

# Parental Abuse of Children in Saudi Arabia: Nature, Prevalence and Effects

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## Abstract

### Background

The physical abuse of children is a worldwide problem, which has received much attention in developed countries but remains less well-attended in developing and third-world nations.

### Objective

The current study sought to determine the nature, prevalence and effects of physical abuse of children by parents in Saudi Arabia.

### Participants and setting

The participants included high school students in two Saudi cities together with parents of students from the same schools.

### Method

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 768 of students and, in addition, interviews were conducted with 20 parents. Analysis of responses involved demographic patterns, weighted means of Likert scores, chi square analysis, and correlation and regression analyses.

### Results

Results indicated that 37% of adolescents had been subjected to some form of physical violence by parents. The most common form of violence reported was being struck with an object other than a stick. A small but significant number of students were subject to burning, punching, or whipping, in some cases on a daily basis, and some reported having been scarred or hospitalised as a result of their injuries. No significant gender difference was found for types of physical abuse. However, a correlation was found between lower levels of parental education with the frequency of certain types of violent behaviour.

### Conclusions

The study indicates that a high level parental physical violence persists in Saudi Arabia, including regular extreme forms that have severe health consequences. Recommendations are made for future research.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, child abuse, child maltreatment, physical abuse, parents

## 1. Introduction

The current study aims to determine the nature, prevalence and effects of physical abuse of children by parents in Saudi Arabia. Significantly, the study seeks to examine these gaps in Saudi Arabia in order to understand the nature of the problem to be addressed. The author of this study has served as both a social worker and a lecturer in social science in Saudi Arabia. He is personally familiar with instances of serious child abuse and aware, more generally, of a high level of child physical abuse throughout the country, which, until recently, has gone largely unreported. It is these personal and professional experiences that motivated him to conduct the present research on the problem.

### *1.1 Global Context*

Physical and other abuses of children have been recognised as occurring in the Middle East for centuries including female infanticide as an acceptable practice (Almuneef & Al-Eissa, 2011). Globally, it was only recently that the World Health organization officially recognised child abuse as a global problem (WHO, 2002). Adonteng-Kissi (2020a) highlights how different parts of the world may have different perspectives of what is childhood and the nature of child rearing. Indications are, there is a lack of understanding in the distinction between punishment and abuse. More positively, in a study in rural Ghana, Adonteng-Kissi (2020b) identified how inconsistencies between child rearing and children's rights were reconcilable. The latter study gives hope for changing parental attitudes and child rearing behaviour in other parts of the world, including Saudi Arabia, the focus of the current context.

### *1.2 Situational Context for the Study*

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a very conservative country in which strong physical punishment of children by parents has traditionally been common and regarded as an accepted means of instilling good behaviour in the young (Al-Shail, Hassan, Aldowaish, and Kattan, 2012). Moreover, due to the closed nature of Saudi society, matters arising from the disciplining of children have, in the past, been considered to be exclusively the responsibility of the family. Even in cases where injury occurs, families have frequently rejected outside intervention, (Al Eissa and Almuneef, 2010). Public and government recognition of the problem of child abuse began in Saudi Arabia as recently as the early 1990s following a series of reports in the popular media of severe incidences of physical abuse (Almuneef and Al-Eissa, 2011). Subsequently, the Saudi government established several centres in hospitals, mainly in Riyadh, to treat and record instances of physical abuse, though these were limited in their scope and capacity.

### *1.3 Significance of the Study*

Information available about the prevalence and severity of physical child abuse in KSA by parents remains scarce and incomplete (Al Eissa and Almuneef, 2009). Much of the data has come from a small number of hospitals and medical facilities where victims have presented with injuries arising from their abuse or from case studies of individual, high-profile cases (Almuneef and Al-Eissa, 2011). In contrast to such incidence studies, or a small-scale case study (Almadani et al., 2012), no studies have been conducted with large universal populations. Nor have studies included those who commit acts of violence towards adolescents (Habib, 2012). The limited number of studies that have been conducted have used small sample sizes, case study design, or analysis of documentary file records, and have focused on incidence rather than prevalence statistics (Al-Eissa et al., 2015). Studies that have utilised interviews are particularly rare and have been confined to research on specific instances of abuse (Mogaddam et al., 2015).

Several international studies have provided information on the age of onset of child physical abuse and, in some cases, examined links between this and long-term effects (Chaffin, Kelleher, and Hollenberg, 1996). Although a limited amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between the age-onset of harsh corporal punishment and outcomes in some Arabic countries, there has been no such study specific to KSA (Alyahri and Goodman, 2008). Again, there exists a considerable body of international literature on the various effects on children and adolescents of physical abuse and punishment (Norman et al., 2012). In the case of KSA, however, information on the outcomes, especially that reported by victims of abuse, has not been available up to this point (Almuneef and Al-Eissa, 2011).

### *1.4 Aims of the Current Study*

In addressing the gaps in current literature in KSA, the present study aims to address the nature, prevalence and effects of parental physical abuse of children and determine whether the nature of abuse is similar or different to other parts of the world. In summary, this study provides for the first time, detailed information, specific to KSA, on the frequency of occurrence of different types of violent physical behaviours by parents, the frequency of onset of these physical behaviours by parents at different ages of the child, and the physical, social, and psychological effects of violent behaviours on the child.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Design*

A mixed methods design was utilized for this study. Quantitative questions were asked in order to identify the type, frequency and extent of the abusive parental behaviours and the symptomatic consequences for children. In contrast, qualitative questions were utilized to gain an insight into the subjective experience, perceptions and understandings of children who experienced the harms. Many of the latter questions involved Likert scales.

## 2.2 Participants

Two samples of participants were utilised: a larger group of students from high schools in the age group 12–18 for the questionnaire and a smaller group of parents of students from the same schools for the interviews. Schools in two culturally and demographically distinct cities, Almadinah and Hail, were included in the study to provide a basis for comparison of how such factors might influence abuse statistics.

In the absence of prior detailed data, a simple random probability sampling was used to select the groups of students and parents. To determine the sample size of students, the standard formula  $ME = z \sqrt{[p^*(1 - p^*)/n]}$  was applied, where ME is the margin of error,  $z$  is the  $z$ -score or standard score,  $p^*$  is the researcher's prior judgement of the value of  $p$ , and  $n$  is the sample size (Sullivan, 2006). Taking  $p^* = 0.5$ ,  $z = 1.96$  (assuming a confidence level of 95%), and ME 0.05, gave  $n = 384$  (Heeringa, West, and Berglund, 2010). Thus, 384 students were selected from the total population of secondary school students in each of the target cities, giving a total sample size for the questionnaire of 768. The selection criteria sought equal numbers of males and females; thus 192 male students and the same number of female students were selected from each city.

Owing to the fact that the selection of participants was carried out by the managers of the schools rather than by the researcher, an even distribution by number and gender could not be ensured across the age groups. Considerably more students, for example, aged 16-18 years participated ( $n = 318$ ) than students aged 12–15 years ( $n = 66$ ), and of students aged 15 who were interviewed, 17 were female whereas only 5 were male. Similarly, there was an uneven gender distribution within age groups by city. Twice as many males ( $n = 40$ ) aged 12 from Almadinah took part than females ( $n = 20$ ). There was no representation of 13-year-old females from Almadinah and only one 13-year-old male from Hail.

The majority of students (92.7%,  $n = 712$ ), lived with their parents. The remaining 7.3% lived with relatives, such as grandparents and uncles and aunts, or non-relatives. In Hail, however, a significantly larger percentage (97.9%,  $n = 188$ ) of boys lived with their parents than did girls (87.0%,  $n = 167$ ), possibly as a result of Hail being a more conservative and therefore male-oriented region.

As regards the interviews with parents, the sample was again chosen randomly. The sample size, based on a consideration of saturation and time available, was taken to be 20, i.e. 10 in each of the cities included (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006).

## 2.3 Measures

A pilot study was conducted with 40 students (20 male and 20 female) from Almadinah and Hail. The interview was piloted with 4 parents, 2 from each of Almadinah and Hail. None of the interview pilot study participants took part in the full study. Some adjustments were made, based on the pilot, to improve clarity.

The response options for many of the questions on the questionnaire were in the form of Likert scores. The questions posed in both the questionnaires and interviews were designed to collect data in three primary areas: the prevalence and nature of physical violence by parents against children in Saudi Arabia, the reason for this violence, and the effects it had on the subjects and their relationship with others. The questionnaire asked for general information about the students, their family situation, and the academic and employed status of their parents. It further asked about the types, severity, and frequency of any parental violent physical behaviour and the impacts of such behaviour. The interview was divided into six sections, which covered the following areas: 1. Definition of physical punishment and abuse. 2. Extent, frequency, and age of onset of physical punishment, and opinions about its effectiveness as a means of discipline. 3. Types of punishment used. 4. Reasons for its use. 5. Opinions of the role of government in child protection. 6. Impacts of physical punishment, including any marks left on the body and hospitalisation.

Responses to interview questions were recorded, transcribed, and coded in preparation for thematic analysis. Triangulation was enabled because the questions asked of the adolescents in the questionnaire and those posed to parents in the interviews overlapped. Both referenced the abuse or physical discipline experienced by the same sample of adolescents, the nature and frequency of the actions, and the impact these actions may have had. No attempt was made to measure the validity or reliability of the questionnaire.

## 2.4 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to students in a safe managed space in either a classroom or school hall, during the normal school day. The researcher worked with a team of 15 research assistants (nine men and six women) in each city, all of whom were professional social workers. Before data collection began, the researcher met with the research assistants for a one-day, training session to explain the ethics and purpose of the study and

to ensure consistency in administering the questionnaire. Support arrangements for the adolescents during and following completion of the questionnaire were also discussed.

Before students received the questionnaires the researcher, delivered a short briefing on the aims of their research, purpose of the questionnaire, and the types of questions asked. The term “physical behaviours” a non-judgemental term commonly used in research was used to avoid imposing a construct of physical abuse on what most, if not all, might perceive to be everyday natural behaviour (Wilcox, 2012). Students were reassured that they were under no obligation to participate if they did not want to and were free to withdraw at any point. It was also explained that any information they did provide would be treated in the strictest confidence. Participants with learning difficulties were able to ask for help from the researcher in reading questions and allowed extra time to give their answers. Typically, the questionnaire took 30–40 minutes to complete. The researcher allowed time for participants to ask any questions after completion of the questionnaires.

### *2.5 Data Analysis*

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. Analysis included demographic patterns, chi-square statistics to assess variability in the data, and mean and median calculations of numerical data.

The results of Likert score questions were analysed in the form of weighted means. Correlation and regression analyses were used to evaluate the consequences of child physical abuse and punishment as a function of the types and frequency of both parental and teacher behaviours. The strength and direction of relationships between different factors was gauged by means of simple correlation. A correlation was accepted as statistically significant if the p-value was less than 0.05.

Logistic regression analysis, when the dependent variable is binary, was used to estimate the effect of behaviour on the consequences of physical abuse (Menard, 2002).

The type and extent of physical abuse may depend on a number of factors, including gender and level of parental education. Two different non-parametric techniques were used in the data analysis. To compare abuse between two groups, such as male and female, the Mann-Whitney test was applied (Fay and Proschan, 2010). For comparing more than two groups, such as the level of the father’s education (primary, secondary, graduate, or postgraduate), the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test was used (Mayers, 2013).

The interview data was subjected to interpretative thematic analysis. Following transcription of the recorded interviews and translation from Arabic to English, codes were identified and named. These codes consisted of statements made by the interviewees, which had common elements and were relevant to the research question and the broader literature review conducted. The common element might be, for instance, mention of the term ‘control’ when distinguishing between physical punishment and abuse, or of the term’s ‘fearfulness’ or ‘anxiety’ as effects of parental violent behaviour. From consideration of the clusters as a whole, themes were then extracted for each question of the interview. Finally, the clusters and themes were used as the framework for narrative discussion. Triangulation of data involved comparing qualitative responses to the quantitative responses to give a picture of both the extent and nature of harms and consequences. Selective quotes represent the range of views identified by extent of quantitative responses.

### *2.6 Ethics*

The subject of this study is sensitive from the point of view of the adolescents and parents involved. Approval for it was sought and granted by the University of Dundee research ethics committee.

The researcher worked in accordance with the regulations of the Saudi government and the norms of the national culture. For example, it is customary in KSA for males and females to be separated in both schools and the workplace. Thus, female research assistants were used when questionnaires were being administered in girls’ schools. All potential participants were provided with a brief description of the study and were assured that they had the right to refuse to answer any or all questions, or to withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher identified participants by code numbers and did not have knowledge of their names or any other personal identifying information. After analysis of the information collected by means of the questionnaire by SPSS or NVivo, the researcher followed Saudi government child protection procedures. These involved a social worker interviewing any individual who requested help for incidents involving physical behaviours by adults, then, if necessary, informing the local child protection centre so that the individual’s well-being could be ensured by removal to a place of safety, if required. At both the beginning and end of each questionnaire session, the researcher explained the steps that an individual could take if they wished to disclose incidences of parent violent physical behaviours and seek help.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Types of Violent Physical Behaviour by Parents

Table 1 summarises the results from the questionnaire to do with the types of violent parental physical behaviours experienced by students, and the frequency with which these behaviours occurred.

#### 3.2 Analysis of Types of Violent Parental Behaviour

Table 1. Types of parental violent physical behaviour

Cities	Gender	Frequency and %	Slapping		Punching		Pulling hair		Beating with a stick or rod		Beating with other object		Hitting in the face		Whipping with cord, etc		Burning		Other										
			Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly									
Almadinah	Male	Freq & %	16.83	7.36	62.32	12.62	18.94	15.78	12.62	19.99	15.78	11.57	17.89	14.73	48.25	11.57	13.68	26.13.5	9.47	12.62	17.89	3.16	4.21	9.47	11.23.9	13.28.3	18.39.1		
	Female	Freq & %	12.62	12.62	40.20.8	7.3.6	8.4.2	10.5.2	6.3.1	16.8.3	12.6.2	9.4.7	11.5.7	24.12.5	15.7.8	3.1.6	33.17.2	4.2.1	9.4.7	19.9.9	4.2.1	10.5.2	11.5.7	3.1.6	1.0.5	5.2.6	5.11.4	11.25	16.36.4
Hail	Male	Freq & %	11.5.7	32.16.7	32.16.7	14.7.3	15.7.8	18.9.4	14.7.3	18.9.4	18.9.4	15.7.8	18.9.4	50.26	26.13.5	14.7.3	41.21.4	15.7.8	16.8.3	21.10.9	12.6.2	16.8.3	23.12	1.0.5	3.1.6	6.3.1	5.11.1	10.22.2	20.44.4
	Female	Freq & %	11.5.7	10.5.2	17.8.9	7.3.6	5.2.6	11.5.7	12.6.2	25.13	29.15.1	9.4.7	12.6.2	19.9.9	11.5.7	11.5.7	36.18.8	6.3.1	4.2.1	17.8.9	5.2.6	9.4.7	21.10.9	1.0.5	2.1.0	4.2.1	5.45.5	2.18.2	2.18.2

Certain patterns are evident in the data on types of parental violent behaviour. The results in Table 1 reveal that a small but significant number of students experience violent behaviour by their parents every day. This is a disturbing discovery in view of the physical and psychological harm that such activity is likely to have on these children. The most common form of violence reported was hitting with an object other than a stick or rod, which was experienced by 35.0% (n = 269) of all the students surveyed. This was followed by slapping 34.1% (n = 262), beating with a stick or rod 29.4% (n = 226), pulling hair 25.5% (n = 196), hitting in the face 21.0% (n = 161), whipping 19.4% (n = 149), punching 18.2% (n = 140), and burning 5.5% (n = 42). A discussion of each of these forms now follows.

#### 3.3 Slapping

Slapping on a daily basis was reported by 5.7% (n = 22) of Hail students and 7.3% (n = 28) of Almadinah students. Such habitual behaviour, as in the case of other violent forms, is of serious concern in terms of the child’s safety and welfare. In contrast, 61.2% (n = 235) of Almadinah students and 70.6% (n = 271) of Hail students reported they had never been slapped by their parents. These are surprisingly high figures considering that this is a country where previous research had suggested that physical punishment of children is very common. Slapping on a relatively non-sensitive part of the body, such as the buttocks, is, in the West, considered to be one of the mildest forms of physical punishment, so it is significant that around two-thirds of the Saudi students questioned replied that they had never been slapped.

#### 3.4 Punching

A significant minority of adolescents, 18.9% (n = 145 in total for both cities), said they had been punched at some time by their parents, and 4.9% (n = 38) said they were punched on a daily basis. The latter figure is disturbingly high and might indicate a significant core of extreme abuse taking place regularly in the homes of high school students. The severity of punching is not qualified in this question and so might range from a relatively gentle closed fist hit to a less sensitive area, such as the shoulder, to a hard strike to the head. There is also the possibility that some children might be exaggerating in their responses, both in terms of the nature of the behaviour and its frequency. However, the data from Almadinah and Hail were consistent with respect to the percentages reporting this form of behaviour across all frequency ranges (never, daily, weekly, and monthly), adding weight to their authenticity.

### 3.5 Pulling Hair

The responses with respect to pulling hair are reasonably consistent between students from the two cities. A small minority reported that they experienced this behaviour every day, whereas, overall, about one-fifth said that they experienced it on a weekly or monthly basis.

### 3.6 Beating With a Rod or Stick

Again, a small minority (5.2%,  $n = 20$  in the case of Almadinah and 6.2%,  $n = 24$  in the case of Hail) indicated that they experienced this form of behaviour daily. Of course, these are not necessarily the same students who reported other types of daily behaviours by parents; however, if accurate, it is indicative of habitual behaviour. Slightly more than two-thirds of students from both cities reported that they were never struck by a rod or stick by their parents. This is surprisingly high and may indicate one of the following: (1) previous prevalence studies were in error, (2) there has been a recent change in prevalence of beatings generally, or (3) that students were not accurately reporting their experiences.

### 3.7 Beating With Some Other Object

With regard to beating with some object other than a stick or rod, a similar pattern of responses is evident to that already seen in the case of other types of behaviour: a majority (just under two-thirds) reported never having experienced it, whereas a small minority said it happened every day. Around one-quarter of students said they were beaten in this manner by their parents on a weekly or monthly basis.

### 3.8 Hitting in the Face

As in the case of other categories of parental violent behaviour, a few per cent of adolescents reported that being hit in the face happened daily. A further 15.1% ( $n = 58$ ) in the case of Hail and 17.4% ( $n = 67$ ) in the case of Almadinah, said they were hit in the face weekly or monthly. Close to four-fifths of students from both cities indicated that they had never been struck in the face by their parents. Given the dangers of striking a child in the face, the fact that one fifth of the students questioned indicated that they had experienced behaviour of this type is a concern. There is, however, a wide range of possible severity in this category, from a comparatively mild slap across the cheek, for example, to a hard blow across the mouth, nose, or eyes.

### 3.9 Whipping With a Cord, etc.

A broadly similar pattern of responses is seen in the case of whipping with a cord or similar. A small percentage, between 3.4% ( $n = 13$ ) in the case of Almadinah and 4.4% ( $n = 17$ ) in the case of Hail, said it happened every day. A further 13.0%,  $n = 50$  (Almadinah) to 18.0%,  $n = 69$  (Hail), said it was a weekly or monthly occurrence, while the remainder, about four-fifths, said they had never experienced it. Again, it is surprising that 3 to 4% reported being whipped on a daily basis, unless this behaviour took place in a way that was unrelated to what the child had done. To be whipped every day suggests extreme abuse that is inflicted without reason, habitually, as a form of torture. This could be due to some mental illness or instability of the parent. Alternatively, however misguided, it might be what the parent believes to be a valid and effective form of discipline and one they feel entitled to frequently dispense.

### 3.10 Burning

The fact that 4.4% ( $n = 17$ ) to 6.5% ( $n = 25$ ), from Hail and Almadinah respectively, said they had experienced it at all is shocking. Most disturbingly, 1.6% ( $n = 6$ ) of students from Almadinah reported being burned by their parents every day. An overwhelming majority of students, 93.5% ( $n = 359$ ) to 95.6% ( $n = 367$ ), in the case of Almadinah and Hail respectively, reported never having experienced burning as a behaviour by their parents – not surprisingly, as it is perhaps one of the more extreme forms of abuse to which a child could be subjected. A possible form in which burning might occur is if the parent is a smoker and touches a lighted cigarette momentarily against the exposed skin of a child. A parent prone to violence might come to use such behaviour on a habitual basis as a form of punishment. Such behaviour could be expected to leave extensive scarring and have a deep psychological impact, although further research would be needed to investigate this.

### 3.11 Other Forms of Violent Behaviour

Students were questioned with regard to any other form of violent behaviour by parents, which was not included in the previous categories. Such behaviour might include, for example, throwing objects, such as a shoe, or making a child stand in an uncomfortable position or perform hard exercises or chores, perhaps in extreme heat. A total of 146 students out of the 768 who took part in the survey answered this question. Of these, 17.8% ( $n = 16$ ) from Almadinah and 17.9% ( $n = 10$ ) from Hail reported experiencing some other form of violent behaviour every day.

The reported frequency of different types of violent parental behaviour are presented in Table 2 in terms of percentages, mean, median and standard deviation (SD). The percentage of children who never experienced particular forms of physical abuse was 65–95.4% (depending on the form), while the abuse experienced on a monthly basis was 3.1–20.6%, weekly 1.3–10.3%, and daily 1.0–9.0%. The types of abuse are ranked in order using weighted mean, and from most frequent to least are: (1) beating with an object other than a stick or rod, (2) slapping, (3) beating with a stick or rod, (4) pulling hair, (5) hitting in the face, (6) punching, (7) whipping with a cord, and (8) burning.

Table 2. Occurrence of violent parental behaviour (percentage of whole sample)

How often have you experienced the following parental behaviours? (Never = 1, monthly = 2, weekly = 3, daily = 4)	Never %	Monthly %	Weekly %	Daily %	Mean	Median	SD	Rank
	(number)	(number)	(number)	(number)				
Beating with other object	65.0 (499)	20.6 (158)	5.5 (42)	9.0 (69)	1.58	1.00	.945	1
Slapping	66.1 (508)	17.1 (131)	10.3 (79)	6.5 (50)	1.57	1.00	.918	2
Beating with stick or rod	70.6 (542)	16.1 (124)	7.6 (58)	5.7 (44)	1.48	1.00	.863	3
Pulling hair	74.5 (570)	9.6 (74)	10.2 (78)	5.7 (44)	1.47	1.00	.893	4
Hitting in the face	79.0 (607)	10.8 (83)	5.5 (42)	4.7 (36)	1.36	1.00	.788	5
Punching	81.8 (628)	7.0 (54)	6.0 (46)	5.2 (40)	1.35	1.00	.812	6
Whipping with cord, etc.	80.6 (619)	9.4 (72)	6.1 (47)	3.9 (30)	1.33	1.00	.761	7
Burning	94.5 (726)	3.1 (24)	1.3 (10)	1.0 (8)	1.09	1.00	.412	8

The results suggest that there is no particular age at which violent behaviour on the part of parents tends to start. Such behaviour was reported as being unusual against very young children (4–5-year-olds), but between the ages of about 7 and 11, the frequency of onset of behaviours is between 12 and 16% per year. There is no particular age at which the onset of violent behaviours shows a marked increase. It rises by an extra 4% per year from the age of 5 for two years and then increases by similar amounts per year up to age of 12. The age of 10 sees the greatest onset of violent physical behaviours, which also corresponds with the age indicated in the Koran as the minimum age at which a child should be physically disciplined. The table shows that out of a total 768 students who responded to the questionnaire, 602, or 73.8%, indicated that between the ages of 4 and 15 they had experienced some form of violent parental behaviour. It should also be noted that, since some of the children surveyed were under the age of 15, they might yet go on to experience such behaviour, which would make the eventual figure higher.

#### 4. Analysis

##### 4.1 Physical Effects of Parental Violent Behaviour

Table 3 below summarises the results of questions on the questionnaire that pertain to the types of marks, temporary or permanent, if any, left on the body as a result of violent physical behaviours by parents.

Table 3. Types of mark left on the body as a result of parental violent behaviour

Cities	Gender	and %	Frequency	Red mark that quickly faded			Bruises that lasted a few days			Bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week but were not permanent			Injuries that needed medical treatment			Permanent scars	
				Once	Occasionally	Often	Once	Occasionally	Often	Once	Occasionally	Often	Once	Occasionally	Often	Once	Often
Almadinah	Male	Freq &	24	27	15	29	25	9	26	13	2	4	3	4	7	7	12
		%	12.5	14.1	7.8	15.1	13	4.7	13.5	6.8	1	2.1	1.6	2.1	3.6	3.6	6.2
	Female	Freq &	24	21	15	14	12	8	15	11	1	12	6	5	9	3	14
		%	12.5	10.9	7.8	7.3	6.2	4.2	7.8	5.7	0.5	6.2	3.1	2.6	4.7	1.6	7.3
Hail	Male	Freq &	35	35	31	18	39	13	23	26	14	16	13	14	7	9	9
		%	18.2	18.2	16.1	9.4	20.3	6.8	12	13.5	7.3	8.3	6.8	7.3	3.6	4.7	4.7
	Female	Freq &	16	23	21	17	28	6	20	19	3	12	12	11	4	7	11
		%	8.3	12	10.9	8.9	14.6	3.1	10.4	9.9	1.6	6.2	6.2	5.7	2.1	3.6	5.7

##### 4.2 No Marks or Short-Lived Bruising

Between 4.4%, n = 17 (Almadinah) and 4.9%, n = 19 (Hail) of adolescents said they often suffered short-lived bruising as a result of physical violence by parents. Roughly one quarter said that they had had such marks left on them once or occasionally, while 13.5% (n = 52) of Hail students and 7.8% (n = 30) indicated that they had been given temporary red marks often. Between 58.1%, n = 223 (Hail) and 67.2%, n = 258 (Almadinah) of students reported never having experienced parental physical violence that left a transient mark. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of students reported that they never suffered injuries that resulted in bruises that lasted several days.

Between about three-quarters and four-fifths of the students questioned reported that they had never suffered temporary bruising or other marks that lasted more than one week. A small minority, 0.8% (n = 3) in the case of Almadinah students and 4.4% (n = 17) in the case of Hail students, said they had experienced this kind of marking often. The rest responded that they had experienced it once or occasionally.



#### 4.3 Need for Medical Attention, Including Hospitalisation

Between 8.8%, n = 34 (Almadinah) and 20.3%, n = 78 (Hail) of students reported that they had received injuries as a result of violent actions by parents that needed medical attention. Remarkably, 6.5% (n = 25), or 1 in 13, of Hail students said that they often needed such attention. A high percentage, between 5.2%, n = 20 (Hail) and 6.8%, n = 26 (Almadinah), reported having often received permanent scarring as a result of violent behaviours by parents. In total about 13% (n = 99) of students (the same percentage in both school areas) said they had been permanently scarred at some due to actions of their parents.

To summarise, the least severe form of marks resulting from parental physical behaviour were the most commonly reported. This is not surprising since, in general, less violent forms of behaviour were also found to be more common. Temporary red marks were reported by 32.8% (n = 126) of Almadinah students and 41.9% (n = 161) of Hail students. Any form of moderate contact with skin, for example by slapping, could be expected to leave such a mark. Only non-contact physical behaviours, such as making children stand in arduous or painful positions, would result in no marks whatsoever. Bruising lasting a few days, which would result from a sharp contact, such as punching or striking with an object, was reported by 25.3% (n = 97) of the Almadinah sample and 31.5% (n = 121) of Hail students. Some of the data is particularly concerning. Among these are the fact that 20.3% (n = 78) of the Hail students required medical treatment at some point because of violent parental behaviour, and 13.5% (n = 52) of Almadinah students and 12.2% (n = 47) of Hail students questioned had been left permanently scarred as a result of violence by parents.

### 5. Analysis

#### 5.1 Statistical Analysis of Types of Markings, Including Correlations

Based on the weighted mean of their occurrence, the types of marks were ranked in order from most frequent to least (see Table 4). The ranking is as follows: (1) "red mark that quickly faded", (2) "bruise(s) that lasted a few days", (3) "bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week but were not permanent", (4) "injuries that needed medical treatment", and (5) permanent scar(s).

Table 4. Marks left on body of child as a result of the parental behaviour

Type of mark (Never = 1, once = 2, occasional = 3, often = 4)	Never	Once	Occasionally	Often	Mean	Median	SD	Rank
Red mark that quickly faded	62.6	12.9	13.8	10.7	1.73	1.00	1.057	1
Bruise(s) that lasted a few days	71.6	10.2	13.5	4.7	1.51	1.00	.896	2
Bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week but not permanent	77.5	10.9	9.0	2.6	1.37	1.00	.754	3
Injuries that needed medical treatment	85.4	5.7	4.4	4.4	1.28	1.00	.746	4
Permanent scar (s)	87.1	3.5	3.4	6.0	1.28	1.00	.794	5

The relationship between parental behaviour and marks left on the body of the child was measured using Spearman correlation. As shown in Table 5, all of the resulting correlations were positive, thus indicating a possible link between more frequent abuse and marks left on the body of child. Although the resulting correlations were low, they were statistically significant.

Table 5. Correlation between parental behaviour and mark left on body of child

		Red mark that quickly faded	Bruise(s) that lasted a few days	Non-permanent bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week	Injuries that needed medical treatment	Permanent scar (s)
Slapping	Correlation	.075	.162	.159	.115	.097
	p-value	.039	.000	.000	.001	.007
Punching	Correlation	.051	.067	.097	.053	-.018-
	p-value	.159	.065	.007	.145	.623
Pulling hair	Correlation	.091	.127	.164	.191	.070
	p-value	.012	.000	.000	.000	.052
Beating with stick or rod	Correlation	.199	.103	.152	.179	.058
	p-value	.000	.004	.000	.000	.106
Beating with another object	Correlation	.127	.155	.146	.185	.047
	p-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.192
Hitting in the face	Correlation	.169	.238	.179	.089	.062
	p-value	.000	.000	.000	.013	.087
Whipping with cord, etc.	Correlation	.140	.212	.285	.128	.145
	p-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Burning	Correlation	.072	.182	.172	.231	.161
	p-value	.046	.000	.000	.000	.000

“Bruise(s) that lasted a few days” showed a higher correlation with “hitting in the face” and “whipping with a cord, etc.” than with the other forms of abuse. Also, “bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week but were not permanent” showed a higher correlation with “whipping with a cord, etc.” than with the other forms of abuse. “Red mark that quickly faded” was found to more highly correlated with “beating with a stick or rod” than with other abuses. “Injuries that needed medical treatment” showed a higher correlation with “burning” compared with the other abuses. Again, these correlations, although indicated by the statistical analysis, were not strong, so that some caution is warranted when making assertions. One possibility suggested by the data is that the more serious injuries arise from physical behaviours that are uncontrolled. The most common, traditional method of punishment in Saudi Arabia is beating with a stick in a controlled, premeditated form in a way prescribed by religious law. This form correlates with the least severe type of skin mark in the data collected here. On the other hand, more severe behaviours, such as hitting in the face and whipping, which may be less controlled and inflicted on the spur of the moment, possibly out of anger, appear to show a higher correlation with lasting injuries. Finally, it is not surprising that burning, which must inevitably cause an intense, localised skin injury, is positively correlated with the need for medical treatment.

The relationship between parental violent behaviour and level of parent education was measured using Spearman correlation. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between the frequency of abuse types and level of parental educations, i.e. lower frequency of abuse tends to correspond with higher level of parental education. “Slapping” and “beating with a stick or rod” showed a higher correlation with the mother’s level of education than the fathers. In contrast, “punching” and “burning” were more highly correlated with the father’s level of education than the mothers. “Hitting in face” and “beating with another object” are types of abuse that were not significantly more correlated with the level of education of either parent.

Several possible inferences arise from these results. Firstly, it may be that less well-educated parents are less likely to know about, or appreciate, the negative psychological and social consequences that may arise from violent behaviours toward their children. They may also be more likely to follow old traditions, religious and tribal, in which comparatively harsh physical punishments are regarded as normal. Both of these inferences are supported by comments made by parents of different educational backgrounds who were interviewed as part of this study, i.e. those with a poorer educational background tended to favour more harsh physical treatment of their offspring. Another factor is that less well-educated parents may tend to be under greater pressure, such as financial pressure, in their daily lives so that they are more prone to outbursts of anger, which could be manifested in more severe and regular forms of violence toward their children.

With regard to the father's educational level, the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test showed that some types of violent behaviour were more common if the father had not received education past the primary level. Specifically, these behaviours were "punching", "beating with a stick or rod", "beating with another object", and "hitting in the face". Having said this, it is clear that violent parental behaviour is a significant problem at all parental education levels. Regarding severity of harm, some comments were made concerning this in the earlier discussion of the results in Table 5 to do with the marks cause by different behaviours.

Regarding the mother's level of education, the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test revealed that some types of violent behaviour were correlated with the mother having been educated to only primary or secondary level. Specifically, these behaviours were: "slapping", "punching", "pulling hair", and "beating with another object". Again, it is evident that a significant amount of violent behaviour is displayed by parents of all education levels.

A statistical analysis was also conducted to see if physical abuse by parents differed depending on the child's gender. The Mann-Whitney test confirmed that there was no significant difference, based on gender, in the levels of the different types of physical abuse by parents. Children may be likely to suffer more abuse if they do not live with parents. The 6.0% of children in this study who lived with people other than their parents seemed to experience a higher level of certain types of abuse, namely, "slapping", "beating with other objects", and "pulling hair". Although 1.3% of children who lived outside the parental home, etc., suffered from more frequent "beating with some other object" and "whipping with a cord" than those who lived with parents, application of the Mann-Whitney test showed that this difference was not statistically significant.

With regard to hospitalisation as a result of abuse (see Table 6), application of the Mann-Whitney test revealed that a physically abused child was more likely to go to hospital for treatment if marks leading to scarring and bruising that lasted a few days, had been inflicted at least once.

Table 6. Connection between marks left on the body and need to attend hospital (Mann-Whitney test)

Were marks left on your body as a result of the parental behaviour? Never = 1, once = 2, occasionally = 3, often = 4	Have you ever gone to hospital because of parental behaviours?						Mann-Whitney	
	Yes			No			Z	p-value
	Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD		
Red mark that quickly faded	1.99	1.00	1.239	1.69	1.00	1.023	-2.126	.034
Bruise(s) that lasted a few days	2.03	2.00	1.060	1.44	1.00	.844	-6.245	.000
Non-permanent bruises or other marks that lasted more than a week	1.71	1.00	.963	1.32	1.00	.705	-4.833	.000
Injuries that needed medical treatment?	1.46	1.00	.921	1.25	1.00	.713	-2.933	.003
Permanent scar (s)	2.07	1.00	1.246	1.17	1.00	.627	-11.369	.000

## 6. Discussion

Parental violence against children occurs worldwide (Chan, 2012). Detailed statistics of the prevalence of physical child abuse are available in the case of many developed countries, such as the United Kingdom (Waugh, 2013). Cultural and historical references also indicate that physical punishment has been traditionally common in KSA and conditions continue that may encourage both abuse and a failure to appreciate the extent to which it occurs (Al-Shail, Hassan, Aldowais, and Kattan, 2012). The current study found that there were high levels of parental physical abuse in KSA and that much of this abuse is severe in some cases leading to hospitalizations. The common features of abuse on KSA were also identified. Limited education of parents was identified as one factor for the continued use of physical punishment and physical abuse.

### 6.1 Severity and Extent of Parental Physical Abuse in KSA

A major, and disturbing, finding of this research is that some children within the general high school population are being physically abused at home, by such methods as punching, whipping, and burning, on a frequent basis. Previous researchers have commented that it is not uncommon for parents in KSA to regard strong punishment, such as that involving a whip or other pain-inducing implement, not as abuse but as a reasonable and effective approach to disciplining children (Al-Zahrani, 2005). This attitude was confirmed by interviews in this study during which those parents who used physical punishment expressed the belief that its effects were almost entirely positive and that any negative effects were minor and temporary. However, it is still shocking to discover from the present study that about one in every hundred adolescents, of those who took part in the questionnaire, is being burned by their parents every day and about one in 25 has been burned at some point in their lives. Moreover, a very significant minority (about one in 8) of children who took part in this research reported having attended hospital because of injuries they sustained as a result of parental violence. Extrapolated nationwide, this leads to a figure far in excess of those implied by statistics on child abuse appearing in official, hospital-based publications (e.g., Health Ministry in Saudi Arabia, 2012). It is also higher than child physical abuse rates recorded in Western countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia (Chaplin, Flatley, and Smith, 2011). Some allowance must be made for the fact that the means used to assess physical abuse prevalence may differ from one country to another, and, indeed, from one survey to another; however, a hospitalisation rate of 1 in every 8 adolescents due to parental or teacher physical abuse is high by any standards and reveals an on-going situation in which many young Saudis are being put at serious risk of both physical and psychological harm.

### 6.2 Extent of Hospitalizations

Violence that leads to hospitalisation, or the need for medical attention, qualifies as physical abuse by definitions adopted internationally (Hien, Cohen, Caldeira, Flom and Wasserman, 2010). However, the current study also found high numbers of Saudi adolescents who experience a range of acts of physical violence including hitting with a stick or other object, slapping, and pulling hair, as well as more extreme actions, such as hitting in the face and punching. Whether all of these incidents amount to abuse or not depends on how physical abuse is defined, and this varies according to local cultural and societal norms (Alfaryan, 2014).

### 6.3 Common Experiences of Abuse

Slightly more than a third of the young people who completed the questionnaire in this research said they had experienced the commonest form of parental violence recorded, namely, being struck with some form of object other than a stick. Slapping and beating with a stick had also been experienced by around a third of the respondents. The more violent forms of treatment, such as punching and burning, were experienced by fewer children but their occurrence was nonetheless significant. About a fifth of the individuals who took part in the questionnaire, for example, had been whipped at one time or another. Direct comparisons with earlier studies are complicated by the diversity of methodologies and sampling techniques used. The proportion of students surveyed in this study who reported having experienced some level of parental physical violent behaviour falls within the range of prevalence of such behaviour reported by some international studies (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore and Runyan, 1998). It is at the lower end of the spectrum of violence against children reported by the few relevant KSA studies. However, most previous Saudi-specific research focused on samples of children and adolescents who had been examined by doctors following allegations of abuse of various kinds. Thus, these were specific populations, not representative of the population as a whole, and the statistics arising from them were incidence figures.

### 6.4 Extent of Physical Punishment

The proportion of parents who indicated, during the interviews, that they used physical punishment roughly coincided with the proportion of adolescents who said they had experienced it. However, there was a difference

between the perceived effects of this violence by parents and the actual effects reported by those subjected to it. A significant fraction of students reported that they suffered negative psychological, emotional, and social effects as a result of physical violence by parents. In contrast, those parents who used physical punishment said that they believed it to be a positive form of discipline without any significant or long-term negative outcomes.

### *6.5 Limited Parental Education*

According to some international studies, low parental education is a risk factor in child abuse (Dong et al., 2004). The present study offers support for this assertion in that less parental violence was reported by Hail female students which may be connected to the fact that the employment rate and education level of Hail mothers was higher than those of Almadinah mothers.

### *6.6 Age of Onset of Abuse*

Earlier international studies have reported a link between the age at which abuse began and the severity of problems such as anxiety and depression in later life (Kaplow and Widom, 2007). According to the data collected in this study, there is no particular age of the child at which parental violent behaviour tends to start. Such behaviour was reported as being unusual against very young children (4–5-year-olds), but between the ages of about 7 and 11 the frequency of onset of behaviours is quite similar from year to year. In other words, there is no age at which the onset of violent behaviour shows a marked increase. Although, overall, girls experienced less violent behaviour than boys, the violence toward girls tended to start earlier.

### *6.7 Caution Regarding Reporting*

It is possible that many students were concealing the truth, for example for fear of retribution if they believed the information, they provided might reach their parents (Al-Eissah, 1998). This same possibility may apply to other of the responses to the questionnaire. However, the researcher considers large-scale falsification of data unlikely in view of the steps taken to ensure anonymity and data privacy, and to explain these measures clearly to all participants. It may also be that slapping is simply not a form of punishment normally applied to children in Saudi Arabia and that other, harsher forms are the ones applied when physical behaviours are used at all.

## **7. Limitations**

The study was limited to two cities, Al-Madinah and Hail. Although these differ considerably in social character and other factors, they are not necessarily representative of the country as a whole.

The study focused on child physical abuse and made no attempt to investigate possible links with other types of abuse, such as sexual or emotional abuse or neglect. Moreover, it did not consider child physical abuse or punishment by adults other than parents or teachers, including other family members, friends of the family, or strangers. The research examined the occurrence and incidence of different types of physical punishment but not the force of the action, the part of the body affected, or the circumstances under which the violent behaviour occurred.

The study was limited to data on adolescents aged 12 to 18 attending public high schools, and did not include students from private schools, primary schools, universities, or social centres. Although equal numbers of males and females were included in the study, the composition of the sample was not evenly distributed across the age groups. This was because the selection was carried out by the managers of the schools in question and not by the researcher.

With regard to the interviews there was a lack of inter-rater reliability of the qualitative data obtained. A further limitation was the use of a number of research assistants to oversee the data collection and a lack of any means of checking consistent administration of the interviews.

## **8. Conclusions**

The present study provides new and detailed information on the frequency of occurrence of different types of violent physical behaviours by parents, the frequency of onset of these physical behaviours by parents at different ages of the child, and the physical, social, and psychological effects of violent behaviours on the child.

It is clear that significant levels of violent behaviour by both parents are occurring in the general population of KSA. This behaviour is displayed in varying degrees depending on the type, including slapping, punching, pulling hair, beating with a stick or rod, beating with another object, hitting in the face, whipping with a cord, etc., and burning. Although the prevalence rates are lower than those found in some earlier studies, many children still suffer from the effects of abuse and, in a small percentage of cases, the abuse is serious, frequent, and on-going.

The research has shown that, in some cases, the level of violence is extreme in both its severity (such as being burned and whipped or bruised) and frequency (occurring on a daily basis). The level of hospitalisation and permanent scarring reported by students, due to parental physical abuse, is alarming and requires further investigation and action to protect the children involved. Similarly, many students appear to suffer a variety of psychological problems as a result of their experiences. The level and frequency of violent behaviour tended to be greatest in cases where parental education was low. This suggests that an important way to prevent or reduce violence towards children is to increase the awareness of parents of the dangers of such behaviour in ways that target those at the low end of the educational spectrum. It is thus a recommendation of this study that the Saudi government investigate and implement such a scheme. It is further recommended that social services in SA look at ways of making it easier for vulnerable children, such as those in the study who experienced regular violent behaviour at home, to be identified and offered assistance.

Further research is needed to extend the scope of this study to other cities and parts of Saudi Arabia, and that research be carried out on the links with other types of abuse. It is likely that very valuable insights could be obtained, too, by interviewing adolescents themselves.

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