

Incidence of Abusive Parenting in Single Parent and Intact Families as Perceived by the Adolescents

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ABSTRACT The present study was undertaken to document the incidence of abusive parenting in single parent and intact families. The sample, consisting of 200 adolescents both boys and girls (100 each from single parent and intact families) in the age group of 13-16 years was selected from co-educational Senior Secondary Schools of Ludhiana city. Data were collected by using a Personal Information Sheet and a self structured Interview Schedule relating to abusive parenting. Varying degree of abusive parenting was reported by 81 per cent adolescents; 59 per cent experiencing low abusive parenting and 22 per cent high, in both single parent and intact families. Adolescents from intact families perceived their parents as more abusive on various dimensions such as nature of parents, school regularity, discouraging, criticizing and ignoring attitude of parents; boys were punished more than girls. A total of 59.50 per cent adolescents experienced physical punishment and the most common mode used for punishment was slapping (80.67%) and the adolescents experienced injuries (20.16%) also such as bruises, bleeding, burns and even bone fractures.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting plays a pivotal role in the proper growth and development of child and relates to all the interactions between parents and children (Glasgow et al. 1997). The type of interaction between parents and child has a profound impact on his personality development. A warm and healthy interaction gives him/her a sense of emotional security, mutual concern, understanding, acceptance, companionship, cooperation and enhances his growth and development (Sroufe et al. 1992) where as an inappropriate/abusive interaction deprives him of enriched environment and becomes a hassle in his psychological development. A family has the primary responsibility for nurturing and protection of children right from infancy till later years of life. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also (Article 19), a child has to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in care of parents, legal guardian(s) or any other person, who has the care of child (Government of India 1991).

Abusive parenting also defines a parenting style which refers to intentional acts by the parents that result in physical and emotional harm to children including failure to perform duty and obligation of supervision, maintenance and protection which fall within the limits of their ability and circumstances (Sloan 1983). Abusive parents have been reported to have high rates of coercive and compliant behaviour, lack child management skills and empathy (Kropp and Haynes 1987). They are more likely than other couples to have marital problems, fight physically with each other, experience more stressful events than other families and their households are more disorganized (Pillai 2004) whereas single parents due to multiple responsibilities have been reported to be ineffective in their disciplinary practices (Bank et al. 1993) but more permissive than two parent families.

Adolescence is a difficult period for abusive parents because as the children reach this phase of life, parents suddenly discover that children no longer view their parents as a source of knowledge and assert their own feelings, emotions (Joseph 1981) and consider themselves old enough to make decisions without suggestions or interferences from parents. The child's immaturity in understanding and his inability to control himself make necessary for many parents to step in with harsh disciplinary measures (Darling and Steinberg 1993) which sometimes may be perceived abusive by children. Therefore, it

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was considered worthwhile to document abusive parenting especially during adolescence which is transitional, emotionally unstable and a most sensitive stage. Hence, the present study was undertaken to document the incidence of abusive parenting and prevalence of physical punishment among adolescents in different family settings i.e. single parent and intact families with the following objectives.

- i) To document the incidence of abusive parenting in single parent and intact families as perceived by the adolescents.
- ii) To determine the prevalence of physical punishment among adolescents in single parent and intact families.
- iii) To suggest guidelines to the parents for appropriate parenting/disciplinary techniques.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted on school going adolescents (age 13-16 years) from various co-educational Senior Secondary Schools in Ludhiana city by using a multistage sampling procedure. A list of all 58 Senior Secondary Government and Public/Private, co-educational schools was procured from the District Education Officer (DEO) Ludhiana and a representative sample of ten schools was randomly selected proportionately from each category. Following the selection of schools, the principals of the schools were contacted personally and apprised of the purpose of the study so as to work with the adolescents in the school and lists of students belonging to both single parent and intact families were prepared. There were 150 adolescents belonging to single parent families in age group of 13-16 years in all the selected schools and a sample of 100 adolescents was randomly drawn out of this. Similarly hundred adolescents of same age group were selected belonging to intact families in proportion to the adolescents selected from single parent families from each school thus comprising a sample of 200 adolescents including 100 each boys and girls from single parent and intact families.

Operational Definition: It was imperative to define abusive parenting since the practices of child rearing and concept of child abuse vary in different cultures. Therefore, to define abusive parenting in the context of present study a preliminary survey was conducted to know the perceptions of adolescents about abusive behavior

of their parents by holding discussions with them.

Based on the opinions revealed by the adolescents during discussions, Abusive Parenting was defined as follows:

Abusive Parenting refers to "the acts relating to the child battering and neglect. Battering includes kicking the adolescents, spanking, pushing, pinching, shaking, twisting of ear, pulling of hair, beating with a stick, belting, tying up, burning and threatening with a weapon" etc whereas neglect can be conceptualized in terms of failure of parents to provide for the well being of child, such as neglecting medical problems, criticizing, ignoring and discouraging attitude of parents, comparing the adolescents with friends, not appreciating and involving them much in family decisions etc.

Tools: The tools employed to collect the data were (i) Personal Information Sheet which was used to assess the background of the respondents including age, gender, birth order, family type (single/intact), reasons of single parenthood, age, education and occupation of parents, family structure (joint/nuclear), number of siblings, age of siblings and monthly income of family and (ii) A Self Structured Interview Schedule related to Abusive Parenting viz. nature of parents, parental interest for their children's studies/extra curricular activities, school regularity, attitude of parents towards illness of adolescents, involvement of adolescents in family decision making, discouraging attitude of parents, preference for a particular sibling, neglecting, isolating and their criticizing nature, parental behaviour with adolescents' friends and practices of physical punishment and extent thereof.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results relating to incidence of abusive parenting among adolescents in single parent and intact families are presented in Table 1. On the whole 19 per cent of the adolescents perceived their parents as non abusive and the rest of them 81 per cent reported to be suffering from varying degree of abuse; low abuse among 59 per cent whereas high abuse among 22 per cent of them. Dave et. al.(1982) also reported majority of the parents (81 %) to be aggressive and physically abusive towards their children; 7 per cent children suffered physical neglect at the hands of parents and 2.7 per cent were victims of emo-

Table 1: Incidence of abusive parenting among adolescents in single parent and intact families (n = 200)

Category of abuse (scores)	Single parent families (n=100)	Intact families (n=100)	Total families (n=200)	χ^2 value
No abuse(0-15)	27 (27.00)	11 (11.00)	38 (19.00)	11.22**
Low abuse(15-35)	58 (58.00)	60 (60.00)	118 (59.00)	
High abuse(35 & above)	15 (15.00)	29 (29.00)	44 (22.00)	

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages

**P < .01

tional abuse. In intact families, 29 per cent adolescents perceived their parents as highly abusive while in single parent families only 15 per cent parents were perceived as highly abusive. In single parent families a higher percentage of adolescents (27%) perceived their parents as non abusive as compared to 11 per cent in intact families. The chi-square value was also calculated to be highly significant ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 11.22$; $P < .01$). The adolescents in the intact families perceived their parents as more abusive as compared to adolescents in single parent families. Such perceptions of the adolescents are based on the facts that their behaviour is being monitored by both the parents as compared to the single-parent families where the parent has a tendency to exhibit more sympathetic and protective attitude towards the child due to absence of another parent. The results confirm the findings of a study by Mahajan and Madhurima (1995) who also reported that 92 per cent parents in intact families admitted that they punished or abused their children.

Gender wise differences in the incidence of abusive parenting among adolescents in single parent and intact families are presented in Table

2. A higher percentage of boys (27%) reported to perceive their parents as highly abusive as compared to girls (17%). Almost equal percentage of boys (58%) and girls (60%) experienced low abuse and more girls (23%) as compared to boys (15%) perceived their parents as non abusive ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 6.91$; $P < 0.05$). Hence, the boys and girls differed significantly in their perceptions regarding abusive parenting and boys perceived their parents more abusive as compared to girls. This may be attributed to the fact that boys are more aggressive and independent in nature and hence provoke more conflicting situations as compared to girls. Kang (1994) also reported similar findings as boys perceived their parents more abusive compared to girls and Kewalramani (1996) also revealed that more boys than girls were victims of physical and emotional abuse. With respect to type of families; in single parent families equal number of boys and girls (58% each) perceived their parents as less abusive and more number of boys (18%) as compared to girls (12%) perceived their parents as highly abusive. Rest of the boys (24%) and girls (30%) in single parent families assessed their parents as non abusive. Chi-square value ($\chi^2_{(2)} 0.93$) was also calculated

Table 2: Genderwise differences in the incidence of abusive parenting among adolescents in single parent and intact families (n = 200)

Category of abuse (scores)	Single parent families (n=100)		χ^2 value	Intact families (n=100)		χ^2 value	Total families (n=200)		χ^2 value
	Boys (n=50)	Girls (n=50)		Boys (n=50)	Girls (n=50)		Boys (n=50)	Girls (n=50)	
No abuse (0-15)	12 (24.00)	15 (30.00)	0.93 ^{NS}	3 (6.00)	8 (16.00)	6.03*	15 (15.00)	23 (23.00)	6.91*
Low abuse (15-35)	29 (58.00)	29 (58.00)		29 (58.00)	31 (62.00)		58 (58.00)	60 (60.00)	
High abuse (35 & above)	9 (18.00)	6 (12.00)		18 (36.00)	11 (22.00)		27 (27.00)	17 (17.00)	

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

* P < .05

NS = Non Significant

to be non-significant which implies that in single parent families boys and girls did not differ significantly in their perceptions regarding abusive parenting (Table 2). This may be due to the reason that in single parent families parents are more cautious and possessive for both sons and daughters as compared to intact families. A similar trend could be seen in case of intact families where a higher percentage of boys (36 %) compared to girls (22 %) perceived their parents as highly abusive and almost equal proportion of boys (58 %) and girls (62 %) were found to be low on abuse. More girls (16 %) compared to boys (6 %) perceived their parents as non-abusive. The chi-square value was also found to be significant ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 6.03$; $P < 0.05$). Thus on the whole, in intact families there were significant differences in the perceptions of boys and girls with regard to parenting and boys perceived their parents as more abusive compared to girls (Table 2).

Data related to incidence of physical punishment and neglect experienced by the adolescents in single parent and intact families is presented in Table 3. More boys reported to be physically punished by their parents as compared to girls in both single parent and intact families. The chi-square value ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 50.38$; $P < 0.001$) also indicates highly significant differences in the perception of boys and girls regarding physical punishment. Boys perceived their parents as more punishing than girls in both single and intact families. This finding is in line with that of Kewalramani (1996) who also investigated that more

boys than girls were the victims of physical abuse. Kang (1994) also revealed that physical punishment was employed more in case of boys than girls by parents.

Almost equal number of boys (33.50 %) and girls (31.00 %) experienced discouraging attitude of their parents (Table 3). However, adolescents from intact families (both boys and girls) perceived their parents as more discouraging than adolescents from single parent families but statistically there were no significant differences. More girls (19.50%) were influenced by biased attitude of parents who showed preference for a male child in the family ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 6.06$; $P < 0.05$), hence the girls perceived their parents to be biased towards them (Table 3). Similarly, with respect to differences in both single parent and intact families, a higher percentage of girls perceived their parents exhibiting biased attitude towards them. Due to male dominating society parents may have more inclination towards sons which may sometimes be perceived by the daughters as biased attitude, although it may not actually be so.

Perceptions of adolescents with respect to ignoring attitude of parents towards them were headed by girls (44.50%) and adolescents from single parent families perceived themselves to be ignored more in comparison to intact families. Statistically also differences were found to be significant ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.74$; $P < 0.05$). Apart from this, majority of the adolescents perceived their parents to be of criticizing nature and rejecting their demands in both single parent and intact families. However, statically there were no signifi-

Table 3: Frequency and per cent of adolescents experiencing physical punishment and neglect

Parameters	Single parent families		Intact families		Total		χ^2 value
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Physical punishment	38 (38.00)	27 (27.00)	32 (32.00)	22 (22.00)	70 (35.00)	49 (16.50)	50.38***
Discouraging attitude	28 (28.00)	29 (29.00)	39 (39.00)	33 (33.00)	67 (33.50)	62 (31.00)	3.32 ^{NS}
Biased attitude of parents	11 (11.00)	19 (19.00)	15 (15.00)	24 (24.00)	26 (15.00)	43 (19.50)	6.06*
Ignoring attitude of parents	34 (34.00)	49 (49.00)	24 (24.00)	40 (40.00)	58 (29.00)	89 (44.50)	7.74*
Criticising nature	39 (34.00)	35 (35.00)	42 (42.00)	35 (35.00)	81 (40.50)	70 (35.00)	3.40 ^{NS}
Rejection of demand	41 (41.00)	25 (25.00)	29 (29.00)	31 (31.00)	70 (35.00)	56 (28.00)	5.62 ^{NS}

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages

NS: Non significant * $P < 0.05$ *** $P < 0.001$

cant differences since the chi-square values were found to be non-significant. This may be due to the fact that adolescence is one of the most sensitive stage and adolescents are easily affected and distracted even by the suggestions given by their parents/other adults in the family since they do not want any interference during this stage. Conflicts arise between them and their parents and they perceive their parents as having negative attitude towards them.

Guidelines to Parents for Appropriate Parenting/Disciplinary Techniques

The guidelines for appropriate parenting/disciplinary techniques are based on the opinions, suggestions and perceptions of the adolescents.

- Adolescence is the most crucial stage of development in individual's life and it is often difficult for the parents to realize that their responsibilities as parents of adolescents are different from that of parents of children. So they continue to have the same close supervision on the activities of their adolescents as they did when they were young. Parents should not be too strict in their rule enforcement on the adolescents rather they must gradually relax parental ties as children step in adolescence.
- No matter how much parents love their adolescents and care for them, at times they get annoyed at the mistakes committed by them or get angry being in bad mood or tired or just to discipline the adolescents. They very easily loose their temper and patience and rely on use of punishment which should be avoided at all costs and it is never appreciated by most of the adolescents. During discussions while collecting data 48.20 per cent adolescents from the present investigation also expressed that their parents should exhibit patience, should not be short tempered while dealing with them and 61.40 per cent of

them suggested that their parents should not punish them.

- At the same time adolescents should also follow the guidelines given by their parents, not react back immediately on being scolded or criticized by parents, not misled by mass media regarding violence or other bad things which may provoke the parents to use any type of abusive behaviour.

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