16	.65***	1.15	.19	.74***	.25	.14	.21
Father attitudes	.26	.16	.20	.05	.19	.03	.71	.14	.61***
R^2	.48			.46			.53		
$F_{(43,6)}$	6.71***			6.01***			8.08***		

* $p<.075$; ** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$

[a] girls – 1, boys - 0

The other independent variables (child's gender, birth order, and parents' own level of education) were found to have no significant effect on the frequency of PP. According to the children's account, however, the attitude of the mother (only), along with child's gender, were significant predictors of such behavior (â=0.65<0.01; â=0.-0.31<0.01, respectively – see Table 1). Boys, according to the children, were physically punished more than girls.

PP – who and how often

By the account of all three groups, mothers much more than fathers used physical punishment ($\div^2_{(4)}$=23.56), while it was the fathers whom the children feared more ($\div^2_{(4)}$=34.26; see Table 2). The degree of agreement among the three groups of respondents in this regard is noteworthy. Just over half the respondents in each group reported that the mothers used physical punishment more than the fathers, yet over 80%(!) related that the children feared their father more than their mother. However, Friedman's $\div^2$ test revealed a significant difference ($\div^2_{(4)}$=18.77;p<.001) in the three groups' responses to the "frequency question" (see Table 2). While 52% of the children reported being physically punished at least 1-2 times a week, 42% of the mothers and only 14% of the fathers reported such frequency. In fact, over 80% of the fathers reported that they used PP less than once or twice a month.

Table 2

Distribution of physical punishment characteristics as perceived by the child.

Variable	Categories		Child	Mother	Father	Friedman $\div^2$
Frequency of PP (per week)	3 or more times	N	4	4	0	18.77***
		%	8.0	8.0	0.0	
	1 – 2 times	N	22	17	7	
		%	44.0	34.0	14.0	
	less than 1 time	N	24	29	43	
		%	48.0	58.0	86.0	
Who uses PP more	father	N	11	12	11	23.56***
		%	22.0	24.0	22.0	
	mother	N	29	26	28	
		%	58.0	52.0	56.0	

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Categories			Child	Mother	Father	Friedman $\div^2$
	both	N		10	24	11	
		%		20.0	24.0	22.0	
Whom does the child fear more	father	N		40	42	43	34.26***
		%		80.0	84.0	86.0	
	mother	N		6	3	1	
		%		12.0	6.0	2.0	
	both	N		4	5	6	
		%		8.0	10.0	12.0	
Recency of PP	this week	N		29	27	13	9.70**
		%		58.0	54.0	26.0	
	last month	N		8	8	15	
		%		16.0	16.0	30.0	
	more than a	N		13	15	22	
	month ago	%		26.0	30.0	44.0	
Feel sorry after PP	always	N		13	32	20	21.28***
		%		26.0	64.0	40.0	
	frequently	N		31	17	22	
		%		62.0	34.0	44.0	
	sometimes	N		5	1	7	
		%		10.0	2.0	14.0	
	rarely	N		1	0	0	
		%		2.0	0.0	0.0	
	never	N		0	0	1	
		%		0.0	0.0	2.0	
Try to cause pain	always	N		0	1	0	6.54*
		%		0.0	2.0	0.0	
	frequently	N		0	0	0	
		%		0.0	0.0	0.0	

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Categories		Child	Mother	Father	Friedman $\div^2$
	sometimes	N	3	10	9	
		%	6.0	20.0	18.0	
	Rarely	N	10	10	13	
		%	20.0	20.0	26.0	
	never	N	37	29	28	
		%	74.0	58.0	56.0	
PP boys more than	always	N	0	0	0	2.46
girls		%	0.0	0.0	0.0	
	frequently	N	3	3	2	
		%	6.0	6.0	4.0	
	sometimes	N	10	7	8	
		%	20.0	14.0	16.0	
	rarely	N	4	3	3	
		%	8.0	6.0	6.0	
	never	N	33	37	37	
		%	66.0	74.0	74.0	

The large difference between the children's and the fathers' reported frequency of physical punishment reflects the fact that the children's report relates to both parents while the fathers' (and the mothers') only to themselves. To obtain a further indication of the "frequency" reports' reliability we asked a "recency question". The results in general (see Table 2) show that physical punishment had been used recently ("last week" and "last month") more frequently than would be expected from the responses to the "frequency question". While only 14% of the fathers indicated that they used PP at least 1-2 times a week, almost twice as many fathers (26%) reported that they had physically punished their child in the previous week. The same comparison with the mothers' and the children's reports also shows a gap of 12% and 6% respectively, and in the same direction. That is,

54% of the mothers indicated that they had physically punished their child during the previous week and 58% of the children reported being so punished.

Friedman's $\div^2$ test also showed significant group differences in their reports on how frequently the punishing parent "tries to cause pain" to the child ($\div^2_{(8)}$=6.54; <0.05) and how frequently the parent "feels sorry" ($\div^2_{(8)}$=21.28; <0.01). In general, none of the groups reported high frequency ("always" and "rarely") of trying to cause pain. The difference was in the lower categories. Yet it is interesting to note that the children seemed to perceive the punishing parent as less often trying to cause pain than both parents' reported (see Table 2). But as for feeling sorry afterwards, the children perceived their parents as less remorseful than the both parents reported feeling. While two thirds of the mothers and 40% of the fathers reported "always" feeling sorry for physically punishing the child, only quarter of the children perceived their parents as feeling so (see Table 2).

<u>Children's misbehavior and parents' reactions</u>

The results of MANOVA and post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons (see Table 3) show that for all misbehavior categories except angering parents the frequency ranking of the four types of parents' reactions was the same for children, mothers, and fathers. The children and their mothers agreed as to the frequency of physical punishment as a reaction to every one of the seven categories of misbehavior. But the children reported significantly more use of physical punishment in six of the seven misbehavior categories than their fathers.

Table 3

Means and standard deviations of four types of parents' reactions to seven types of child misbehaviors, as perceived by child, mother, and father.

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Parents' reaction	Child (1) M (SD)	Mother (2) M (SD)	Father (3) M (SD)	Wilks' Lambda	Bonferroni pairwise comparisons

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to physical violence

Physical punishment (1) (RPP)	2.35 (.56)	2.36 (.63)	2.1 (.54)	.74***	1,2>3
Verbal abuse (2) (VA)	3.67 (.82)	3.70 (.79)	3.72 (.76)	.99	
Discussion (3) (DIS)	3.00 (.58)	2.99 (.63)	3.10 (.73)	.97	
No response (4) (NR)	1.00 (.12)	1.00 (.13)	1.01 (.26)	.98	

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Wilks' Lambda	.02**	.03**	.03**
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2>3>1>4	2>3>1>4	2>3>1>4

to disobedience

Physical punishment (1) (RPP)	2.18 (.58)	2.16 (.72)	1.94 (.48)	.81**	1>3
Verbal abuse (2) (VA)	3.63 (.69)	3.56 (.72)	3.41 (.58)	.86*	1>3
Discussion (3) (DIS)	3.17 (.73)	3.40 (.61)	3.12 (.82)	.88	
No response (4) (NR)	1.05 (.14)	1.03 (.11)	1.15 (.23)	.78**	2<1,3

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Wilks' Lambda	.02***	.02***	.03***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4

to forbidden behavior

Physical punishment (1) (RPP)	2.92 (.97)	2.73 (.91)	2.47 (.96)	.76***	1>3
Verbal abuse (2) (VA)	4.26 (.67)	4.24 (.85)	3.93 (.79)	.81**	1,2<3
Discussion (3) (DIS)	2.57 (.79)	2.85 (.95)	2.47 (.95)	.88	
No response (4) (NR)	1.05 (.25)	1.02 (.10)	1.14 (.23)	.87*	3<2

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Wilks' Lambda	.04***	.04***	.08***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2>1,3>4	2>1,3>4	2>1,3>4

to rebellious behavior

Physical punishment (1)	(RPP)	3.31	(.78)	3.17	(.88)	2.97	(.80)	.81** 1>3
Verbal abuse (2)	(VA)	4.23	(.67)	4.19	(.85)	4.15	(.79)	.97
Discussion (3)	(DIS)	2.69	(.77)	2.80	(.86)	2.73	(.82)	.98
No response (4)	(NR)	1.00	(.00)	1.00	(.00)	1.01	(.05)	.98

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Wilks' Lambda	.02***	.03***	.03***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2>1>3>4	2>1,3>4	2,>1,3>4

to verbal violence

Physical punishment (1)	(RPP)	2.80	(.85)	2.69	(.93)	2.35	(.85)	.82** 1>3
Verbal abuse (2)	(VA)	4.22	(.77)	4.12	(.84)	3.96	(.89)	.92
Discussion (3)	(DIS)	2.42	(.83)	2.94	(.99)	2.59	(.98)	.80 2<1
No response (4)	(NR)	1.02	(.14)	1.00	(.00)	1.02	(.10)	.94

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Wilks' Lambda	.04***	.03***	.03***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2>1,3>4	2>1,3>4	2>1,3>4

to failure in school

Physical punishment (1)	(RPP)	2.16	(.91)	2.12	(.80)	2.00	(.93)	.97
Verbal abuse (2)	(VA)	3.98	(.97)	3.76	(.93)	3.78	(.97)	.97
Discussion (3)	(DIS)	3.70	(.95)	3.92	(.99)	3.62	(.92)	.94
No response (4)	(NR)	1.00	(.00)	1.00	(.00)	1.00	(.00)	---

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Wilks' Lambda	.03***	.03***	.04***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4

to angering parents

Physical punishment (1)	(RPP)	1.73	(.50)	1,70	(.57)	1.51	(.36)	.85* 1>3
Verbal abuse (2)	(VA)	2.85	(.78)	2.75	(.96)	2.35	(.69)	.73*** 1,2>3
Discussion (3)	(DIS)	3.14	(.76)	3.14	(.77)	2.55	(.82)	.70*** 1,2>3
No response (4)	(NR)	1.13	(.36)	1.32	(.54)	1.87	(.96)	.57*** 3<2<1

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Wilks' Lambda	.09***	.13***	.14***
Bonferroni pairwise comparison	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4	2,3>1>4;2>1

With statistical significance, the parents' most frequent reaction to all categories of misbehavior, by all accounts, was verbal violence. For the following categories -- angering the parents, disobedience, and failing at school -- talk was as frequent a reaction as verbal violence. Note that for all categories of misbehavior (except children's physical violence) the parents' second most frequently reported reaction was physical punishment. When the child was physically violent, parents tended to reciprocate with verbal violence significantly more often than with a talk reaction and that still significantly more frequently than with physical punishment.

DISCUSSION

Comparing the reports of fathers, mothers, and children, we found a surprising agreement between mothers and their children on almost all the dependent measures. Considering that mothers are with the children more than fathers, and carry the burden of socializing them, it was only to be expected that the fathers' accounts would be somewhat different. Nevertheless, by all accounts physical punishment is alive and well in the Israeli Arab families studied in this research. The present results show that despite the law prohibiting any use of physical force against children, 90% of them reported its use at some frequency. But more than half of the mothers and the children reported its use at a minimum frequency of 1-2 times a week. This, at least according to the parents' reports, was the case regardless of the child's gender, either parent's level of education, or the family's income level. These statistics are markedly higher than those reported by Haj-Yahia and Noursi (1998). The difference between the samples and the specific dependent variables of the two studies may easily explain the different results.

The high frequency at which physical punishment was used is, however, in some degree inconsistent with the ambivalent attitude both

parents expressed on physical punishment. Few parents (4.7% of the mothers and 6.2% of the fathers) expressed attitudes ranging from "agree" to "strongly agree" with the use of physical punishment. The attitudes of most parents' (79.5% of the mothers and 73.4% of the fathers) fell within the range from "disagree" to "partially agree". Still, the results show that in congruence with other studies (Coral-Verdigo, Frias-Armenta, Romero, & Munoz 1995; Scolar & Stein, 1995) parents' attitude significantly predicts their behavior. These seemingly contradicting results may be explained in more than one way. Obviously, variables of the child and the parent other than attitude exist that account for the parent's actual behavior. Straus (1994) suggested that factors of the child such as his/her age and temperament, the specific situation and context, the kind of offense committed, and the father-child relationship may have much to do with eliciting a reaction of physical punishment. In addition, the parent's own personal characteristics such as temperament, self-control, and his/her own parents' disciplinary ways may explain, beyond attitude, the use of physical punishment. The difference found here between the parents' attitudes and actual behavior may also reflects the difference in the speed at which changes occur in attitudes versus behavior. The law that made the use of force against children a criminal offense is barely a decade old in Israel. But ever since its enactment in 1993 there has much publicity about its importance. Posters, flyers, lectures, and TV programs tell of the harmful effect that physical punishment has on children. We assume that the modicum of ambivalence detected by this study in the parents' attitude to physical punishment is at least partially due to this campaign. For all that, the finding that the children did not object more strongly than their parents to the use of physical punishment may indicate the degree to which these children accept physical punishment as a norm and an inherent aspect of the parent-child relationship. These children's attitude may change as they grow

up and become parents themselves, but their childhood experience may make intergenerational transmission a likely reality.

In spite of the high frequency of the use of physical punishment, it is still not the first nor the most frequently used form of discipline. Comparing the four types of parents' reactions, we found that parents tended to retort most frequently to verbal violence with six of the seven types of children's misconduct. With the more serious types of misconduct ("forbidden behavior", "rebellious acts", and "verbal violence") the second most frequent reaction was physical punishment. To the other types of misconduct, parents' second most frequent reaction was talk. The general picture that emerges from all of this is that the lives of many of the children in our sample of families involved a violent aspect. Parents often cursed, insulted, and at times physically hurt their children. Curiously, although the mother more than the father was found to be violent with her children, by all accounts they feared the father much more. This may be because of the patriarchal structure of the Israeli Arab family. It may be because the fearful effect of physical punishment decreases with the high frequency at which it is used. But it may also be because fear is not so much a function of how often the child is physically punished as much as the force applied.

Because of the limited number of families studied here, one should be careful in generalizing its findings. Furthermore, because we could find no previous study of the similar sample and dependent variables carried out with Israeli Arab families, the meaning and significance of these findings on the social level are limited. We have no data to compare our results on a time scale, or with the Jewish majority. But like a snapshot, the present study's results portrays a somewhat difficult picture of the socializing practices in the sample of Arab families studied here. Still, the social situation model presented by Gelles and Cornell (1985) and partially supported by Dietz (2000) seems particularly relevant here. The model

postulates that the use of violence is differentially distributed within society and is dependent on the differences in stress levels and socializing practices. More specifically, the model assumes that violence within the family results from two main factors. One is structural stress. That is, a certain group of people (such as in the lower socioeconomic strata or a minority) experience more stress and frustration than other groups. The second factor relates to particular cultural norms, which may encourage the use of force and violence as a culturally legitimate means of response and control. As for the first factor, anyone who has the slightest knowledge of the situation in Israel recognizes the enormous social and economic stresses endured by the Arab minority. And as for the cultural norms, Haj-Yahaia, (1994) presented the case that the use of force as a disciplinary means is accepted and even expected of parents. The minority Arab society in Israel, for better or for worse, has been opening up to the influences of the majority Jewish society, and more modern norms and values in child rearing practices are gradually replacing the old traditions. We feel that the data presented here on the frequency of use of physical punishment are far better than they were in the not too distant past. It is for future studies, however, to evaluate the long-term effect of the campaign against the use of physical force with children.

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