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# Crossing the Line: Is Corporal Punishment Child Abuse?

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# Crossing the Line: Is Corporal Punishment Child Abuse?

Submitted by Jade R. Wallat  
May 2017

MSW Clinical Research Paper

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore when corporal punishment crosses the line into abuse. Qualitative interviews were conducted with five child protection workers who work hand in hand with families and children where abuse allegations have been made. These audio-recorded interviews took place over a period of two weeks and the data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The most common themes that emerged were *lack of resources, financial hardships, upbringing and MN State Statute*. Given the high number of abuse allegations that are made, as well as the number of open child protection cases, it is important that research into why corporal punishment is used should be continued.

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## Crossing the Line: Is Corporal Punishment Child Abuse?

There has been an ongoing debate surrounding the topic of using corporal punishment to discipline children. Some parents believe it teaches children obedience, while others claim corporal punishment can negatively affect children. Corporal punishment by definition is “an act carried out with the intention of causing a child to experience physical pain, but not injury, for the purposes of correction or control of behavior” (Straus, 1979). According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, physical abuse is defined as, “any non-accidental physical injury to the child and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child” (p. 2). The purpose of this study is to determine where corporal punishment crosses the line and becomes child abuse. This study will also go on to discuss the effects on the child when this line is crossed and punishment becomes child abuse.

There are many forms of corporal punishment that parents use. The most common forms of corporal punishment are “spanking, slapping, shoving a child roughly, and hitting with certain objects, e.g., hair brush or a belt” (Straus & Donnelly, 1994, p. 137). According to the Canadian Department of Justice, “child physical abuse involves deliberate use of force against a child, such that it causes injury or puts the child at risk for injury. These types of forces include beating, hitting, shaking, pushing, choking, biting, burning, kicking, or assaulting a child with a weapon,” (Straus & Donnelly, 1994, p. 137).

There are other facts when it comes to child abuse and how the impact of child abuse can have on the children experiencing it, and the community that they are living in. According to child help.org there are financial impacts of child abuse. “Since 2008 lifetime estimates of lost worker productivity, health care costs, special education costs, child welfare expenditures and

criminal justice expenditures added up to \$124 billion,” (childhelp.org, 2014). There is also a connection between substance abuse and child maltreatment. “Of 513 children exposed to drugs in-utero, rates of abuse were two to three times that of other children in the same geographical area. In addition, 14% of men in prison and 36% of women in prison in the USA were abused as children, which is about twice the frequency seen in the general population,” (Swan, N., 1998, childhelp.org). The affects that child abuse can have not only on the child but the community can lead to more criminal activity which leads to more individuals being put in jail. That alone can have a negative outcome on money in which the communities or state rely on. This cycle is like a roundabout: those who were abused as children are more likely to abuse their own children. This leads to more negative behavior and the cycle will just continue when those children decide to have children of their own, (Swan, N., 1998, childhelp.org).

Several pieces of evidence indicate that physical abuse is a social concern. Straus and Stewart (1999) found that, “94% of parents hit toddlers,” which is actually consistent with other studies that have been done in the past. When looking at what child abuse can lead to one must consider that, “mental health disorders and addictions, children who experience child abuse are more likely to be at risk when they grow up for intimate partner violence, alcoholism and alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, smoking and drinking at an early age, depression and suicidal attempts,” (Silverman, A., p. 709-711, 1996).

This topic is directly related to social work as today it remains legal in every state for parents to utilize corporal punishment in disciplining their children. It also remains legal in many other nations. As Emily Douglas, an Assistant Professor in the field of social work states, “the evidence concerning the potential ill effects of using corporal punishment against children is overwhelmingly consistent and yet most of the U.S. and much of the world ignore this

evidence.” (pg. 225) Douglas (2009) goes on to point out that in the past public policy has been utilized effectively to a variety of attitudes and behaviors affecting social issues. Public policy has the potential to also effectively address the issues associated with the use of corporal punishment against children. In this study, I will focus on the experiences of social workers who are current Child Protection Workers (CPS) who work hand in hand with families who have open cases through the County due to allegations of abuse. I will also address how the use of corporal punishment by the parents affects the dynamic between parents and their children.

## **Literature Review**

### **When Corporal Punishment Becomes Physical Abuse**

In many states, corporal punishment becomes child abuse when the child is harmed. Minnesota statute defines physical abuse as “any non-accidental physical injury, mental injury, or threatened injury inflicted by a person responsible for a child’s care. Physical abuse also includes injuries that cannot reasonably be explained by a child’s history of injuries,” (Minn. Stat. 626.556, subd. 2(k)). The statute goes on to define a specific list of actions that are not considered reasonable and goes on to state that, “a physical injury to a child, other than by accidental means, includes, but is not limited to: bruises, scratches, lacerations, abrasions, swelling, burns, as well as more serious injuries causing extensive tissue damage,” (Minnesota Child Maltreatment Intake, Screening and Response Path Guidelines, 2015, p. 48). As noted by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, physical abuse is defined as:

Any physical injury or threat of harm or substantial injury inflicted by a caregiver upon a child other than by accidental means. The impact of physical abuse can range from minor bruises to severe internal injuries and death. Physical abuse



does not include reasonable and moderate physical discipline of a child that does not result in an injury (MN Department of Human Services, 2016).

All parents must have some tools or background for disciplining their children. As noted by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, by the time children are four years of age, “most American parents have used some form of physical punishment, such as spanking, hitting, or another kind of physical force,” (Strauss & Stewart, 1999, p. 55-70). The National Opinion Research Center conducted a survey in 2006 in which survey results reflected that many parents utilize some form of physical punishment. The survey also revealed that approximately two-thirds of the adults surveyed were in agreement that there are times when a child just needs a “good hard spanking.”

### **Upbringing**

A person’s upbringing can influence their attitudes later on in life. “Attitudes are usually defined as a tendency to responding favorably or unfavorably to certain objects, persons, or situations,” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 130). Children watch and learn from what their parents do and teach them. In an interview with Wes Mayberry of The Daily Sentinel (2014), Dr. John Lochman, Director of the Center for Prevention of Youth Behavior Problems at the University of Alabama has stated, “It’s very understandable why today’s parents use corporal punishment because that’s how most of them were raised. Not that it was right back then either, but it’s just what these parents are familiar with,” (p. 2). Lochman went on to explain that when parents consistently resort to corporal punishment as a means of discipline, many times there will be an unintended consequence of teaching the child that frustrating situations are handled through the use of physical aggression. Dr. Laura Bloom, an assistant professor at the University of Alabama in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, stated that “parents often

discipline the way they were disciplined as children. It's a repetitive cycle," (Department of Human Development, Paragraph 1).

If a parent uses physical punishment to teach their child a lesson, there is a significantly higher chance that the child will also use physical punishment later on in life (Bower-Russa, et al., 2001; Deather-Deckard, et al., 2003; Graziano & Namaste, 1990). Wetzels (1997) argued that "physical punishment teaches children that it is legitimate and necessary to hit those you love. Children who grow up in violent families are taught a negative example that restricts their opportunity to develop models for more constructive conflict resolution," (Wetzels, p. 25, 1997). This in turn will teach children that hitting loved ones or acting out in violence is a necessary response especially if they have witnessed or experienced corporal punishment at some point in their own lives.

### **Social Learning Theory**

According to Bandura, "social learning theory is often described as the bridge between traditional learning theory and the cognitive approach. This is because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning," (Bandura, p. 63, 1977). Children watch what others do, such as parents or persons within the family, who provide the child with examples of different behavior which then are observed and imitated. Extending this thought to corporal punishment, children can develop the idea that hitting is okay from observing it, and then be more likely to imitate down the road. So if a child sees their parent use corporal punishment on a sibling for misbehaving, the child is more likely to imitate the same response to someone who did something the child does not like.

Further, the results of a number of studies indicate that "acceptance of violence increases relative to the severity of violent victimization within the family. The acceptance of violence

goes hand in hand with dwindling self-esteem and lesser ability to empathize,” (Wilmer’s, et al., 2002). Studies show that the best predictor for the acceptance of the use of corporal punishment is the amount of corporal punishment received as a child (Bower-Russa, et al., 2001; Deather-Deckard, et al., 2003; Graziano & Namaste, 1990).

### **Effects on Children**

Cognitive ability is defined as “involving conscious mental activities such as thinking, understanding, learning and remembering” (Merriam-Webster). When a child has been disciplined with corporal punishment, there is less verbal communication going on between the parent and the child. Lochman (2014) points out that children disciplined with corporal punishment, although an unintended consequence, are taught that frustrating situations are addressed with physical aggression. A parent who is not using corporal punishment will use more verbal cues to the child as to why they should not do a particular behavior. Lochman (2014) also notes that parents should use a structured approach when instituting consequences as a form of discipline. He further points out that consistently removing privilege as a method of discipline has been proven to be very effective.

Whether the effects of corporal punishment on children are cognitive, developmental or physical, there are many studies that show the difference between the choices of punishment such as using an object or hand (spanking/hitting), or using techniques such as time-outs or having a conversation with the child about what they did wrong. Some research shows a correlation between corporal punishment and the cognitive function of children, and how it could affect children in a negative way. “The most known outcome of corporal punishment is that it increases violent behavior by the punished child,” (Strauss, 1991, p. 156). Straus also reports, “That youth who received “ordinary” corporal punishment were three times more likely to

assault siblings than those who were never physically punished,” (1991, p. 156). It has also been shown “that there is a linear relationship, across several age groups of children, between frequency of corporal punishment and aggressive acts,” (Larzelere, 1986, p. 27).

Further research was conducted by Straus and Paschall (2009), who tested the hypothesis that the use of corporal punishment, such as slapping a child’s hand or spanking, is associated with restricted development of cognitive ability. Over a period of four years, the National Longitudinal Study of Youth conducted a study focused on the cognitive ability of children between the ages of two and four; they were studied along with the cognitive ability of children between the ages of five and nine. As a part of the study, 10 parenting and demographic variables were considered. The study revealed that the children of mothers in both cohorts who used little or no corporal punishment at one time gained cognitive ability faster than children who did receive any type of corporal punishment. The more corporal punishment that is experienced, the more the children fell behind cognitively compared to other children who did not receive corporal punishment.

There are also two additional studies that “at least indirectly are consistent with the theory that corporal punishment interferes with cognitive ability because both found corporal punishment to be characteristics that are related to cognitive ability,” (Straus & Mathur, p. 459, 1996). A more recent study did show the effect of spanking on 2,573 low income White, African American, and Mexican American children ages one, two, and three. This study showed that due to the children being spanked at all three ages, the children displayed lower Bayley mental development scores. (Paolucci & Violato, p. 200, 2004)

Whether or not a child suffers injury from discipline, the act of physical punishment can be detrimental to the parent/child relationship. Physical punishment often results in children

becoming fearful of the parent and the child is less inclined to speak openly and honestly with the parent. As noted by Douglas (2009), Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff completed a study and concluded that a child can feel conflicted when receiving physical punishment from the parent they love and are dependent upon. The physical punishment often times leaves the child feeling powerless and angry. This can create stress in the child making it even more difficult to maintain appropriate behavior. Many times children will act out with peers by becoming aggressive.

It is clear from my research that not all corporal punishment is child abuse. While many professionals would not endorse corporal punishment as a preferred method of discipline, there are parents who continue to use it without crossing the line. However, evidence shows that corporal punishment can diminish cognitive ability and the parent/child relationship. When corporal punishment crosses a line and causes physical harm to a child, this is the point in which it becomes child abuse. Although not all corporal punishment is child abuse, it can have a lasting, long-term negative impact on children who may see aggressive behavior as an appropriate response to situations in which they are frustrated or angry, (Straus & Mathur, p. 462, 1996). Parents must decide for themselves the approach they feel is appropriate for themselves and their families, being mindful that it may be a slippery slope in terms of using corporal punishment on their child. If one spank is not sufficient to correct a behavior, is a harder spank called for?

There are different types of corporal punishment that are used which affect cognitive, behavioral and mental functioning of children. Moreover, corporal punishment can lead to negative outcomes when the child becomes older, and may decide to have children of their own, (Straus & Mathur, p. 471, 1996). I am looking to gather information from child protection

workers to see where the line has been crossed into abuse when parents are using corporal punishment on their children.

### **Conceptual Framework**

There are many parents in the world today that believe the use of corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline. Conversely, there is research today which states a much different viewpoint. The conceptual framework for this study will be focused around the effects of corporal punishment on children, and the point at which corporal punishment crosses the line into abuse. Research and theory support the notion that corporal punishment has a negative effect on children and their upbringing. For this conceptual framework, different parenting styles of parents will be examined, and how these parenting styles can affect children and their relationship with their parents. Attachment theory will also be considered in this discussion.

### **Parenting Styles**

There are four different methods that categorize parents and their parenting styles. These styles are authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and uninvolved parents. With authoritarian parenting, “parents establish the rules and expect that children will follow them without exception,” (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, p. 1, 2010). Parents who use the authoritarian approach to parenting are not allowing the child to become involved with problem solving, figuring out challenges and/or obstacles. The expectation of the parent as stated by Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian is that their children will follow their rules at all times. Usually when children get in trouble or ask questions, the parent will respond with “because I said so.” As a result, children of authoritarian parents do not get an explanation of the rules and there will be no room for negotiation. According to Plotnik,

children with authoritarian parents will receive punishments instead of consequences. This can lead the child to have low self-esteem, and at times they will become aggressive as they are more focused on being mad at their parent(s) for the punishment rather than learning how to make decisions and solve problems (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, p. 1, 2010).

Authoritative parenting includes “parents who do have rules for their children; however, they allow some exceptions to the rule. The parents will often tell children the reasons for the rules and they are more willing to consider a child’s feelings when setting limits,” (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2010, p. 2). It is shown that the children who are raised with authoritative parents appear to be happy and they tend to be more successful. These children are good with making decisions and they will successfully evaluate safety risks on their own. These children also will feel comfortable enough to express their opinions.

In the case of permissive parenting, “the parents tend to be lenient and may only step in when there is a serious problem. There may be a few consequences for misbehavior because parents have an attitude of kids will be kids,” (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, p. 2, 2010). In this kind of parenting, the parents tend to be more of a friend to the child rather than a parental figure. There will be times when they will encourage their children to talk about their problems, but may not discourage bad behaviors. Children with permissive parents tend to struggle academically and will exhibit more behavior problems because they may not appreciate authority figures or rules.

In the case of uninvolved parenting, parents tend to be neglectful, and they often do not meet their children’s basic needs and may expect children to raise themselves. This can be due to the parent’s mental health issues or potentially substance abuse problems. These parents can lack

the knowledge on how to raise their children or may feel overwhelmed by other problems going on at the time, (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2010, p. 3).

It has been shown that children who have uninvolved parents lack not only self-esteem but will suffer academically. Some children can exhibit sadness and have certain behavioral problems.

Looking at the different parenting styles, there are parents who do parent in different ways. At times, their parenting could cross the line and become abuse. Being able to develop a discipline strategy is key. As stated by Plotnik, “there may be parents who fit into more than one category when it comes to parenting styles,” (p. 4, 2010). Therefore, it is important that parents take the time to recognize what they want their children to learn. With certain strategies, children can become responsible adults and be able to make healthy decisions on their own. It appears that authoritarian parenting would be associated more with corporal punishment and physical abuse.

### **Attachment Theory**

According to the first attachment theorist, John Bowlby (2016), attachment is defined as “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings,” (p. 351). Bowlby believed that the bonds between children and their parents have a tremendous impact that follows through life. There was a time when other theorists thought that food was the form that leads to attachment behavior, but Bowlby stated that he believed the demonstration of nurturing and responsiveness were the primary determinants of achieving attachment. The central theme of attachment includes, “Primary caregivers who are available and responsive to an infant’s needs to allow the child to develop a sense of security. The infant or child will know that the caregiver is



dependable, which will create a secure base for the child to explore the world,” (Bowlby, 2016, p. 39).

### **Ainsworth’s “Strange Situation”**

In 1970, psychologist Mary Ainsworth completed a study with a goal to expand upon the work of Bowlby. Ainsworth’s study showed effects of attachment on behavior. The researchers in the study observed children who were between the ages of 12 and 18 months as they responded to situations in which they were briefly left alone and then were reunited with their mothers. Based upon the responses the researchers had observed, Ainsworth came up with and described three major styles of attachment. These three styles were secure attachment, ambivalent-insecure attachment, and avoidant-insecure attachment. (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). This was followed by two researchers named Main and Solomon (1986) who added a fourth attachment called disorganized-insecure attachment. After a number of studies were conducted, it was shown that Ainsworth’s attachment styles of children are associated with certain behavioral patterns.

### **Patterns of Attachment**

For this project, the focus will be on avoidant attachment and disorganized attachment. Avoidant attachment is when the child will avoid their parents or caregivers. These children will show no specific interest or preference between their caregiver and a stranger. It was shown that the avoidant attachment style may be the result of abusive or neglectful caregivers/parents. The child in turn will avoid seeking help in the future, because they were punished for relying on their parents or caregivers, (Ainsworth, et al., 1978).

It has been found that disorganized attachment affects children by their display of confusion and mix of behavior. Research has shown that with the lack of attachment, the child can show inconsistency with behavior and the child may see their caregiver as a source of comfort or a source of fear which leads to the disorganized behavior (Ainsworth, 1991).

There are many reasons why attachment is important. It has been shown by researchers that children who have secure attachment as infants will develop stronger self-esteem and a higher level of resilience as they grow older. Children will be able to perform more independently, have successful relationships and will not experience depression and anxiety as frequently as others, (Schaffer & Emerson, 1964). In contrast, children who experience excessive corporal punishment or abuse will have more extensive negative outcomes through their childhood and into adulthood. They are less likely to form healthy relationships whether with their parents or in an intimate relationship. It was shown above these children will more likely be diagnosed with a mental health condition or have an addiction problem.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to examine the views of Child Protection Workers and how they determine where the line has been crossed when it comes to parents using corporal punishment. The intent was to determine what the workers feel and see every day where discipline, such as corporal punishment, crosses the line into abuse. This research has been focused on the different parenting styles parents use and how that affects how they discipline their children. When interviewing the child protection workers, there was discussion regarding the type of attachment they see between parents and their children.

The design of this study was to be exploratory and qualitative. As stated by Grinnell “the purpose of a qualitative design is to sift and sort the masses of words we have collected from our research participants in such a way that we can derive patterns related to our research question,” (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996, p. 439). The participants answered a series of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to include additional in-depth information in their answers. The researcher conducted a series of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Once collected, the researcher reviewed and conducted a data analysis of the information collected.

### **Sample**

The sample that was used in this research was from a snowball sampling. To obtain the sample, the researcher contacted child protection workers and social workers with which the researcher has a professional connection. The researcher located other participants by inquiring of the first contacts if there are any other social workers who may have an interest in being involved in the study. The researcher will seek a sample size of approximately six respondents. They will include child protection workers who work for Hennepin and Ramsey Counties.

### **Protecting Human Subjects**

The study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas for approval to use human subjects. Before each interview took place, the researcher shared a consent form with each respondent, which noted the purpose of the study and reviewed other protections of the respondents. The consent form outlined confidentiality and followed the guidelines of the University of St. Thomas IRB Human Subject Guidelines. There were other specific protections that were noted on the consent form such as what the researcher will do with notes and audio from the interview. (See Appendices A and B for a copy of the contact letter and consent form.)

## **Data Collection**

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the respondents, using a list of questions which was developed by the researcher. (See Appendix C for interview questions.) During the interview process, some of the questions were altered for clarification if any confusion existed. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes in length and the location was determined by the participant respondents based on their convenience and comfort. Respondents were asked where they had seen the line being crossed when it comes to parents disciplining their children. Respondents were also asked how they determined where the line had been crossed; for example, if there was a state law they needed to follow or there were other things that needed to be considered as well.

## **Data Analysis**

When all of the information had been collected, I started by following the steps of coding the categories and themes of the information. As stated by Grinnell, “there are four tasks to first level coding and they are identifying meaning units, creating categories, assigning codes to categories and refining and reorganizing categories,” (2016, p. 445). I then looked for a meaning. Grinnell states that, “drawing meaning from our data is perhaps the most rewarding step of a qualitative data analysis,” (2016, p. 450). Using this data analysis, I was able to see from the interviews and information collected how to answer the research question.

## **Results**

There were five semi-structured interviews that were conducted between January 17, 2017 and February 3, 2017. Four of the respondents were female, while one respondent was male. Two of the respondents were case managers with Child Protective Services (CPS) in which

they worked with the families once they were referred out by the Child Protection Worker. The other three respondents were active CPS investigators who would go out and meet with the families when allegations of abuse and/or neglect came into the county. The following themes were most commonly identified by the respondents: lack of resources, financial hardships, upbringing and MN state statute.

### **Lack of Resources**

The respondents all touched upon the fact that there are not enough resources available for families to access unless the family has an open child protection case. Many of the available resources have a monetary cost and the majority of the families who need the services cannot afford them. If a family does have an open child protection case, the needed resources are contracted and paid for by the county. When families are unable to afford necessary services to learn a healthy and effective way to discipline their children, they are left feeling defeated and frustrated.

*The community centers usually have sliding scale fees, so that's one of the referrals that I like, in the documentations, it's like, hey, I found an ECFE class near you, you should go, because it's a non-punitive way and it's like the other moms don't have to know that you were sent here by Child Protection; it's just I'm here to learn about being a better parent to my kids and my kid gets to socialize with other kids, but, yeah, there aren't that many resources.*

Resources were discussed by some respondents as being need specific. These particular resources include things like Family Group Decision Making and crisis nurseries.

*We also have something called Family Group Decision Making which is another resource and that is like a facilitator that would meet and help them talk that out, some issue, like why are you running away all the time? We get a lot of runaways with the older kids.*

*A lot of families that we work with are low income or few resources, right, so the stress is so high in that family that if little Johnny is not listening, well, I'm just going to snap. I'm just going to hit him because he's not stopping, or whatever he is doing. So looking at the systems and things like that, I think that has helped a lot and, in regards to like resources, like crisis nurseries. If you feel that you're getting ramped up, send little Johnny to a nursery before you put your hands on your kid. Or the classic, like anger management. Depending upon the situation, like a domestic abuse support group, depending. Those are the main ones that I can think of.*

These quotes illustrate the limited resources available for families who struggle with parenting. It came to light that there are limitations to accessibility if the family does not have an open child protection case. If the family does not have an open case, then the resources are lacking, not available, or have an extremely long waitlist. This can put a strain on the family/parents because they do not know how to appropriately discipline their children, so they do what they know which can lead to allegations of abuse.

### **Hardships**

Each respondent touched upon the hardships they see in the families that they are working with. The hardships ranged from mental illness to chemical dependency and poverty. Importantly, many of these hardships are structural, such as poverty.

*Oh, yes, and just so much mental illness and trauma and alcoholism and domestic violence. And then the resources, I don't do as much with that, because if a family is that in need, I send them on to case management.*

The next quote begins to show how workers noted the structural condition of poverty as a harbinger of physical discipline.

*I've seen it more using more physical discipline, but I always come back to is that because they are the poorest members of our community, so we see them more because – so I don't, but I can say that. I can say that, you know, that's in my experience that that is what has happened, but I don't know why that happens, is what I would say.*

*That child had also lived in severe domestic violence and he started exhibiting behaviors in first grade where he would actually attack females and act out aggressive sexual things on the children. So there's just a huge variation.*

*When you are dealing with parents, a lot of our parents are chemically dependent. They are not able to function normally. A lot of our parents are mentally ill. A lot of our children are mentally ill. So, there's many – there's other factors in there.*

In this final quote, the respondent first talks about lack of parenting. However, it is clear that the structural barriers become especially troubling for single mothers.

*Lack of parenting. Lack of parenting being a really big thing and also very inconsistent parenting. And I also think that people are – what – clients that I work with frequently single moms with a number of children of varying ages. So they are overwhelmed, they're tired, they're maybe working two jobs and trying to parent, so that's – it's -- I don't generally see people intentionally being neglectful or abusive.*

There are many parents and families that are facing hardships such as mental illness, poverty, chemical dependency and domestic violence. These hardships have taken a toll on the parent so when their children are misbehaving and the parent feels discipline is necessary, the situation can quickly escalate into an open CPS case for physical abuse. This goes hand in hand with lack of resources. If parents had access to appropriate resources to address the hardships of mental illness, chemical dependency or domestic violence, they would be able to parent in a healthier way. We must consider the fact that there are resources out there, but many times it is difficult to access them when parents do not possess the necessary resources or knowledge to access the appropriate supports through the community.

### **Upbringing**

Parents who are using corporal punishment on their children are using methods that were used to discipline them when they were growing up. However, the manner in which they are disciplining has not been an effective or healthy way to discipline their children. A few of the respondents did touch upon parents who have used corporal punishment because that is how they were disciplined by their parents.

*It's definitely like, oh, grandma and grandpa did this, so that's why mom and dad do this to their kids, you know. That's a generational thing and so I think that that's step one is like, okay, so how did your parents raise you?*

*I think overall they probably have similar outcomes in regards to like, you know, monkey see, monkey do, it's a strong thing. You know, like, if, for example, you have domestic violence in the home, those children are going to see that and, oh, that's how people show love because that's how mom and dad love each other and then it kind of starts that cycle. I personally believe that it's the same thing with corporal punishment.*



*Probably not the whole, I'm going to hit them to show that I love them, but like that's how you discipline people, so like if you have an issue with somebody at school, well, my dad hit me, so I'm going to hit this kid or, you know, when little people become big people and then they have their own kids, oh, well, my parents hit me when I blah, blah, blah, so I'm going to hit my kids or use corporal punishment or whatever.*

Upbringing, as stated, can have an impact on the line being crossed into abuse for children.

Parents, who were beaten, hit with objects or left with marks tend to do the same thing to their children because that is all they know. This can fall back into the lack of resources as well for those who need additional support when disciplining their children and ensuring that they do not cross the line into abuse.

### **MN Statute**

When it comes to disciplining children, there are laws that have been put into place so that the line does not get crossed into abuse. Each respondent touched upon Minnesota's State Laws that help protect children from being abused. The crucial piece, as illustrated through quotes, is leaving a mark on the child.

*So the legal definitions in Minnesota per statute, you are allowed to use an open hand on your child's bottom over clothing preferably and it cannot leave marks that last more than 24 hours. So there are the transient marks that, you know, if you smack somebody they're going to be red –especially if you have pale skin, so that is the legal way to do corporal punishment. Anything that is, if you use an object, if you leave marks, if you hit on the head, if it's under seven, if you hit on the head, that's an automatic malicious punishment and knocking them upside the head –So anything other than open hand, bottom, no marks is abuse legally.*

While the other quotes primarily reference leaving a mark, this former quote also shows that the type of punishment should be only open hand on the bottom. However, given that a mark must be left for evidence, this may make it difficult to determine what means have been used for punishment.

*That leaving a mark thing, that's the whole thing. If you leave a mark, you know, we are required to report it and if there isn't a mark. So our job is to investigate that, even if there aren't marks, you know. I'm going out today on something where there's no marks, but there is a report of abuse and that happened three months ago.*

*I know under the law that parents are allowed to punish their children in the way they see fit, but we move to the level of abuse when somebody has marks, injuries, bruises, cuts, and someone is truly harmed. That is not allowable under the law. The part that is difficult for me is that often we are dealing with emotional abuse. There are no marks and those scars are so deep.*

*Then if a mark, gee, you're putting me on the spot, it's like a mark that lasts longer than – I don't even want to put a time on it because I can't remember off the top of my head, but definitely more than like five minutes or something like that. Like if it leaves a mark or whatever and it's red for just a little bit, it kind of can go either way, but if it's like, you know, the – somebody gets whipped, for example, and leaves a stinging line on their back, you know, that's – that would be a -- in regards to corporal punishment, what I view corporal punishment is like, you know, there is like a scale, right – or not a scale, but a continuum of physical abuse and there is like a spanking, you know, over the clothes, just so it doesn't leave a mark. Child Protection is like, well, use your discretion. You know, don't hit little Johnny because he ate too many cookies, you*

*know, but that is what it is, and then there is all the way at the end of torture and like physical abuse, leaving a mark and strangulation and all of the criminal minds type ickyness and so to me, corporal punishment is all the way down here at the worst of the worst and then where we draw the line is like right in the middle because we look at if it leaves a mark, then it's abuse through the County's eyes, too.*

### **Discussion**

The use of corporal punishment by parents is a controversial topic among parents and families. There are many parents or families who feel using corporal punishment is a beneficial method to discipline their children. Conversely, there are those who do not use corporal punishment due to a number of different reasons or beliefs, some based on religious or personal preferences in discipline. Parenting is not easy, but there are times where parents are using other means in an attempt to get their children to behave. Respondents touched upon the kinds of physical abuse and parenting styles they are seeing with their clients and how parents who think they are disciplining their children are ending up with open child protection cases for abuse.

### **Physical Discipline**

Respondents discussed the circumstances in which a family acquires an open case through Child Protective Services (CPS) and how the parents are responding to the actions that resulted in an open case. Initially, CPS workers who are tasked with investigations receive a report from the intake line. If the case is screened for abuse, it is sent to the investigators and they follow up on the report that was made. The physical acts that CPS typically sees is with parents who are hitting their children on the head or smacking their face, whooping their children with objects such as shoes, hangers, extension cords, phone chargers, sticks from blinds and other objects that can leave marks. When a mark is left on a child, CPS investigators speak with

the parents in an attempt to understand why they used that form of corporal punishment.

Respondents touched upon the reasons some parents have used objects to discipline, explaining that due to culture or upbringing they feel they cannot use their hands for punishment because their religion discourages using skin to skin contact; therefore, they opt to use objects instead of their hands.

Families are then educated on why it is unacceptable to use objects to discipline their children. They are also educated on the Minnesota statute regarding use of corporal punishment. Respondents stated that most of the time parents do not realize that what they are doing is considered abuse. There are, however, parents who openly state that they won't stop what they are doing because that was how they were raised. CPS workers work with the families through case management to get resources such as classes or trainings for the parents, so that the parents can learn a proper way to discipline their children. Most families are able to overcome having an open CPS case, but some continually have open CPS cases because they are unwilling to change the way they discipline their children.

### **Parenting Styles**

When asked what type of parenting styles the respondents see, they touched upon a few main styles that appear with families. Parents as stated by a respondent, "parent out of trauma". The parents do not necessarily have a healthy attachment to their children and this was noticed by respondents who worked with mothers who had children out of rape. They would also see a lack of parenting, parents who would not stop their children from doing things that were not okay or disregarding the behavior because they did not know how to handle it. According to what the respondents have witnessed, the lack of parenting was the result of the parent being tired, over worked, suffering from chemical dependency, or children exhibiting mental illness

that becomes out of control at home. Parents turn to what they think is parenting by using physical force to try to stop their children from behaving a certain way. Overall, it was established that there is a lack of parenting or overly permissive parents and then there are parents using more authoritarian parenting with their children.

### **Relationship of Findings to Literature**

There were a number of things that corresponded with the literature that was presented. The first correlation involved the statements made by the child protection workers regarding what is considered abuse. According to the literature; “Any physical injury or threat of harm or substantial injury inflicted by a caregiver upon a child other than by accidental means. The impact of physical abuse can range from minor bruises to severe internal injuries and death. Physical abuse does not include reasonable and moderate physical discipline of a child that does not result in an injury” (MN Department of Human Services, 2016). I believe this is an important point for the reason that parents, families and caregivers need to know what the laws are regarding the use of corporal punishment to prevent things from quickly getting out of hand leading to the opening of a child protection case.

Upbringing was the next area that correlated with the literature previously discussed. Respondents touched upon the thought that parents who are using corporal punishment use it because that was how they were raised and it is what they know. According to Dr. John Lochman, Director of the Center for Prevention of Youth Behavior Problems at the University of Alabama, “It’s very understandable why today’s parents use corporal punishment because that’s how most of them were raised. Not that it was right back then either, but it’s just what these parents are familiar with,” (p. 2). With the findings from the child protection workers, it is important to remember that children see and hear their parents’ behavior and words. Children

will follow the example of their parents and if they are being hit or see someone else in the home being hit, children will likely grow up thinking that it is acceptable and necessary to hit those that you love when that person has had unacceptable behavior.

When it came to the type of parenting that the child protection workers see throughout their work with families, it was interesting to note that many of the respondents stated that there is a lack of parenting. This lack of parenting is witnessed in parents who are uninvolved or overly permissive. This correlates with my recent literature findings. In the case of uninvolved parenting, being overwhelmed by life circumstances, including mental illness or substance abuse problems, can impact the ability to parent (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2010). Plotnik and Kouyoumdjian make a strong statement that I believe ties everything together with regard to lack of parenting:

In permissive parenting, the parents tend to be more of a friend to the child rather than a parental figure. There will be times when they will encourage their children to talk about their problems, but may not discourage bad behaviors. Children with permissive parents tend to struggle academically and will exhibit more behavior problems because they may not appreciate authority figures or rules (p. 4-5, 2010).

I have found similar themes between my respondents and the research. However, there is a need for additional research in an effort to answer the question, why does corporal punishment occur? I believe it would be beneficial to conduct a study or research with regard to children who have experienced corporal punishment and how it has affected them in childhood and throughout their lives. Respondents touched upon this subject, but valuable information could be obtained

by speaking with children and hearing from them how they felt when experiencing corporal punishment and how this has affected them on a day-to-day basis.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study had its strengths and its limitations. The strength of this study was the qualitative nature. Even though the interview guide was used with each respondent, it gave them the opportunity to expand on their experiences and thoughts regarding each question. Limitations of this study included the years of service with Child Protection Services and the area of work the worker was in. Three out of the five respondents have been on the job less than six months so it limited their experience. There were workers who did not do direct investigation, but worked with case management and that made a difference on what they would see in regard to families and their cases with CPS. Another limitation that was witnessed was the respondents discussing their understanding of the Minnesota Statutes around using corporal punishment on children.

### **Implications of Social Work Practice and Research**

One implication that is needed in terms of research would be the examination of parents who are facing hardships and do not have the necessary resources to effectuate change. As stated in the literature review, there are articles and studies available that reflect the fact that there are parents who use corporal punishment, but these articles and studies may not touch upon what is going on in the parent's life that may be a contributor to their parenting style. Hardships, as stated by the respondents, make parenting even more difficult when one does not have control of one's own life. These parents need to be healthy and stable to parent in a healthy way. While corporal punishment is used, there is more to the complete picture. There is a need for further research on the impact of hardships on parenting. A review of open child abuse cases could be done to collect information regarding the hardships parents are currently facing. An additional

opportunity for research would be to apply the attachment styles that are being used with authoritarian parenting, and collect the data through child protection workers. Data submitted from actual CPS cases would be cataloged in an anonymous fashion. This research could highlight why these incidences of corporal punishment occur.

There are a few implications for social work practice that arise from this research. One implication would be to focus more on education relative to parenting and the development of more resources for families who are struggling to parent their children in a healthy way. A few respondents touched upon the fact that children do not come with an instruction manual and that it would be beneficial if there were resources available for parents addressing appropriate ways to discipline their children. For example, community resources such as literature, classes, lectures or facilitated group discussion could focus on issues to consider in parenting along with providing parents with options on how to discipline their children based on what the child has done. Expectations and discipline with regard to age appropriateness could also be topics for discussion.

Parenting can be frustrating, but using corporal punishment can lead to long term affects that can damage not only the children, but the relationship between parent and child. It is also worth noting that parents who end up with open CPS cases do not necessarily realize that what they have done is considered abuse. Education, in addition to resources, is key so parents who do not think that what they are committing is abuse can take a step back and look at the bigger picture; so they can parent their children in a healthy way, while still maintaining healthy boundaries and relationships with their children.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Contact Letter (Email)**

Good Afternoon,

I am following up on an email I sent to you earlier in December regarding your participation in an interview for my research project as a part of my graduate program at the University of St. Thomas. I have now received approval to begin the interview process. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I would be happy to meet at your place of employment or any other location that would be comfortable for you.

I would like to schedule the interview between January 17th and February 3rd. I will accommodate any time that works with your schedule. Please let me know a date and time that is convenient for you. I very much look forward to meeting with you!

Thank you.

Jade Wallat, MSW Student

**Appendix B**  
**Consent Form**  
**University of St. Thomas**  
**Crossing the Line: Is Corporal Punishment Child Abuse?**  
**983881-1**

You are invited to participate in a research study about Corporal Punishment and child abuse. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a current Child Protection Worker for Hennepin County. You are eligible to participate in this study because you work with not only children but their families who may have been abused or neglected. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Jade Wallat, graduate student at the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to examine the views of Child Protection Workers and how they determine where the line has been crossed when it comes to parents using corporal punishment. The intent is to determine what the workers feel and see every day where discipline, such as corporal punishment, crosses the line into abuse. This research will focus on the different parenting styles parents use and how that affects how they discipline their children. When interviewing the child protection workers, there will be discussion about what kind of attachment they see parents have with their children. The design of this study will be exploratory and qualitative. As stated by Grinnell "the purpose of a qualitative design is to sift and sort the masses of words we have collected from our research participants in such a way that we can derive patterns related to our research question." (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell p. 439 1996). The participants will answer a series of open-ended questions which will allow the participants to include additional in-depth information to their answers. The researcher will conduct a series of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Once collected, the researcher will review and conduct a data analysis of the information collected.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Participate in an audio recorded interview. Your time commitment for the interview will be approximately 30-45 minutes. This interview will take place at the Hennepin County Child Services Center in Minneapolis, MN.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

This study has no direct risks, and there is no direct benefit in this study.

### **Privacy**

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include the audio recording for the

interview, and notes from the interview. Consent forms, audio recordings and interview answers will be stored in the primary investigators home office in a locked drawer. Jade Wallat will be the only one with a key and access to the locked drawer. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim within a month. The device being used is a digital audio device without Wi-Fi access. When the digital audio device has been used it will be transported backed to the locked drawer at Jade Wallat's home office. In order to transcribe, Jade will use Word through UST's OneDrive business server. The internet access will be obtained through UST internet connection via Ethernet cable. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Hennepin County Child Services center or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. You can withdraw by emailing me at wall6429@stthomas.edu... You are also free to skip any questions I may ask during the interview.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Jade Wallat. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at [763-210-8279 or email me at wall6429@stthomas.edu]. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

---

**Signature of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Date**

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**Signature of Researcher**

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**Date**

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Schedule**

1. Could you give me some background as it relates to your work as a CPS worker?
2. When working with various families, what were some parenting styles you noticed?
3. How do you define corporal punishment? How do you define abuse?
4. What would you say is the impact of corporal punishment on children? Does it depend on the child? Why or why not?
5. Are there resources available for parents who use corporal punishment? If so, how are they able to change their parenting style?
6. How effective are the resources in changing parenting styles of parents who use corporal punishment?
7. Where do you see the line being crossed when parents use corporal punishment? How does state law inform your decision about corporal punishment being abuse?