

## International Variations in Harsh Child Discipline

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### Abstract

**Background:** Although the history of recognition of child abuse in Europe and North America extends over 40 years, recognition and data are lacking in other parts of the world. Cultural differences in child-rearing complicate cross-cultural studies of abuse.

**Objective:** To ascertain rates of harsh and less-harsh parenting behavior in population-based samples.

**Methods:** We used parallel surveys of parental discipline of children in samples of mothers in Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India, Philippines, and the United States. Data were collected between 1998 and 2003. The instrument used was a modification of the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale, along with a study-developed survey of demographic characteristics and other parent and child variables. Women (N = 14 239) from 19 communities in 6 countries were surveyed. We interviewed mothers aged 15 to 49 years (18–49 years in the United States) who had a child younger than 18 years in her home. Sample selection involved either random sampling or systematic sampling within randomly selected blocks or neighborhoods.

**Results:** Nearly all parents used nonviolent discipline and verbal or psychological punishment. Physical punishment was used in at least 55% of the families. Spanking rates (with open hand on buttocks) ranged from a low of 15% in an educated community in India to a high of 76% in a Philippine community. Similarly, there was a wide range in the rates of children who were hit with objects (9%–74% [median: 39%]) or beaten by their parents (0.1%–28.5%). Extremely harsh methods of physical punishment, such as burning or smothering, were rare in all countries. It is concerning that  $\geq 20\%$  of parents in 9 communities admitted shaking children younger than 2 years.

**Conclusions:** Physical and verbal punishments of children are common in high-, middle-, and low-income communities around the world. The forms and rates of punishment vary among countries and among

communities within countries. A median of 16% of children experienced harsh or potentially abusive physical discipline in the previous year.