

Parents' Perceptions of Child Abuse and Child Discipline in Bangkok, Thailand

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Background: Violation of a child's right to protection is an issue for children all over the world. In Thailand, the greatest barrier to intervening in child abuse issues is the lack of awareness and the positive attitudes and beliefs on using violence as a way to discipline children. The incongruent definition used amongst Thai society and relevant sectors, causes incidences to be under reported and an obstacle to child survival and development.

Objective: The present study is a qualitative study and aims to explore the perceptions of child abuse and child discipline definitions amongst parents in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area in order to extend broader knowledge for interpretation, definitions and to differentiate the line between child abuse and child discipline.

Material and Method: Focus group discussions were used as the primary data collection method and content analysis was applied as the data analysis.

Results: The results produced two categories of parents' perceptions regarding child abuse and discipline. First, was the perception of the causes of child punishment and child discipline, and second was the meaning and difference between child abuse and child discipline.

Conclusion: The study results would be beneficial for policy makers, health and related sectors to understand the meaning of the terms used amongst family members in order to apply and promote child protection strategies in culturally appropriate ways.

Keywords: Child abuse, Child discipline

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Child protection is an issue for children all over the world. Children have rights to special protection against maltreatment because of their powerlessness. The UN convention on the rights of the child (CRC) includes survival rights, protection rights, development rights, and participation rights^(1,2). Violations of children's rights to protection were found widespread in Thailand recently. Yet, the greatest barrier to intervene in the issue is the lack of problem awareness and knowledge amongst society regarding child rights. In addition, positive attitudes and beliefs on using violence as a way to discipline children, including the assertion of rights over the child among family members, have been embedded from generation to generation over the decades. Moreover, the incongruent definition used amongst Thai society and relevant sectors causes incidences to be under reported and an obstacle to

child survival and development. Child victims are at risk of shortened lives, poor physical and mental health, behavioral and education problems, poor parenting skills later in life, homelessness, vagrancy, and displacement^(1,3). These risks affect society as a whole and result in a subsequent cost rises in health and social welfare⁽³⁾.

According to WHO's Global Burden of Disease data, around 875,000 children and adolescents under the age of 18 years old died as a result of an injury or violence in 2002⁽⁴⁾. Most victims are abused by their parents⁽⁵⁾. The physical vulnerability and limitations of children result in physical and mental dependency, which is most likely the cause for physical abuse and neglect from parents or caretakers. Besides, the children's immature mental conditions increase the tendency of irritation for parents. In Thailand, the available statistics of child victims who need help has been increasing almost every year^(6,7). Statistics from the Health Care Service Development Office⁽⁸⁾, Ministry of Public Health, revealed that 19,068 cases of woman and child abuse were found in the year 2007. This amounted to 52 cases per day. From 2004-2007, 60-70

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percent of child sexual abuse cases were reported, followed by 20-30 percent for physical abuse, 3-7 percent of emotional abuse, and 2-4 percent for neglect. Child abuse is the result of many factors coming together in a complex interplay. The ecological model views interpersonal violence as the outcome of the interaction between many factors at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels⁽⁹⁾. Within the family, negative parenting^(10,11), a non-functioning family structure, the cultural justification for the use of force against children-including family social isolation-create important contributions to the child protection problem⁽¹²⁾. Norms, values, beliefs, and social and cultural justifications, not only play a very significant role on the interpretation of harsh discipline and child abuse, but also on child protection efforts. The belief of parents in asserting their rights over the child can especially be used as a reason to commit violence or harsh discipline.

Child abuse and neglect, sometimes also referred to as child maltreatment, is defined in the world report on violence and health⁽⁴⁾ as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power⁽³⁾”. However, this research focused on child physical abuse and its victims, with their parents as the perpetrators.

The ratification of the convention on the Rights of the Child⁽¹³⁾ resulted in the Child Protection Act of 2003 in Thailand, which focused mainly on the problems of abuse and neglect toward children (Article 4, 25, and 26). The act used the term torture by means of child abuse and defined the definition as ‘any commission or omission of acts which cause the deprivation of freedom of, or mental or physical harm to a child; sexual abuses committed against a child; inducement of a child to act or behave in a manner which is likely to be mentally or physically harmful to the child, unlawful or immoral, regardless of the child’s consent⁽¹⁴⁾’. Unfortunately, the law is not well known amongst parents and guardians. The definition seems to be broad, covering all aspects of child abuse and is difficult for a lay person, including parents, to comprehend. However, there is no line to differentiate between the term child abuse and child physical discipline appearing in the law. As the definition of terms is influenced by norms, customs, values, and beliefs of people in a specific geographical area, the way to interpret and define the terms used for child

abuse and child discipline is challenging. This consequently results in-debate among law professionals and in the health care sector in terms of practical law enforcement. It also creates obstruction of the CRC purpose to create a protective environment for children in order to increase a child’s opportunity to grow up physically and mentally healthy.

The aim of the present study is to explore the perceptions of child abuse and child discipline definitions amongst parents with an expectation to contribute to the usefulness of the present study to provide and extend broader knowledge for interpretation, definition, and to differentiate the line between the term child abuse and child discipline. It would also be beneficial for policy makers, health and related sectors to understand the meaning of the term used amongst family members in order to apply and promote child protection strategies in a culturally appropriate way.

Material and Method

A qualitative study was employed as the research method in the present study. Motivation for this research arose from expressions of interest and concern regarding the issue of parenting in Bangkok, Thailand. Focus group discussions were used as the data collection method. The Content analysis was applied as the data analysis for the present study.

Participants

The participants were parents of students in grades 5 and 6 selected by purposive sampling inclusive of the parents of students with academic excellence, and parents of students with academic and behavioral problems from 3 government primary schools in Bangkok. They were selected by simple random sampling. Twelve focus group discussions with 96 participants were done by means of data saturation.

Research instruments

The instrument for data collection was focus group interview guidelines developed by the principal researcher. The focus group question route asked about the points of view regarding the child abuse situation in Thailand, the behavior or action for notification of child abuse, and the difference between child abuse and child discipline. Tools including tape recorders were used during focus group interviews. Two research assistants were trained regarding the data collection procedures, and provided assistance as note takers, facilitators and co coordinators for the research

activities, as well as interview transcribers.

Data collection

The research was reviewed/approved by the Human Subject Review Board from the Faculty of Public Health, Mahidol University-Number MUPH2010 140. Data were collected via focus group discussions and field notes. The interviews lasted one and a half to two hours each. During each interview, note taking, clarification of questions, and eliciting the elaboration of responses was accomplished by the principal researcher and research assistants. Upon completion of data collection, the researcher reflected on the observations, interactions and discussions, impressions from the field notes, as well as the transcribed interviews taken verbatim from the audio tape-recordings.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the study, criteria for developing an effective evaluation of qualitative research was employed^(15,16). Credibility of the present study was established by members checking from participants and peer debriefing processes. Transferability of the present study to other contexts was established by providing a data base with sufficient information and detailed descriptions of the means utilized. Dependability and conformability in the present study, were established by providing enough information and an audit trail.

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on content analysis. The researcher conducted inductive content analysis by applying an open coding strategy to analyze and transcribe verbatim from 12 focus group discussions. With all data collected, the researcher reflected on the observation made, along with the interactions and discussion, transcriptions from audio taped-recordings, as well as the records of researcher impressions in field notes. The description technique was used to examine the discussion of child abuse and child discipline issues. The examination began with reading the transcript of each discussion and looking for potential meaning in the discussions. The researcher also sorted the information according to shared experiences. This was accomplished by examining and coding the discussions line by line, underlining key words or phrases, and then writing those words in the right hand margin. Texts with similar words or phrases were arranged together and then cover terms were created

for these groupings. The textual categories were then examined for relationships among categories so as to answer the research questions..

Results

Most participants in focus group discussions were mothers, with the second most being fathers. Some of the participants were grandmothers and grandfathers. Only a few were aunts, sisters, or cousins. Female participants were the majority of the participants. The focus groups produced two categories including: first, the cause of child punishment; and second, the meaning and difference between child abuse and child discipline. These were defined as follows:

The causes of child punishment and child discipline Unbearable behavior

The focus groups' results revealed the child's behaviors that parents were impatient with, which caused harsh punishments. These behaviors included: lying, returning back home late, not being punctual, dangerous role playing, stealing, rude words and gesturing towards parents, aggressive/arguing/yelling behavior, game and TV addiction, hostile reactions, dissatisfactory behavior, stubborn/hot tempered tantrums and self-centeredness, fighting among peers, messy behavior and not helping with house work, irresponsibility towards homework, skipping class, and disrespectful behavior. The groups of parents tended to think that abusive actions happened because of those triggering behaviors from the children. Examples respondents gave on a child's behavioral problem were as follows:

"For example, they use Ku-Mung [Thai pronoun meaning rude words], if so...That would be the problem because it is super rude for us (parents)" K514.

"I slap her mouth...I don't remember what she was arguing about...It is just because she was yelling and shouting...Then I (grandmother) feel angry and strike out" K515.

"Dislikable behavior...When she postponed her duty of doing housework...Her postponement behavior making me to continue the tasks of mopping the floor, washing dishes. She said 'wait, wait, wait' then did nothing..." T614.

Parents' history of being a victim

The majority of the parents have a history of experiencing harsh discipline during their childhoods. The most common harsh discipline found was being

beaten on the head and buttocks and being beaten with bamboo, belts, or sticks. Most of the parents indicated that they used to be disciplined by spanking and beating as well as scolding and yelling. However, it was not considered child abuse by them. It was just the way of creating discipline by parents. They thought they deserved it since they made the mistake.

Meaning and difference between child abuse and child discipline

Child abuse meaning

The meaning of child abuse in the parents' view could be grouped into six categories as follows:

Physical abuse:

Severe or harsh discipline, which necessitates medical treatment, committed in anger, with no reason, sarcastic (revise choice of word) purposes, and committed regularly.

Physical injuries and bullying such as throwing objects at, hitting and punching, smashing, pulling sharply, dragging, slapping, hitting, beating, kicking, stepping on the child, burning with iron or hot water until harming to the point of death.

Emotional abuse:

Broken or divorced family causes emotional pain

Threatening

Driven out of the home

Using the child as a target for expression of anger

Using the child as the target of anger from an intimate conflict

Sexual abuse:

Rape/Child sex trade

Deception/Obscenity/Seduction

Neglect:

Neglect/negligence: including physical, educational, and medical neglect (not providing food or skipping meals, giving no education, giving no treatment)

Limits on freedom:

Confining/restraining/binding/limiting the child's freedom

Forcing/coercing/using power over

Exploitation:

Exploiting/child labor/child begging/homelessness/vagrancy

Strong or Rude words to effect an emotional feeling

Kidnapping/child trafficking

Examples of response details regarding the

meaning of child abuse were as follows:

"Like I said, child abuse is when the parent goes to work and leaves them at home alone" T511.

"Abuse is acting with no reason...It doesn't mean only beating...It is like forcing the child to drink a cat's urine or eat its feces...This could be called abuse..." K513.

"Threatening with words is emotional abuse...beating, with holding pocket money...Driving the child out of the home...All these resulted in mental effects on the children...Even if the child stayed at home, they still would not feel happy" D511.

"Like us...We only beat in the normal way...we just beat 3 or 4 times and it doesn't leave any lesions...but if some parents beat without concern for the location of the strike...like beating on the back...beating kindergarten children...pushing, slapping till the small body of a child falls to the ground. This is not called discipline..." K513.

"In cases of committing child abuse, there would be no reason for spanking. No cause for spanking...Just wanting to spank...Just like she [another parent in group] said that they might get angry from somewhere outside or having a conflict with someone else outside and using the child as the target of expressing their anger...If they teach, they would have a reason for beating...If not you cannot do it..." K517.

"Suppose, it is child abuse...the beating must be a regular beating...It is a pity for the child... if they mean to discipline...only one spanking is enough for them to remember that they are wrong...We need to spank together with teaching...which means discipline not abuse" K514.

Non-abusive behavior

The parents did however describe some behaviors as being non abusive behaviors. For example, helping the family earn money, household helping in cases where the child is more than 5 years old, and beating for discipline purposes. The following statement is an example mentioned by them during focus group discussion:

"I have sold garlands since I was young... I used to sell them... These children are not forced... They do it because they need to help their parents earn money... Around the traffic lights in this area, you will find one child selling garlands... it is just because his family has a low economic status that he needs to help his grandmother because his parents left him to stay with his grandmother to take care of her... These children are not forced..." D628.

Child discipline meaning

The meaning of child discipline as perceived by parents could be grouped as follows:

1. Delegating work well suited for a child's physical limitations.
2. Teaching the difference between good and bad and how to choose good friends.
3. Determining rules and time management.
4. Fostering good consciousness through advice, teaching morals and dharma for children.
5. Rewarding and promoting proper and good behavior such as studiousness.
6. Encouraging self discipline and responsibility
7. Teaching to be obedient, good, and having good social skills such as respecting elders.
8. Teaching and talking with reason, and giving explanations.
9. Showing the child good examples of desired/undesired behavior with respect to children's dignity.

Difference between harsh discipline and child abuse

The group discussions among parents showed how to differentiate harsh discipline and child abuse. Displayed in Table 1.

The following statement is an example mentioned by them during focus group discussion:

“They are our sons...Parental beatings would never be severe...but abuse, we cannot do it to our kids...I don't know how to explain...We (as parents) need to spank them for sure...but spank for discipline...for child abuse, you need to spank everyday...regularly...and consequently has an effect on the child” K525.

“Child discipline is to beat them for teaching... It is the lesson for them to have self discipline... Suppose that after teaching, they don't obey. It must be spanking. It is normal. It is different from child abuse. We spank because we teach. We don't spank because of anger or by means of making or causing them death or injury or bleeding which could be called child abuse. But beating for teaching is part of discipline” K626.

“Beatings, we need to concentrate...we need to know which part of the child's body we can beat and which part we cannot, especially on the head or back... We normally beat on the legs or buttocks...but we need to spank hard enough... It doesn't mean just a small beating... I never feel regret in beating them...because I know I beat them for a purpose” T615.

In conclusion, child abuse is corporal punishment administered with a hot temper or from angry parents, which causes significant injury indicated by lesions, bleeding, severe pain, or even death, and, given without reason or for every slight mistake made

Table. 1 Difference between harsh discipline and child abuse

Harsh discipline	Child abuse
- Beating with no wound but may cause red lesions	- Beating leaving lesions, bruises, bleeding, wounds, he matoma, hurt, or a need for medical treatment
- Beating for a reason (and telling the child the reason)	- Beating with anger, with a revengeful purpose, personal attitude, beat with hateful feeling, using the child as the anger target or conflict target
- Beating with love and good intentions	- Beating with the purpose of humiliation or sarcasm to ward others
- Beating for punishment for the child to know what is wrong and what is right	- Beating with utmost energy, not concerned with developmental and physical limitations
- Beating together with teaching by means of discipline, teaching about negative behavior	- Beating with the purpose of hurting or harming
- No severe beatings	- Nonstop beating without listening to the request to stop or the confession from the child
- Beating for a warning and not to commit or repeat the negative behavior	- Beating without reason, without anything wrong
- No regular beatings, beat and stop	- Beating regularly, repeatedly, frequently
- Beating concerning the child's safety in bodily locations such as hand, buttocks, legs, thighs and not beating on the child's head	- Beating to effect a child's emotions
- The parents are the perpetrators	- Step father and step mother is the perpetrator

by the child.

Discussion

The results of this study also revealed that participants tend to commit harsh physical discipline on their children for unbearable behaviors such as rude words and gesturing, aggressiveness, arguing, and yelling. These behaviors were the major triggers caused by the parents to commit harsh discipline on their children. This is congruent with Belsky⁽¹⁰⁾ who mentioned that the children's own behavior may function to elicit or maintain child abuse actions. For adolescents, the behavior of independent development is normally interpreted by the parents as rebellious behavior⁽¹⁷⁾. This is congruent to Berk⁽¹⁸⁾ who mentioned that adolescents are more likely to show strong argumentative behavior against their parents and consequently result in violence from parents.

The results of the present study showed that the majority of parents have a history of harsh discipline during their childhood. However, it was not considered as child abuse by them. It is congruent with Milner⁽¹⁹⁾ who proposed that child physical abusers often have a childhood history of family problems including receiving or observing maltreatment. The more parents were physically punished as children, the greater the rate of frequency in abusing their own children⁽²⁰⁾. This is also supported by WHO⁽⁹⁾ which indicated that personal history influences how individuals behave and their likelihood of becoming a victim or a perpetrator of violence.

According to WHO⁽³⁾, child abuses were classified into five major types: physical abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and exploitation. In this study, the participants indicated five major types of child abuse actions similar to WHO classifications. However, there are additional types of child abuse emerging. Living with a divorced or a broken family could be considered as child abuse for the groups of participants in the present study, since they felt it causes emotional harm to the children. It is congruent with the present study of Auemaneekul⁽²¹⁾ in Northern Thailand where the results indicated that emotional abuse is not only the words from parents but also the witnessing of intimate violence within the family and living in a broken family. This is supported by the child protection act of 2003 in Thailand⁽¹⁴⁾ which mentioned child abuse as any commission of acts that cause mental harm to a child. The present study of Auemaneekul⁽²¹⁾ also included child abuse as the behavior of using a child for the purposes of family

conflict bargaining. Moreover, the enforcement of using strict discipline and limiting the child's freedom of activities also could be counted as child abuse behavior. Apart from those, failures of the parents in providing fundamental needs to fulfill child development, mental and educational neglect were also counted as characteristics of child neglect and negligence from the same study.

The results from the present study also indicated that corporal punishment with anger, revenge purposes, personal attitudes, hateful feelings, and humiliating or sarcastic purposes are child abuse behaviors. This supported the claim from Gells⁽²²⁾ regarding violence in the family, which mentioned that abusive parents are described as having poor emotional control and are quick to react with poorly controlled aggression. It could also deal with the claim of many studies regarding 'parenting stress' as a significant factor related to child abuse potential⁽²³⁻²⁶⁾. Besides, the idea of committing corporal punishment with an intention from the present study is supported by Park and Collmer⁽²⁷⁾ who proposes the concept of a child abuse definition based on the intention or purposes of the actions towards the victims. For example, child physical abuse means any intentional act that causes hurt to the child. However, this concept is still debatable regarding the definition of intention, since intention is invisible and cannot be observed.

Regarding Park and Collmer⁽²⁷⁾, the definition of child physical abuse could also be based on social and cultural justifications or common acceptance in areas where people live. In Thai culture, an acceptance of corporal punishment and a view of children as possessions have placed children at risk. Corporal punishment is likely acceptable as a normative belief regarding appropriate parenting behaviors^(28,29). Those ideas and beliefs show a positive view on physical punishment as a way to express love to their children amongst the Thai people. Sailor⁽³⁰⁾ proposed that many Asian parents see punishment as a common part of discipline. They do not believe that non-physical forms of punishment are effective. This is supported by the studies by Wechayachai⁽³¹⁾, Amornvivat et al⁽³²⁾, Phuphabul et al⁽³³⁾, and Natamongkonchai et al⁽²⁹⁾ which indicated that most Thai parents create punishments within the family that are physical punishments such as spanking, hitting, and pinching to discipline their children. Additionally Punjekviyasakul⁽³⁴⁾ mentioned that the typical type of relationship between parents and children in Thai traditional custom is a power relationship. Bhikkhu⁽²⁸⁾ and Natamongkonchai et al⁽²⁹⁾

mentioned that hierarchy is imperative for the Thai family. It is customary amongst the Thai people in general to teach people to obey according to seniority. Every child must obey the parents' teachings. The younger ones must always obey the elder ones; therefore, they tend to believe that physical punishment is the parent's right to discipline their own children within the family⁽³⁵⁾, and it is not perceived as abusive behavior.

Although Thailand became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992 and the Child Protection Act was enacted in 2003, these concepts are relatively new within Thai culture and are in a transitional phase of applying those concepts to fit Thai culture. As a matter of fact, those beliefs of physical punishment as a way to express love mentioned above influenced the meaning of child abuse. They also influenced the consideration of corporal punishment as the common discipline for child rearing practices among parents. Child physical abuse found in the community was not considered as abusive action. Those actions are viewed as a way for parents to show love to their children. Physical aggression becomes abuse when it is unfair, undeserved, done for no good reason, with anger, and excessive. Abuse was defined in terms of harm done or maliciousness. Additionally, Thai parents tend to believe that child abuse perpetrators were more likely to be outsiders and strangers rather than family members. Therefore, promoting child protective factors by increasing knowledge and greater understanding of the meaning of the terms used amongst family members and society would be beneficial in terms of applying and promoting child protection strategies in a culturally appropriate way.

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Potential conflicts of interest

None.

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การรับรู้ของบิดามารดาในเขตกรุงเทพมหานครในเรื่องการสร้างวินัยให้กับเด็กและการทารุณกรรมเด็ก

นฤมล เอี่ยมฉีกุล

การละเมิดสิทธิเด็กในการได้รับการปกป้องคุ้มครองเป็นปัญหาสำคัญระดับโลก ในประเทศไทยอุปสรรคหนึ่งในการจัดการกับปัญหาการทารุณกรรมเด็กคือการขาดความตระหนัก ทักษะคิดค้นบวก และความเชื่อในเรื่องการใช้ความรุนแรงในการสร้างวินัยให้กับเด็ก นอกจากนี้ความไม่สอดคล้องของความหมายในเรื่องการทารุณกรรม ต่อเด็กในสังคมและองค์กรที่เกี่ยวข้อง ยังก่อให้เกิดการรายงานกรณีที่ดีกว่าความเป็นจริงและมีผลต่อความอยู่รอดและพัฒนาการของเด็ก

วัตถุประสงค์: การศึกษานี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพซึ่งมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการรับรู้ของกลุ่มผู้ปกครองในกรุงเทพมหานคร ต่อความหมายของการทารุณกรรมเด็กและการสร้างวินัยให้กับเด็ก

วัสดุและวิธีการ: การวิจัยนี้เก็บข้อมูลโดยใช้เทคนิคการสนทนากลุ่มและใช้การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาในงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล

ผลการศึกษา: ได้พบข้อสรุปเกี่ยวกับการรับรู้ของพ่อแม่ผู้ปกครองต่อการทารุณกรรมเด็กและการสร้างวินัยให้กับเด็กออกเป็นสองกลุ่ม ได้แก่ กลุ่มแรกสาเหตุของการถูกทำโทษ และกลุ่มที่สองความหมายรวมถึงการแยกแยะความแตกต่างระหว่างการทารุณกรรมเด็กและการสร้างวินัยให้กับเด็ก

สรุป: ผลการศึกษานี้จะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อผู้ผลักดันนโยบาย นักการสาธารณสุข และองค์กรที่เกี่ยวข้อง ในการเข้าใจความหมายของคำว่าทารุณกรรมในการรับรู้ของครอบครัวเพื่อนำไปประยุกต์ใช้สำหรับการผลักดันกลยุทธ์ในการคุ้มครองเด็กให้เหมาะสมกับบริบทสังคมและวัฒนธรรมไทย
