

## Child Disciplining Practices in Kerala

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This study was done to examine the type and severity of disciplinary practices adopted by parents in Kerala. 1668 mothers, aged 18-49, participated in face-to-face interviews as part of a cross-sectional, population-based survey covering rural, urban and coastal areas. One child from each family was randomly selected as the index child. The interview focused primarily on disciplinary practices. 62% of the mothers reported using severe verbal discipline and 50% of mothers reported using severe physical abuse. Results suggest a high prevalence of normative and abusive practices in the community with mothers playing a prime role in disciplining the child.

**Keywords:** *Child disciplining, Child abuse, Physical abuse, Verbal abuse.*

A complex network of poverty, beliefs and cultural attitudes is involved in deciding the definition of child abuse and neglect in India(1). Child physical abuse and neglect are important public health problems and recent estimates of the prevalence suggest that they are considerably more common than hitherto realized(2). Suman(3), noting the paucity of systematic and quantitative data related to child physical and emotional abuse in India, called for research to document the prevalence of these phenomena and to identify the interacting factors that support or discourage child maltreatment within the family environment. Male and female children experience similar rates of physical abuse(4). In 2004, nearly 152250 children and adolescents were confirmed victims of physical abuse in the United States and of the 4 types of child maltreatment (neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse), physical abuse is second to neglect, constituting approximately 18% of the total(5). There is a strong correlation between early childhood abuse and enduring neurobiological changes in specific regions of the brain(6). These neurobiological changes are often reflected in psychopathology and lifelong maladaptive

behaviors. The objective of the study was to document the patterns of child disciplining practices prevalent in Kerala and to describe the type and severity of disciplining practices.

### METHODS

The study was done as a population based cross sectional survey in Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. The samples were selected separately from rural, urban and coastal areas. Study subjects were women in the age group of 18-49 with at least one child less than 18 years of age. One subject per family was randomly included in the study and the same methodology was followed in the selection of index child. The sample size was estimated based on the estimation of prevalence rates in the defined populations with a variability of 0.4 and precision of 2% and with a 95% confidence interval. The minimum sample size needed in each stratum was estimated as 700 each from rural and urban areas and 200 from coastal areas. The required sample size was drawn using a multi-stage sampling technique.

Child disciplinary practices were assessed using a modified version of the Parent Child Conflict Tactics Scale(7), which has been previously used in

India(8) and other Asian countries(9). For this investigation, the disciplinary practices were classified as belonging to one of five different categories: nonviolent discipline (four items); moderate verbal/ psychological abuse (four items); severe verbal/psychological abuse (three items); minor physical abuse (ten items); moderate physical abuse (three items) and severe physical abuse (eight items). For the analysis, the values for the categories of disciplinary practices were dichotomized (by combining the response options – sometimes/many times) to simply indicate whether that mode of discipline was used or not used within the specified time period. After obtaining institutional ethical clearance, data were collected by trained female social workers and quality assurance was done by the field supervisors. The analysis was done using SPSS for windows.

## RESULTS

Among 1668 mothers who participated in this study, 46% were from rural areas, 41.9% from urban areas and 11.9% from coastal areas. When asked about mother's perception about child disciplining practices, nearly half of the mothers expressed that it was very easy. Compared with rural and urban mothers, more mothers from coastal areas considered child disciplining as a very difficult task.

**Table I** shows the prevalence of child disciplining practices among parents. It was observed that severe verbal abuse was uniform

across rural, urban and coastal mothers. In contrast severe verbal abuse was more prevalent among fathers in the coastal area. Highest prevalence of severe physical abuse was resorted to by rural mothers. On the whole, more mothers resorted to harsh child disciplinary practices including verbal and physical abuse as compared to fathers.

## DISCUSSION

This study is the first attempt to explore the magnitude of child disciplining practices in the Kerala state. Both physical and verbal abuse was found to be practiced in a high proportion of parents. Verbal forms of abuse like calling by names of animals, not talking or shouting were found to be more practiced than threatening to leave, threatening with a stick or cane etc. On the whole, it can be observed that mothers are using more positive methods of disciplining than fathers, irrespective of their place of residence. Non-violent disciplining practices were resorted to by 82.5% of parents, suggesting that there is high community acceptance for non-violent disciplining practices. More than 80% of rural mothers used some mode of nonviolent disciplinary practices with their children, primarily "explaining why a behavior was wrong" or "explaining what to do as right thing". 37.9% of parents resorted to severe physical abuse and 43.8% parents resorted to severe verbal abuse. The pattern of harsh disciplinary practices was found to be practiced by both parents, but more by mothers. This could be due to the prime role played by mothers in

**TABLE I** PREVALENCE OF CHILD DISCIPLINING PRACTICES AMONG PARENTS

Nature of Practice	Parent involved	Rural N=768 n (%)	Urban N=700 n (%)	Coastal N=200 n (%)	Total N=1668 n (%)
Non-violent disciplining	Mother	696 (90.6)	624 (89.1)	155 (77.5)	1475 (88.4)
	Father	615 (80.1)	550 (78.6)	115 (57.5)	1280 (76.7)
Moderate verbal abuse	Mother	622 (80.9)	596 (85.1)	138 (69.0)	1356 (81.3)
	Father	456 (59.4)	443 (63.3)	147 (73.5)	1046 (62.7)
Severe verbal abuse	Mother	481 (62.6)	424 (60.6)	56 (28.0)	961 (57.6)
	Father	201 (26.2)	163 (23.3)	137 (68.5)	501 (30.0)
Moderate physical abuse	Mother	657 (85.5)	563 (80.4)	65 (32.5)	1285 (77.0)
	Father	441 (57.4)	332 (47.4)	117 (58.5)	890 (53.3)
Severe physical abuse	Mother	396 (51.6)	336 (48.0)	39 (19.5)	771 (46.2)
	Father	267 (34.8)	213 (30.4)	13 (06.5)	493 (29.5)

### WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS?

- Non-violent disciplining practices, severe physical abuse and severe verbal abuse are used by 82.5%, 37.9% and 43.9% of parents in Kerala, respectively.
- Both positive methods of disciplining and harsh disciplinary practices, are used more commonly by mothers than fathers.

disciplining their children, as she is the one available at home most of the time. In the context of rapid demographic transition in Kerala, the intra-familial relationships have changed. The primary responsibility of child disciplining and child rearing is mainly in the hands of mothers. The study findings highlighted the need for family intervention programs for parents emphasizing positive child disciplining practices.

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