

Executive Summary

The Department of Applied Social Studies of the City University of Hong Kong and Caritas Youth and Community Service have jointly conducted a survey on factors of Child Abuse and its impact on Child Development in 2013. A survey for a total of 542 children in primary 4 to 6 and their parents from 6 primary schools, was conducted from September to December 2013. The results are astonishing, as they showed that physical punishment is common among Hong Kong families. 62.5% of the children responded in the survey that they have been physically punished in the past year, whereas 31.1% of the respondents commented that the punishment they received reached the level of “serious body persecution”. The research indicated that children who have been physically punished are having worse relationships with their parents than children who have not been physically punished. This group of children is shown to have less trust on their parents, and is less able to effectively communicate in their families. In addition, they are found to have encountered difficulties in social life, have problems in concentrating on work and are prone to violate rules and engage in violence.

The aim of this research is to probe into the problem of child abuse in Hong Kong, from the perspective of family life and children, by conducting a survey with collected questionnaires. The main objectives of this investigation include: (1) to find out how common the problem of child abuse is among Hong Kong families; (2) to investigate the resilience and crisis factors of child abuse; (3) to describe the general situation in Hong Kong families on parent-child relationships; (4) to investigate the relationship between personal and family backgrounds and the resilience and crisis factors of child abuse; and (5) to investigate the relationship between personal and family backgrounds and means of disciplining children.

Background information of research participants

542 children have also been interviewed. These interviewees were at the age between 8 to 13 years old, with an average age at 10.3 years old. The figure showed that 49.1% of the children respondents are male while 50.9% are female. The majority (84.8%) of these children are living with their parents.

518 mothers have been interviewed for the purpose of this research. Their ages ranged from 20 to 60 years old, with the average age as 40.4. Over half (54.9%) of the interviewees have been educated to secondary four or above. Majority of the interviewees (88.9%) are married or are cohabiting with their partners. At the time when the survey was conducted, 44.1% of the interviewees have a full-time job, whereas another 33.2% are full-time housewives.

Apart from mothers, 459 fathers have been interviewed for the purpose of this research. Their ages ranged from 27 to 93, with the average age as 45.3. The research indicated that 54.1% of the interviewees have been educated to secondary four or above. Majority of them (96.1%) are married or are cohabiting with their partners. At the time when the survey was

conducted, 86.1% male respondents have a full-time job, while 2.3% of them are full-time housekeepers.

How common the problem of child abuse is ?

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) has been used in the present research for investigating the problem of child abuse. Four scaling charts are found in CTS, including “Non-violent Discipline”, “Physical Assault”, “Psychological Aggression” and “Neglect”. The scaling chart for “Physical Assault” is subdivided into three categories, namely “mild violence”, “moderate violence” and “serious violence”.

“Psychological Aggression” is defined as “using language and/or symbolic acts purposely to induce fear or trauma in children”. The example items include “to scream at children” and “to insult children with words like ‘idiot’ or ‘lazy fellow’”.

“Neglect” in the scaling chart means “parents failing to fulfill their responsibilities in taking care of their children, especially the children’s needs during growth”. The example items include “leaving children home alone while being aware of the necessity to attend on them”, and “fail to express love and care to children due to various reasons”.

The scaling chart for “Physical Assault” is divided into different levels according to the intensity of violence applied. “Corporal punishment” or “mild physical violence” includes items “hitting children’s palm, arm and/or feet”; and “hitting children’s buttocks with hands”. “Physical Maltreatment” includes acts such as “using belts, combs, sticks or other hard objects to hit children’s body parts (apart from their buttocks)”. “Severe Physical Maltreatment” indicates severe violent acts such as “mauling children continuously”. These acts are viewed as severe or extremely severe physical violence. Such acts of physical abuse could be sanctioned by current child protection legislation. Based on children’s report of their parents’ parenting behavior, the incidence of parental “Psychological Aggression”, “Neglect” and “Physical Assault” was 60.5%, 42.9% and 62.5% respectively. The incidence of “Physical Maltreatment” and “Severe Physical Maltreatment” was 28.7% and 14.5% respectively. The incidence of “physical abuse”, defined as “Physical Maltreatment” or “Severe Physical Maltreatment”, is as high as 31.1%. 12.1% of students reported that they are undergone the “Physical Maltreatment” and “Severe Physical Maltreatment” at the same time.

Child respondents on parenting style	Non-violent discipline	Psychological Aggression	Neglect	Physical Assault		
Percentage	88.4%	60.5%	42.9%	62.5%		
				Corporal Punishment	Physical Maltreatment	Severe Physical Maltreatment
				60.5%	28.7%	14.5%
				Body Persecution		
				31.1%		

Parent-child relationship

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) has been used to measure psychological security the child derived from mother-child and father-child relationships. In particular, the IPPA assesses the quality of parent-child attachment in three aspects, namely “trust”, “communication” and “alienation”.

Example questions for parents on parent-child “trust” include “my children respect my feelings”, “children feel that I am a responsible father/mother”, “I am happy to listen to my children’s thinking while we are discussing on certain issues”, and “I have been trying to understand my children’s worries”. Examples questions for parents on parent-child “communication” includes “my children try to solve problems by themselves instead of asking for my help”, “my children understand that I have my own problems so they would not trouble me when they encountered difficulties”, and “I encourage my children to tell me their problems”. Examples questions on parent-child “alienation” includes “my children find that discussing their problems with me is an embarrassing or stupid act” and “my children are angry with me”.

The Paired Sample T-test was used to compare scores of parent-child relationship reported by parents and that reported by children. In the sample, the average scores of the overall mother-child relationship and mother-child communication reported by mothers was 3.64 and 3.67, which were significantly higher than those reported by children (the overall mother-child relationship reported by children: 3.56; mother-child communication reported by children: 3.40)The other aspect is the average scores of the overall father-child communication and father-child alienation was 3.56 and 2.62, which were significantly higher than those reported by children (the father-child communication reported by children: 3.34; the father-child alienation reported by children: 2.52).

Using protective factors and risk factors to identify groups at higher risk of child abuse

Logistic Regression was conducted to identify factors that may increase the risk of child abuse. The risk factors identified in this study include: children’s behavioral problems, parents’ being abused in their childhood, parents being influenced by Chinese traditional thinking of corporal punishment, marital conflicts, and parents’ personality tendencies of impulsivity and aggressiveness. In other words, parents who are affected by the abovementioned risk factors are at higher risk of causing physical or emotional harm to their children. On the other hand, the readiness to forgive, parenting efficacy, and the willingness to seek help to solve problems are protective factors that prevent or reduce the occurrences of child abuse.

To identify demographic characteristics of parents at higher risk of child abuse

Mothers with higher levels of education tend to use non-violent means to discipline their children, when compared with mothers of lower levels of education. Mothers with higher levels of education also have a lower tendency of abusing or neglecting their children. Mothers without a full-time job and mothers who are single or separated with their partners are more likely to being abusive towards their children when compared with mothers who have a full-time job and mothers who are living with their partners. Surprisingly, mothers who

do not have a full-time job have a higher tendency of neglecting their children than mothers who have a full-time job.

Fathers who are better educated and have a full time job are less likely to neglect their children, when compared with fathers who have lower levels of education and without a full-time job. Fathers of younger age tend to have abusive acts towards their children than fathers who are older.

The relationship between abusive parent-child relationship and children's behavioral problems

The group of children who claimed to have been physically abused by their parents made worse relationships, less trust and less effective communication with their parents than those who claimed not being physically abused. Those children also have manifested more behavior problems in social life, studies and are more likely to violate rules and to engage in violence.

Our Suggestions

1. To find out high-risk group of parents as soon as possible and to step in and help:

Risk factors found in our investigation include: behavioral problems of children, parents' being abused in their childhood, marital conflicts, and parents' personality tendencies of impulsivity and aggressiveness. Parents who are affected by the above mentioned risk factors are more likely of having abusive behavior towards their children. As such, the government is suggested to encourage family service centres, school social workers and related service agencies to identify high-risk groups and to provide speedy aid to those families.

2. Strengthening education and support for parents:

Traditional Chinese Thinking such as "Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child", "Children should be absolutely obedient to their parents" and "appropriate corporal punishment is necessary to make changes in children's behavior" are deeply rooted in the minds of some parents. The government is suggested to strengthen parent education through different means, such as cooperating with television channels to broadcast educational videos or to produce educational programs (e.g. the Parenthood Series produced by RTHK). One of the aims of producing such programmes is to increase parents' tendencies towards forgiveness, teach parents effective ways of parenting and increase their parenting efficacy, and encourage parents to seek help when encountering problems in dealing with their children- all those have found to prevent or reduce incidence of child abuse. Moreover, the government is also suggested to encourage primary schools to hold workshops and seminars for parents, as many parents in need of counseling service are not easily approached by social welfare centers in the community yet those parents are willing to cooperate with schools to deal with children's academic or behavioral problems. Hence, encouraging parents to communicate children's academic or other matters with schools would be a platform for schools to understand the situation of families and to identify parents who are in need of help. In fact, academic

problems have long been the triggering point where parents lose their temper and engage in physical punishment against their children.

3. To strengthen counseling services in primary schools:

The Union of School Counseling Services estimated that 50% of the child abuse cases reported by Social Welfare Department involve children aged between 6 to 12 years old. This survey showed that 31.1% primary school respondents have been physically abused; those children and their parents are in need of counseling service. Yet counseling service in many primary schools are understaffed. Half of the primary schools in Hong Kong even do not have student guidance service/ school social work service. The other schools that provide social work service are understaffed and suffer from high turnover of professional counselors due to the tendering held in each or every three years. As such, the government is suggested to increase manpower for providing counseling services in primary schools, and to develop strategies to avoid the outflow of professional counselors.

4. Provide better training to social workers for them to take precautions against child abuse:

Many of the social workers, especially for those working in primary schools, are likely to be in touch with parents who are at risk of abusing their children. However, many of these social workers have not been trained to identify this group of parents and to provide adequate precautionary measures against child abuse, while some of them are even not sensitive to the likelihood of child abuse while communicating with parents and their children. We suggest that the Universities and the Social Welfare Department collaborate in providing better training for social workers, in order to arouse their awareness towards the problem and to develop more prevention strategies against child abuse.