

## The use of physical punishment in the Greek family: selected socio-demographic aspects

### Summary

*Founded on data from a larger research study of the use of physical punishment in the Greek family, this paper focuses on selected socio-demographic aspects of the phenomenon. The study involved 591 interviews, based on a structured questionnaire, with mothers of 6-year-old and 12-year-old schoolchildren.*

*We investigated socio-demographic variables in terms of their association with the incidence of physical punishment. The variables included the child's age and gender, the presence of siblings or their being an only child, living in a single or two-parent family, the mother's age and level of education and the family's socio-economic status. Ultimately these findings, along with the results of the entire research project, may contribute to the implementation of a comprehensive policy to reduce physical punishment in Greece.*

### Introduction

During the last fifteen years, the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary method in the upbringing of children has a focus of interest among many social scientists in Europe and the United States.

The growing concern for children's rights issues and the connection of physical punishment to physical child abuse have been critical elements in this development. In the past, the tendency was for physical punishment to be 'left alone' and ignored even by those involved in the study, prevention and treatment of child abuse. However, research has shown that this deeply rooted and widely accepted form of punishment can lead to serious physical abuse (Crittenden, 1990). The work of many scholars, activists, researchers and especially of organizations like EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children) and Radda Barnen (Swedish 'Save the Children' program) have radically altered the scene. Furthermore, it is encouraging to see aspects of these changes reflected in the UN Convention on Children's Rights and recommendations formulated by the Council of Europe (Newell, 1996).

Physical punishment can no longer be seen as a necessary and inevitable element in regular child upbringing. It should instead be regarded as a human rights violation with detrimental effects at individual, family and societal levels.

In fact, the effective implementation of new concepts and ethics in the field of child protection and children's rights is one of the greatest challenges faced by contemporary societies. It is a challenge which must be addressed in order to safeguard children from all violations which affect their well being and development (Browne & Fereti, 1995).

In an attempt to study physical punishment of children in Greece, the authors carried out a large-scale research project entitled: 'The use of physical punishment in the upbringing of children in the contemporary Greek family - A sociological study in the Athens area' at the Institute of Child Health's Department of Family Relations between 1994 and 1997. The research involved an investigation of the attitudes, beliefs and practices regarding the use of physical punishment as well as the conditions which lead to, affect and sustain this practice.

In this article we present a selection of our research findings focusing on the sociodemographic aspects of the phenomenon of physical punishment, which is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing pain or discomfort to a child in order to control his or her behavior. Spanking, slapping, smacking, grabbing or shoving a child roughly are the most common forms of physical punishment described in the literature.

Previous research has shown that factors such as the child's gender, the parent's age, number of children in the family and socio-economic status influence the use of physical punishment. More specifically, studies have shown that almost all parents in the United States use corporal punishment with young children. 'Hitting toddlers is just about universal.' (Strauss, 1994) Furthermore, statistics show that as children grow older the use of physical punishment decreases and that 60% of parents in the US surveys hit children in the 10 to 12 age range.

With regard to the child's gender, several studies over the years have found that parents are more likely to hit boys than girls. Culturally defined gender roles and expectations largely explain this differential treatment as they are critical components in parent-child interaction.

Research has shown that as the age of the parent goes up the use of physical punishment decreases. Younger parents more easily and more often resort to hitting their children than older parents of children of the same age.

The relationship between the use of physical punishment and socio-economic status has been and still is a matter of debate among experts in the field. In the past, researchers showed higher rates of physical punishment in the lower socio-economic groups. Others have indicated greater use in the middle echelon, whilst the authors of an evaluation study of publications focusing on the aspect of social class argue that the correlation appears to be rather weak (Erlanger, 1974).

## Method

### *Sample*

Since our target group consisted of mothers of 6 and 12-year-children, ages which correspond with the first year of compulsory primary education and the last year of primary school, we decided to access our sample through the school system. A multi-staged sampling procedure was followed.

The sample was selected from the Ministry of Education's Official Catalogue of all state primary schools in the metropolitan area (Attica). This area is divided into four prefectural districts (Athens, East Attica, West Attica and Piraeus). We drew three schools from each of the four districts, to a total of twelve state primary schools. In addition, we randomly drew three private schools from the same area, adding up to a total of fifteen primary schools. Four groups from each school (two first grade and two sixth grade), were randomly selected and thus we ended up with a sample of 591 mothers of primary-school children.

The carefully designed 24-item structured questionnaire took into account both the family context in contemporary Greece and the wider social and cultural context in which it is embedded (Korbin, 1979; Agathonos, 1992).

On the basis of this questionnaire, 591 interviews were conducted by trained interviewers with mothers in their homes.

## Results

Our study revealed that 65.5% of mothers in the sample use physical punishment to discipline their children.

**Table 1**

	Child's gender			Child's age	
	Total (n: 591)	Boys (n: 293)	Girls (n: 298)	6years old (n: 293) 1st grade	12years old (n: 298) 6st grade
<i>Use of phys.pun.</i>	387 (65.5%)	209 (71.3%)	178 (59.7%)	228 (78%)	159 (53.5%)
<i>Nonuse of phys.pun.</i>	204 (34.5%)	84 (28.7%)	120 (40.3%)	65 (22.2%)	139 (46.3%)

At a first level, the statistical analysis of the data involved a series of cross-tabulations and associated chi-square tests in order to assess the significance of association of physical punishment with various sociodemographic variables as follows:

- When taking into account the children's age, it is clear that the incidence of physical punishment is much higher among younger children ( $\chi^2=38.53$ ,  $DF=1$ ,  $P<.001$ ).
- With regard to the child's gender, boys are clearly the recipients of more physical punishment than girls ( $\chi^2=8.79$ ,  $DF=1$ ,  $P=.003$ ) (Fig. 1).
- The punishment a child receives is also influenced significantly by whether or not he/she has any siblings. More specifically, children who have siblings run a much higher risk of being physically punished than only children ( $\chi^2=7.14$ ,  $DF=1$ ,  $P=0.007$ ) (Fig. 2).

d) Physical punishment is more likely to be used in two-parent families than in single-parent families. It should be noted that in this research sample, the term 'single parent' refers only to mothers as single parents. ( $\chi^2=4.12$ ,  $DF=1$ ,  $P=.042$ ). (Fig. 3)

e) The mother's age proved to be a significant factor in the incidence of physical punishment in the upbringing of children. Younger mothers tend to resort more to this method than older mothers. ( $\chi^2=26.57$ ,  $DF=2$ ,  $P < .001$ ).

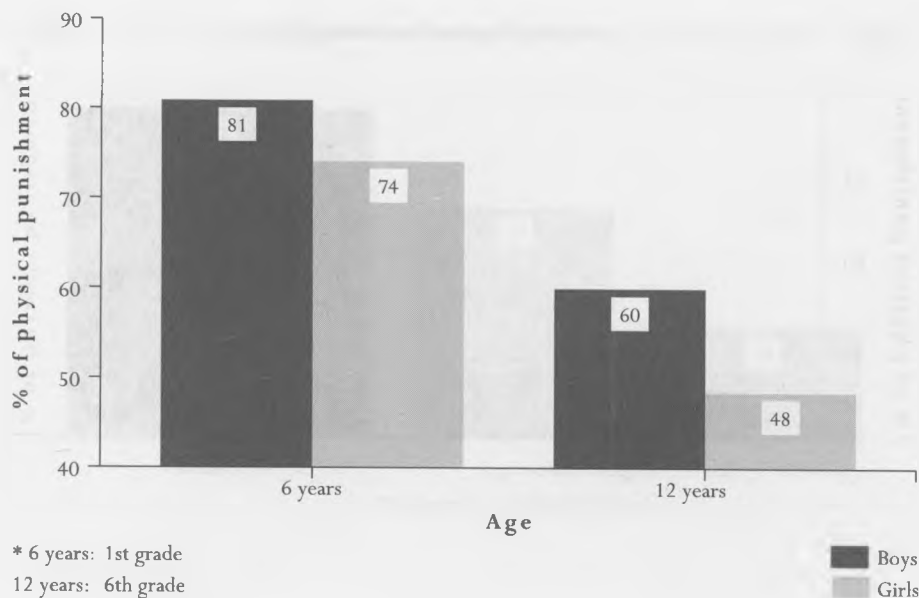
Since it could be argued that older mothers tend to have older children who receive less physical punishment due to their age, we have investigated the effect of the mother's age separately for the two age groups of children (first and sixth grade) (Fig. 4).

We found that the pattern persists, with the exception that the 30-39 age category of mothers of first graders use even more physical punishment than those in the 20-29 age category for the same age group of children.

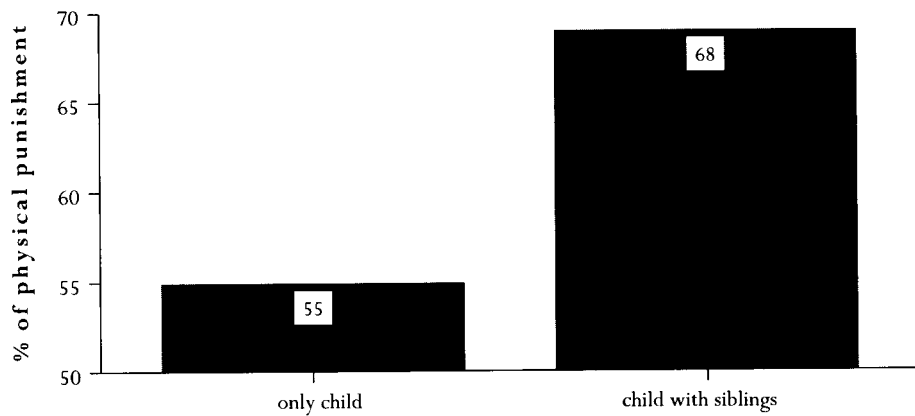
f) The mother's educational level was also found to be a significantly influential factor in the use of physical punishment. The higher the mother's level of education, the less likely she was to hit her children ( $\chi^2=9.42$ ,  $DF=2$ ,  $P=.008$ ) (Fig. 5).

g) With regard to the impact family socio-economic status has on the incidence of physical punishment, it was evident that children in families of higher socio-economic status receive less physical punishment than children in families of lower socio-economic status. ( $\chi^2=7.61$ ,  $DF=2$ ,  $P=.02$ ) (Fig. 6)

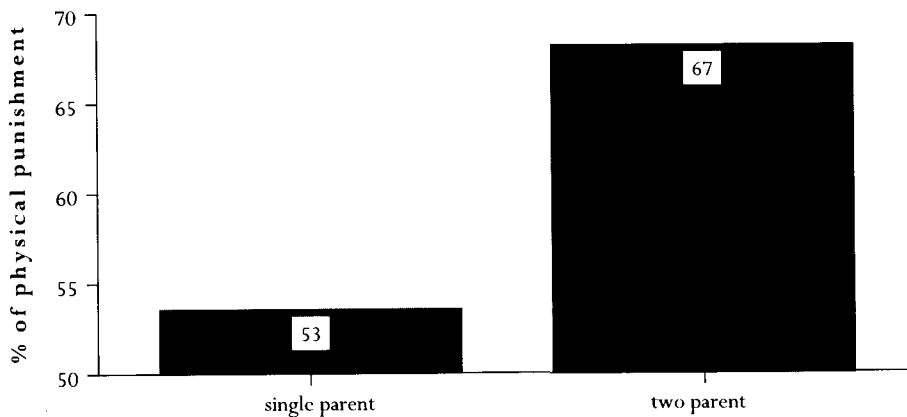
Figure 1. Physical punishment by child's age\* and gender



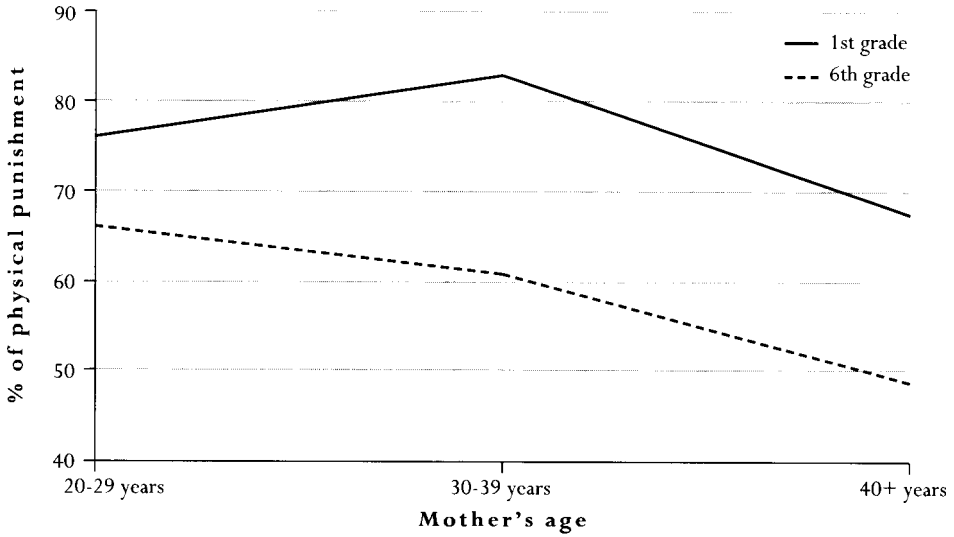
**Figure 2.** *Physical punishment in only children and children with siblings*



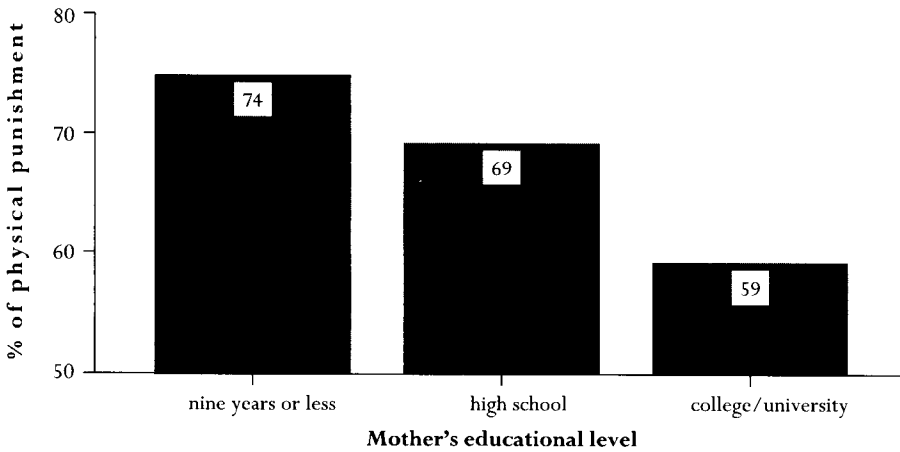
**Figure 3.** *Physical punishment in children of single and two parent families*



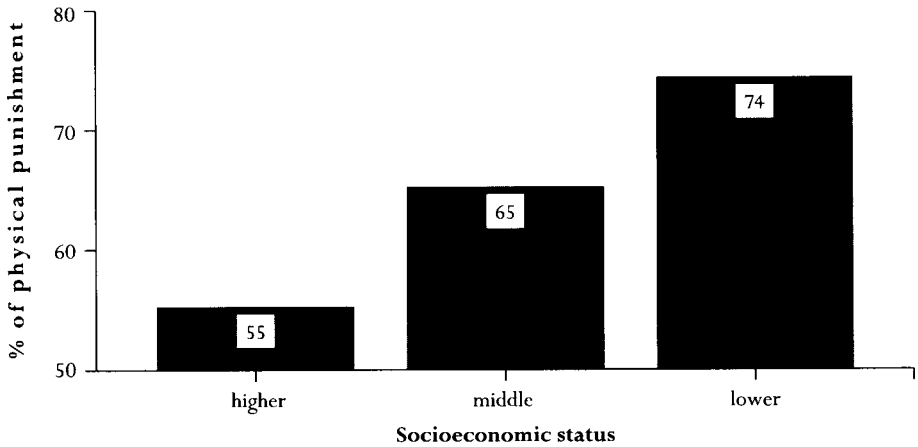
**Figure 4.** *Physical punishment by mother's age in 1st grade and 6th grade children*



**Figure 5.** *Physical punishment by mother's educational level*



**Figure 6.** Physical punishment by family socioeconomic status



In an attempt to rank those sociodemographic characteristics which provide the best discrimination between the families who use physical punishment in order to discipline their children and those who do not, stepwise logistic regression was applied.

**Table 2**

Independent variable	B	S.E.	Sig.	Odds ratio
Child's age (6th-1st grade vs 12 years-6th grade)	1.196	.190	<.001	3.306
Only child	-.637	.223	.004	.529
Social Status	-	-	.009	-
(upper vs low socioecon. status)	-.510	.189	.007	.600
(middle vs low socioecon. status)	-.001	.134	.991	.998
Child's gender (boys vs girls)	.478	.185	.010	1.613

B: regression coefficient

S.E.: standard error of regression coefficient

Sig.: significance of the regression coefficient based on Wald's test

The table above shows that the characteristic that best discriminates those who use physical punishment from those who do not, is the child's age. Six-year-olds are 3 times more likely to be physically punished than 12-year-olds.

Whether a child has siblings or not is the factor that further fine-tunes discrimination. Children who have brothers or sisters are almost twice as likely to be physically punished as only children. At the third step, family social status adds significantly to the discrimination. Children in

the upper category are less likely to be physically punished than those from families with lower socio-economic status. At the fourth step, the child's gender makes a significant contribution.

No more variables add significantly to the discrimination of families in which the mothers use physical punishment from those who do not.

## Discussion

### *Incidence of physical punishment*

The prevalence rate (65.5%) of physical punishment found in our study is comparable to previous findings of other studies (Strauss, 1994), although due to methodological differences it is impossible to make direct comparisons. What is of particular importance, however, is the fact that the majority of Greek children are disciplined by physical punishment, the most easily accessible and destructive tool available to their mothers. Physical punishment as an inextricable aspect of the social fabric has the seal of cultural approval. Typically, 62% of mothers believe that it is used by most parents and 82% believe that at least half of all parents hit their children.

### *Child's age*

Most research findings show that older children receive less physical punishment than younger children. In our study, 6-year-olds proved to be more vulnerable. This finding is consistent with other studies that reveal particularly high vulnerability for physical punishment in pre-school children up to the age of six. The reasons for high risk of physical punishment among younger children may be disobedience, lack of knowledge of rules, experimentation and unpredictable behavior coupled with the adults' greater sense of authority, dominance and control of very young children.

### *Child's gender*

Being male increases a child's chance of physical punishment. Boys are found to be one and a half times more likely to be physically punished than girls. Gender expectations and culturally defined gender roles entail that boys are more active, misbehave more frequently and should be toughened by physical punishment. Girls, in contrast, are regarded as more obedient and, moreover, are not expected to grow up to be tough and aggressive.

### *Children with siblings vs only children*

In this study, children who had siblings were two times more likely to receive physical punishment than only children. During the interview, 62.4% of mothers said that they punish their children because they fight with their brothers and sisters. It should be noted that the number of children in the family was not a significantly differentiating factor. What was of particular importance, however, was whether there were at least two siblings who could get into fighting.



### *Single vs two-parent families*

Children living with both parents were more likely to be physically punished than children in single-parent households, 61% and 53% respectively. It is assumed that two-parent families are likely to experience marital stress, differences of opinion on discipline and disagreements on critical issues regarding children.

### *Mother's education*

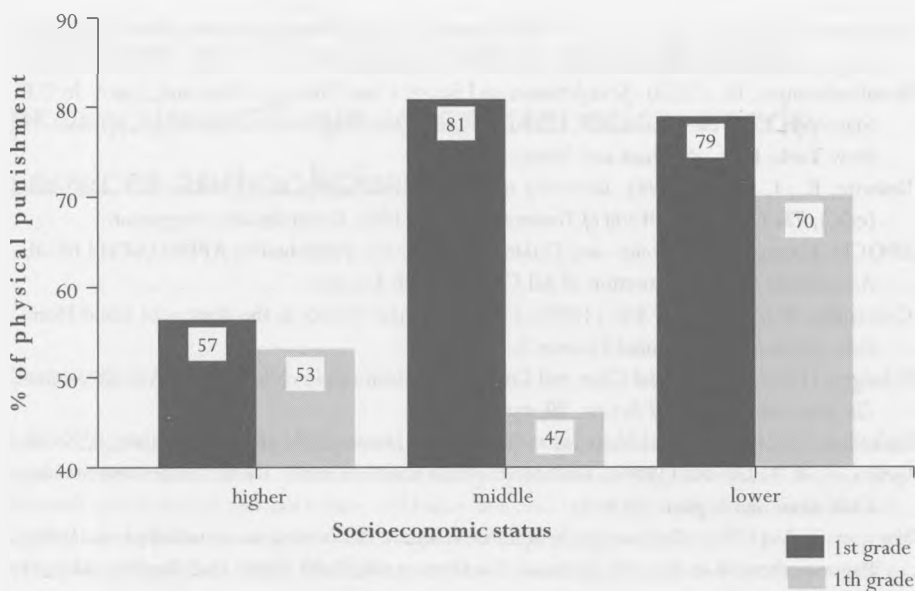
Physical punishment was significantly associated with the level of the mother's education. The lower the level of education, the greater the likelihood of mothers resorting to physical punishment. It could be argued that in a country like Greece, which has not yet seen any campaign to raise public awareness of physical punishment and in favor of non-violent methods of discipline, more highly educated mothers are at an advantage as they have a richer knowledge background that helps them seek both alternative ways to correct and control their children's behavior and advice and support from special sources.

### *Socio-economic status*

In earlier studies it was found that the incidence of physical punishment tends to be higher in families of lower socio-economic status (Bronfenbrenner, 1958). More recent research, however, has shown that the relationship between the two variables is either weak or non-existent. In an attempt to examine this parameter in our study, the family socio-economic status variable was defined in three categories - higher, middle and lower - on the basis of information on the parents' occupation, the parents' level of educational, type of housing and type and area of the school attended. At a first level of analysis using cross-tabulation and chi square tests, the association appeared to be significant, with more use of physical punishment in the lower socio-economic status families. This finding was confirmed through further analysis of the data using logistic regression. In fact, the chance of physical punishment being used was almost twice as high in lower socio-economic status families as in upper socio-economic status families.

However, when the incidence of physical punishment in middle socio-economic status families was contrasted with the incidence among lower socio-economic status families, no significance difference was found. As can be seen in figure 7, in which the child's age is also taken into account, middle status families recorded the highest use for the 6-year-olds and the lowest for the 12-year-olds. Given the conflicting results of previous research and the surrounding controversy over socio-economic status differences in physical punishment, we feel that any attempt to provide a sound interpretation of our findings must be presented in association with the part of the study concerning attitudes, beliefs and practices as well as the aetiology and circumstances of physical punishment in Greece.

Figure 7. Physical punishment by family socioeconomic status in 1st grade and 6th grade children



### Concluding remarks

Punishment of children by physical force is an old and complex phenomenon which it demands courage and commitment to change. The reforms and experience gained in other countries, for example in Scandinavia, are valuable instruments to this end. However, in each social context the process through which a social phenomenon is recognized as a social problem has to follow a certain pathway in order to arrive at social planning and policy implementation. Within the larger research project, the sociodemographic aspects dealt with in this paper may contribute towards both a better understanding of physical punishment in Greece and an effective prevention policy by taking into account factors and attributes which are likely to further increase the use of physical punishment.

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