

Disciplining children

How to spare the rod, but not spoil the child



Mr Bryan Lo, 42 – with his wife Natasha Leng, 40, and their children Nathan, six, and Sasha, eight – says it is key to build strong emotional connections with one's children.
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Study shows many parents here resort to physical punishment as a form of discipline – but experts say there may be long-term negative effects



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A recent study has shown that physical punishment is commonly used by parents in Singapore.

Nearly one in two parents – or 45 per cent of respondents – resorted to at least one form of corporal punishment, such as spanking or using an object to hit the child, in the past year, the 2021 study found.

About 750 parents and 670 young adults were involved in the study, which was done jointly with the Singapore Children's Society and Yale-NUS College.

The Straits Times speaks to experts about the effects of physical punishment and alternative methods of discipline.

LINKS TO AGGRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Dr Cheung Hoi Shan, the lead researcher of the study, says research has shown that children on the receiving end of physical punishment are more likely to be aggressive during childhood and as adults.

Other long-term consequences documented include negative effects on mental health and parent-child relationships, as well as delinquent or criminal behaviour.

Mr Edward Kang, assistant manager at Care Corner Family Support Services, says aggression could range from stomping of feet and shouting to slamming doors, throwing items and hitting others.

"Children may also have difficulty resolving conflicts outside the home, like with their friends. Instead of using more positive ways to solve problems, they may resort to using physical methods," he adds.

Physical punishment also puts a strain on parent-child relationships, especially when there is little or no positive attention given to the child, says Mr Kang.

Dr Cheung, an assistant professor of psychology at Yale-NUS College, says that once a child is hit often enough, it damages the trust

between the child and the parent, as well as the parent's position as protector.

"The parent is supposed to be there for the child in times of his or her distress, and not add on to the child's distress," she adds.

The only "positive" outcome of physical punishment is immediate compliance, says Dr Cheung.

"It is effective to use physical punishment to stop the behaviour immediately, but at the expense of moral internalisation, meaning that they learn nothing about the moral values that we want to teach," she says.

A child's fear of being hit prevents him or her from learning the lesson that the parent is trying to convey, she adds.

Psychological punishment, which refers to shouting, insulting or shaming, often goes hand in hand with physical methods, says Dr Cheung.

"Chances are, you are also shouting, maybe at the same time, as you hit the child. And you may also be screaming insults."

Both physical and psychological punishment should be avoided, she adds.

Some might argue that they have been physically punished and turned out fine, but experts still discourage the use of such meth-

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ods, as they expose children to unnecessary risks. Some people who appear "fine" may be grappling with anxiety issues, for example.

Ms Vivyan Chee, deputy director of Singapore Children's Society's Oasis for Minds Services, which supports the mental well-being of children and youth, says: "There are many other ways that we can parent and discipline children without exposing children to such risks."

BUILD STRONG FOUNDATIONS

Parents must first build strong bonds of attachment with their children, experts say.

Ms Chee says: "This secure attachment will become the foundation for parents to discipline and relate to their children."

Discipline is essentially teaching a child something, she says. "Before teaching, we have to connect with the child and that means understanding the child's point of view."

After that connection is established, the parent can move on to correcting the child's behaviour, she says, adding that children need time to process correction, just like adults.

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Set clear rules, be consistent and follow through



Administer consequences for bad behaviour – like timeouts or removal of privileges such as screen time – sooner rather than later, so that children can make the link and inculcate healthy habits early on. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

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Acknowledging that parents are not perfect, Ms Chee recommends that they work towards a five-to-one ratio of positive and negative interactions with their children.

This will help to ensure a good balance of interactions and a stable, lasting relationship, similar to what is needed in marriages, she says.

Mr Bryan Lo, who has an eight-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son, says it is key to build strong emotional connections with one's children.

"You get out of the relationship what you put in. You need to fill the children's love bank," says the 42-year-old, who works part-time in a human resource business.

Deposits into a child's "love bank" make them feel loved and emotionally connected, while withdrawals do the opposite.

Spending quality time with them, hugging and expressing love count as deposits. Withdrawals could be actions such as yelling, spanking, criticising and nagging.

"It's important that there are more deposits than withdrawals. Sometimes parents wonder why their teenage kids don't relate to them. It could be because you have taken so many withdrawals from their love bank over the years," says Mr Lo.

SETTING CLEAR RULES

Many parents get mad at their children over routine issues, Mr Kang says.

What would help are clear rules and guidelines that must be in place when children are young.

"The clearer we are in our expectations, the better able children are to follow instructions and routines," he says. "It's then easier for them to know which rewards or consequences are linked to certain behaviours."

Consistency and following through are key, and rules should not change, he adds.

"Administer consequences – like timeouts or removal of privileges – immediately rather than later, so that children inculcate habits early on," he says.

It may not always be possible to implement rules immediately when other caregivers like grandparents and domestic helpers are involved, he says.

"They can monitor behaviour, but are likely not the ones dealing out the discipline. You need them to be aligned with you so that your rules remain effective," he says.

"For example, a reward like screen time or a treat is no longer effective when the child finds other sources for it."

Mr Kang adds that rewards can also be as simple as a family outing or time spent with the child, like playing games or watching a movie.

"It could be something you are already doing with them. Turn it into a reward so you can kill two birds with one stone," he suggests.

Mr Lo says he explains his point of view to his children even though it is time-consuming.

"I try to get them on board with my perspective and ask them to share theirs. You can't just scold them all the time – they're not your soldiers."

He used to lose his temper when his son was younger and sometimes resorted to physical punishment, but things have improved over time, as his son grew older and they could communicate better.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD

Avoid giving children labels like "lazy" or "defiant", says Dr Cheung.

"These labels are hard to shake off overnight once they are deployed," she says.

Instead, experts say, seek to understand a child's needs at different stages.

Ms Chee says teaching begins when a child is an infant.

"Infants don't have the language to understand yet, but their bodies can feel and they are internalising things," she says, adding that the tone which parents use in communicating with them is important.

Whining is a way of self-soothing at this age as they do not have the means to express themselves, she says.

Ms Chee says parents can take

steps to prevent negative situations, like distracting the child or childproofing the house and setting boundaries for the young child to explore safely.

Mr Kang says: "They're still developing and are more driven by their emotional rather than thinking brain. So the moment they have a negative emotion, they can't make sense of it and release it in the form of anger and tantrums, and parents bear the brunt of it."

He adds that parents of very young children may need to repeat actions for the children to emulate, in order to teach them new behaviour.

"Teach them how to do things, rather than what not to do. Use visual aids like picture cards or children's books with healthy habits," he suggests.

Dr Cheung says that children learn by social referencing. This means that in ambiguous situations, they turn to their trusted figures for cues and feedback on whether an action is appropriate or not.

Positive reinforcement is another way of encouraging good behaviour. Focus on what the child has

done right instead of telling him what he cannot do, she says.

GIVING KIDS SPACE

As children grow, from the pre-school ages and beyond, they will seek independence.

"The child actually wants to feel empowered and have some control, but parents want them to do things their way, and that's why tensions are heightened at the pre-school age," says Ms Chee.

She suggests giving them some choice over how and when a non-negotiable activity like brushing of teeth is done.

Parents play a mentor or coach role in the primary school years, she says, as children's worlds get bigger and they cope with academic and social demands.

In the secondary school years, teens are grappling with issues of personal identity and start to take risks, she says.

Parents can coach children in thinking and making decisions, instead of feeding them instructions and information, she adds.

Mr Kang says: "Rewards and consequences have less impact in the adolescent years. Parents should discuss issues and problems rather than solely administer consequences."

MANAGING EMOTIONS

Parents in the recent study reported that their mood and stress levels were strong influences that may lead to impulsive physical discipline, as they acted out of anger and frustration.

Ms Chee says that parental authority is not about being loud or hostile. It is showing that you are in charge and in control of yourself.

Parents could take time to reflect and identify their own triggers, she adds.

During situations where your child is acting up, pause for a few seconds to breathe in if you can, she says. Try to identify how you are feeling at that moment, as that will help activate the thinking brain so you do not just act emotionally.

"If we just stay in our emotional brain, we're just triggered... You'll say something that you regret, and it's not helpful for your child," she adds.

You could step away for a short while to gather your thoughts before returning if another parent or caregiver could take over, she says.

Mr Kang says parents could identify other stressors in their lives that may spill over into parenting, and use different coping mechanisms. Professional help is also available for those who have difficulty managing their anger or emotions.

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USEFUL PARENTING RESOURCES

- Ministry of Social and Family Development: str.sg/wVhZ
- Families for Life: str.sg/wVhK
- Parenting platform Help123: str.sg/wVhH
- Care Corner Family Support Services: str.sg/wVhJ, call 6235-4705 or e-mail parenting@carecorner.org.sg
- Touch Community Services: str.sg/wVh9, call 6377-0122 or e-mail tcs@touch.org.sg

To be a study participant: Yale-NUS College's Dr Cheung Hoi Shan is working with the Singapore Children's Society on a follow-up study on parental discipline and children's outcomes. The study will involve 250 families with children in Primary 4. Those interested in taking part can go to www.tinyurl.com/PWStudy2022.