



## Undermining Learning: Multi-Country Longitudinal Evidence on Corporal Punishment in Schools

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### SUMMARY

Globally the use of corporal punishment in schools is increasingly prohibited in law, yet in many countries its use continues, even where outlawed. Proponents argue that it is an effective and non-harmful means of instilling discipline, respect and obedience in children, while others point to a series of detrimental effects, including physical harm, poor academic performance, low class participation, school dropout and declining psychosocial well-being. Using longitudinal data from the Young Lives study,<sup>1</sup> this Brief summarizes research examining whether corporal punishment in schools is associated with lasting effects on children's cognitive development. The brief is part of the UNICEF Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children.

We find that corporal punishment in schools is highly prevalent, despite legal prohibition, with younger children, boys and poor children at greater risk. Corporal punishment experienced at age 8 is negatively associated with maths scores at age 12 in India, Peru and Viet Nam. The associated negative effect of corporal punishment on maths scores at age 12 is equivalent to the child's caregiver having between three and six years less education. Legislation, teacher training, addressing gender and social norms and greater international and national prioritisation of tackling violence affecting children, all play a part in building safe, supportive and enabling environments so that every child can flourish.

### INTRODUCTION

Twenty five years ago, Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) laid the foundations for the protection of children from 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child'. Despite near universal ratification of the UNCRC, only 8 per cent of children worldwide live in countries that have fully prohibited physical or corporal punishment in all settings,

leaving slightly more than 2 billion children without full legal protection (UNICEF, 2014: 110-111).

Although it is often legally prohibited, the use of physical violence for discipline is a well-established norm in many communities, both at home and at school. Many adults and children believe corporal punishment to be an effective disciplinary method, important in generating respect and in teaching children to become responsible adults. In some resource-poor settings, especially where education systems have undergone rapid expansion, the strain on teachers resulting from the limited human and physical resources may lead to a greater use of physical punishment in the classroom.

Nonetheless, many studies find detrimental effects of corporal punishment on children, such as physical harm, poor academic performance, low class participation, low self-worth and self-esteem, and avoidance and dropout from school for fear of being beaten. Many children do not feel that corporal punishment helps them learn or behave; rather, it leaves them scared, confused, sad, and possibly more inclined to become violent themselves due to the normalization of violence. However, the use of corporal punishment and whether it has lasting impacts on children's development remains contested. There are also limited longitudinal surveys, especially from Low- and Middle-Income Countries, which collect data on children's outcomes at a time point different to when they actually experienced the corporal punishment. This is important in understanding whether corporal punishment is associated with effects on children's learning. If the data are collected at around the same time as the punishment is inflicted, it is not possible to disentangle whether a child was beaten because of lower marks in exams or performed less well in tests because of being beaten. This brief is a non-technical summary of research (Ogando Portela and Pells, 2015) which uses longitudinal data from the Young Lives study to ask: **does corporal punishment**

**in schools help or hinder children's learning?**

### FINDINGS

*Corporal punishment is highly prevalent despite legal prohibition*

The widespread use of physical punishment in schools indicates ongoing challenges in enforcing existing laws and

#### What is corporal punishment?

*Corporal punishment is 'any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.' It includes smacking, slapping or spanking with a hand or implement, but at times can involve kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching and burning among other forms of violence.*

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006

<sup>1</sup> See box on page 2

### Young Lives and the UNICEF Multi-country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children

The Young Lives longitudinal study of childhood poverty follows 12,000 children over 15 years, across four countries: Ethiopia, India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru, and Viet Nam. Young Lives oversamples poor households and, though not nationally representative, broadly captures the diversity of children within each country in terms of geographic, ethnic and livelihood characteristics. The study has an Older Cohort born in 1994/95 and a Younger Cohort born in 2000/1, and collects both quantitative and qualitative data.

The analysis described in this Brief contributes to the UNICEF Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children (in Italy, Peru, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe), which is analysing how structural factors – the social, cultural, economic, legal, organizational, or policy responses – interact to affect everyday violence in children’s homes, schools and communities, in order to inform better national strategies for violence prevention.

regulations. Despite explicit legal prohibition of corporal punishment in Ethiopia, India and Viet Nam, and a statement of norms discouraging its use in schools in Peru, corporal punishment remains prevalent in all four countries. Among children aged 8, over half in Peru and Viet Nam, three quarters in Ethiopia, and over nine in ten in India reported witnessing a teacher administering corporal punishment in the last week (Figure 1).

#### Violence in school is a key reason why children dislike school

Corporal punishment is often part of a wider problem of violence in schools, which includes other forms of humiliating punishment from teachers, peer bullying and gender-based violence. Violence in schools, including physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers, is the foremost reason children aged 8 give for disliking school, ranging from 26 per cent in India, to 38 per cent in Peru, 42 per cent in Ethiopia and 53 per cent in Viet Nam.

#### Younger children, boys, and disadvantaged children are significantly more likely to experience corporal punishment

The likelihood of children experiencing corporal punishment is predicted by a combination of more ‘universal’ structural factors and norms related to age, gender and poverty

and more context-specific factors relating to conditions, pressures and norms in different settings.

Younger children are at greater risk of corporal punishment than adolescents, with the incidence of corporal punishment at age 8 more than double the rate reported by 15-year-olds, in all four countries (see Figure 1).

Boys are significantly more likely than girls to report experiencing corporal punishment across the four countries, ranging from 9 percentage points in Peru to 17 percentage points in Viet Nam.<sup>2</sup> This adds to the growing global picture of the greater vulnerability of boys to physical punishment. It is, however, important to note that girls are often at greater risk of other forms of humiliating treatment and sexual violence.

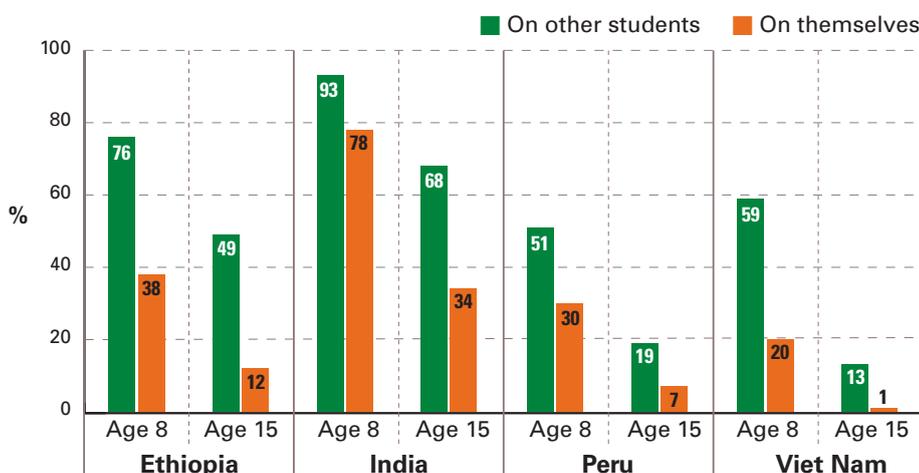
Children from more disadvantaged households (measured using household expenditure or caregiver’s level of education) are significantly more likely to be punished in India, Peru and Viet Nam compared to children living in more advantaged households in the same community. When comparing children in the same school, disadvantaged children in India and Viet Nam are significantly more likely to be punished than their more advantaged peers. There may be a number of reasons that

poor children experience more corporal punishment, including being punished for lacking school materials and frequent absence in order to undertake work for the household (Morrow and Singh, 2014: 11-13).

There does not appear to be any consistent pattern in the relationship between location (urban vs. rural) or type of school (public vs. private) and corporal punishment; rather, this depends on national and regional characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> All differences reported in this brief as significant are statistically significant at the 90 per cent confidence interval or higher.

**Figure 1 - Children’s self-reports of teachers’ use of physical punishment in the past week at ages 8 and 15 (2009)**



In Ethiopia and Viet Nam, children in urban areas report experiencing more corporal punishment, with the reverse true in India and Peru. In Ethiopia, India and Peru children in government (public) schools were most likely to experience corporal punishment, but results were only significant in Peru.

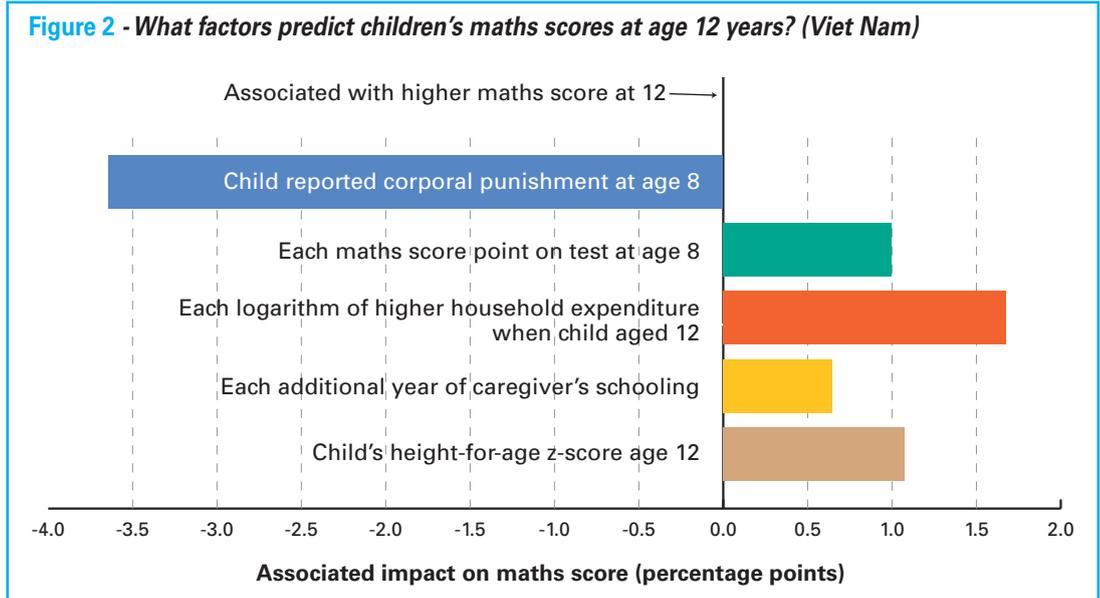
*Corporal punishment is associated with poorer cognitive development outcomes*

We find evidence that corporal punishment is linked with poorer test scores. At age 8 corporal punishment is negatively associated with children’s maths scores, in all four countries, even after controlling for a range of child and household characteristics and when comparing children in the same community. The results also remain significant in Ethiopia, India and Viet Nam after controlling for previous performance in maths at age 5.<sup>3</sup>

These negative effects persist when examining children’s test scores at age 12. In India, Peru and Viet Nam, corporal punishment experienced at age 8 is negatively associated with maths scores at age 12. While we cannot prove causality, the longitudinal data allow us to control for a series of other possible explanations that might affect children’s school performance. These results remain significant when comparing children living in the same community and after controlling for previous maths performance in Peru and Viet Nam.<sup>4</sup> To put the findings into context, it is well-established that children with more highly educated parents have better educational outcomes. The associated negative effect of corporal punishment on maths scores at age 12, is equivalent to the child’s caregiver (usually mother) having between three and six years less education (size varies by country).

Figure 2 visualizes these findings for Viet Nam. Bars to the right of the central axis show factors associated with higher maths scores at age 12 and bars to the left with lower maths scores. The length of the bar is the average size of the associated effect. The figure predicts that holding other

factors constant, if a child reported being beaten at age 8 this was associated with a score on average of 3.6 percentage points lower on the maths test at age 12. The negative average effect associated with corporal punishment is equivalent to the effect associated with a child having a caregiver with approximately five fewer years of education.



Note: Only statistically significant relationships are reported (90 per cent confidence interval or higher). The units of the control variables are as follows: previous maths scores (raw points on a test of 29 questions), child reports corporal punishment (yes/no), household expenditure (consumption measure in logarithms), caregiver education (years of schooling), height for age (height for age z scores). Full details of the models are in Ogando Portela and Pells, 2015.

Corporal punishment is also associated with effects on children’s psychosocial well-being. When experienced at age 8, corporal punishment is associated with children having lower self-efficacy (the capability to face difficulties and recover from setbacks) in Peru and lower self-esteem (self-worth or self-value) in Viet Nam at age 12.

**Good School Toolkit: Raising Voices, Uganda**

One promising model is the Good School Toolkit developed by Raising Voices in Uganda (Devries et al. 2015). The intervention includes setting goals and developing action plans at the school level, training on positive discipline, behaviour-change techniques for teachers, children, administrators and parents and the formation of child-led committees: all supported by visits from the Raising Voices team. Evidence from a randomised control trial found that after 18 months, children in the intervention schools were 42 per cent less likely to have been at risk of physical violence from school during the previous week (ibid., e383).

<sup>3</sup> In Peru the results are still negative but not significant.  
<sup>4</sup> In the case of India, the effects reduce in size and are no longer statistically significant once we account for previous maths scores at age 8. However, maths scores at age 8 may already be accounting for the effects of corporal punishment. In Ethiopia, there is a negative association between corporal punishment and test scores, but this is not significant, which may be due to much lower test scores in general in Ethiopia.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Corporal punishment not only violates children's fundamental rights to dignity and bodily integrity but also undermines their capacity to learn, with lasting implications for their life chances. In the policy implications below we expand our focus to reflect on the multiple strategies that can play a part in preventing violence in schools and building safe, supportive and enabling environments for all children to learn and flourish.

### *Legislation is an important first step in eradicating the use of corporal punishment, but on its own is not sufficient*

However, as the high prevalence estimates across the four countries have demonstrated, a large gap exists between the law and the daily reality experienced by many children. This requires greater attention to understanding institutional norms that impede implementation and for the legislation to be supported by a wider range of preventative measures in policies and programmes. Policies developed at the national level to create safe and enabling school environments need to be adapted to the specific needs and challenges encountered at the local and school level.

### *School environments need to be enabling, supportive, inclusive and safe spaces in which children can learn and flourish*

Corporal punishment is often part of a wider culture of violence in school, which includes other forms of humiliating punishment, peer bullying and gender-based violence. This requires addressing the structures, norms and practices within the school environment as a whole that promote violent behaviour (including, but not focusing exclusively on, the disciplinary system), that reinforce gender norms and also discriminate against certain groups of children.

Improving school governance is central, with guidelines and action plans on eliminating violence in schools, including corporal punishment, developed and enforced with the support of teachers, parents and children. Children need safe and confidential means of reporting instances of violence, with appropriate follow-up taken to provide support and address the needs of the child as well as to hold the perpetrator to account.

School-level interventions need to be accompanied and supported by wider systemic change in the education system, led by national governments, education departments and authorities. Measures including policy development, budgetary allocations and employment policies (e.g. the use of corporal punishment constituting misconduct and liable to disciplinary action), in addition to teacher training, are required to provide the knowledge, human and financial resources necessary to enforce legislation and increase accountability (see Office of the SRSG on Violence against Children, 2012).

### *Teachers need to be trained and supported in the use of non-violent or positive methods of discipline*

Positive discipline aims to foster children's development and learning by building their self-confidence and

self-discipline based on the principles of respect and dignity (see Durrant, 2010). It equips teachers with classroom management techniques that focus on finding constructive solutions to challenging situations, rather than resorting to violence. In addition, not all teachers favour corporal punishment but may fear criticism from others that they are weak. Training on positive discipline needs to incorporate space for collective reflective processes which make evident that others (within the specific school and/or in other places) do not support or use violence and are nonetheless effective in their teaching practice.

### *Breaking cycles of violence requires greater attention to the gendered nature of corporal punishment*

This is imperative, given that boys are significantly more likely to experience corporal punishment, which reinforces gender stereotypes and notions of violent masculinities at a young age. This is not to ignore the serious risk of other forms of violence faced by girls, but breaking cycles of violence requires a greater understanding of how norms are internalised and the role played by corporal punishment in instilling gendered identities. Tackling gender-based violence requires empowering women and girls and redefining ideas of masculinity. Therefore both teacher training materials and school curricula need to include content that encourages learners to question and challenge established norms.

### *Greater awareness of the negative effects of corporal punishment on children is required in order to challenge the normalization of violence*

Corporal punishment is part of a wider problem where the use of physical violence to discipline children is considered acceptable within communities and families and believed to support children's learning and development. Community dialogue and working with local norms and understandings to bring about change from within, is more effective and respectful than imposing from the outside and avoids stigmatizing different groups of people.

### *National action plans to implement the Sustainable Development Goals need to retain the focus on protecting children from violence, abuse and exploitation*

Violence against children is receiving greater international attention than ever before with the inclusion of goals and targets in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically in relation to corporal punishment, Goal 4 on education access and quality includes a target to: 'Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all'. The formulation of national action plans to implement the SDGs offers a crucial opportunity to stimulate greater attention to violence affecting children, including better data collection and increased resource allocation for violence prevention.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief has been written by Hayley Jones with Kirrily Pells, based on Ogando Portela and Pells (2015). For full citations and underlying analysis, including results tables please see <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/series/22/>. The brief was funded by the UNICEF Office of Research as part of the Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children. We would like to thank our reviewers for their helpful comments and Catherine Maternowska and Alina Potts for their support.

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India – the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – Peru and Viet Nam) over 15 years. It is funded from 2001 to 2017 by UK aid from the Department for International Development (DFID), with co-funding by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2014 and Irish Aid from 2014 to 2015. The full texts of all Young Lives publications are available online: <http://www.younglives.org.uk>

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