

Adolescent Perceptions and Extent of Abusive Parenting in Single Parent and Intact Families

Meenu Gupta and Sukhminder Kaur

*Department of Human Development, Punjab Agricultural University,
Ludhiana 141 004, Punjab, India*

KEYWORDS Abusive Parenting. Single Parent Families. Intact Families. Adolescents

ABSTRACT Present study was undertaken to document the adolescent perceptions and extent 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. Adolescents from intact families perceived their parents as more abusive on various dimensions such as nature of parents, school regularity, discouragement, criticizing attitude and ignoring behaviour of parents; boys experienced more punishment than girls. The most common method used for physical punishment was slapping (80.67%) followed by other methods such as twisting of ear (47%), spanking (24%), kicking (18%) and beating (26%) etc. Guidelines to parents for appropriate parenting/ disciplinary techniques were suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Parents play a significant role in the growth and personality development of a child and successful parenting is the ability of a parent to understand and support their children in the face of unwanted or critical situations. Through interaction with children, parents reflect their attitude, beliefs, values, interests as well as their care taking and training behaviour (Glasgow et al. 1993). A good parenting gives the child a sense of mutual concern, understanding, acceptance, companionship, cooperation and enhances overall personality development whereas inappropriate parenting deprives him of enriched environment followed by negative consequences such as shyness, withdrawal, anxiety, poor academic achievement, hampers personality development and leads to non-disciplined behaviour among children. The majority of the incidents of abuse that come to the surface arise from situations where parents are attempting to control or discipline their children. Abusive parents are significantly more authoritarian and harsh towards their children and are less appropriate in their choice of disciplinary methods

compared to non abusive parents (Pillai 2004). It is the ineffectiveness of the abusive parent's child management style that contributes to the abuse.

Abusive parenting is a complex system, influenced by sociological, cultural, psychological and interactional variables. Parents who abuse their children tend to demonstrate some particular personality traits such as feeling of being unloved and unworthy themselves and their lives have usually been fraught with rejection and losses; with loss of nurturing in childhood as the foundation (Tower 1993). Abusive parenting may also result from several other reasons such as economic distress, use of alcohol and drugs, social isolation, big family size, violence in family, martial conflicts and lack of child management skills (Kewalramani 1996). Abusive parents have been reported to have martial conflicts, fight physically with each other, experience more stressful events than other families and their households are more disorganized (Pillai 2004). It is more true for single parents who may lack child management skills due to multiplicity of responsibilities. Single parents have also been reported to be ineffective in their disciplinary practices (Bank et al. 1993). They face a lot of difficulty in bringing up their children single headedly especially the mothers because the tension created by the financial problems together with the strain of role overload leads to neglect of children (Krishnan 1991). These experiences have a profound effect on the personality development of adolescents.

Moreover, adolescence is a most sensitive and

Address for correspondence:

Dr. (Mrs.) Sukhminder Kaur
Department of Human Development
College of Home Science, Punjab Agricultural University
Ludhiana 141 001, Punjab, India
Mobile: 09463503991
E-mail: gursh198@yahoo.co.in

difficult period of human development. With the demand of independence by them, some parents may feel threatened and less sure of themselves and thus demand complete obedience and submission to their whims and wishes from the child (Montemayor and Raymond 1983). The child's immaturity in understanding of his inability to control himself make necessary for many parents to step in with harsh or disciplinary measures (Darling and Steinberg 1993). Hence, it was considered worthwhile to document the perceptions of adolescents towards abusive parenting in intact versus single parent families. Moreover the concept of abusive parenting in single parent as well as in intact families has yet not received required attention and consequently scant literature is available in this area. The present study was therefore planned with the objectives. (i) To study the extent of abusive parenting in single parent and intact families as perceived by the adolescents. (ii) To determine the differences in abusive parenting in single parent and intact families on various dimensions viz. physical punishment, emotional abuse and neglect. (iii) To prepare guidelines to educate parents for appropriate parenting/ disciplinary techniques.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted on school going adolescents (age 13-16 years) during the session 2004-05 from various co-educational Senior Secondary Schools in Ludhiana city by using a multi-stage sampling procedure. A list of all the Senior Secondary Government and Public/Private, co-educational schools (58 in total) 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 personally contacted and explained the purpose of study to get permission to work in their schools. Thereafter, the lists of students belonging to both single parent and intact families were prepared and a sample of 100 adolescents was randomly drawn out of 150 adolescents belonging to single parent families in age group of 13-16 years in all the selected schools. Similarly 100 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 a total sample comprised of 200 adolescents including 100 each boys and girls.

Operational Definition: Since the definition of abusive parenting varies from culture to culture, therefore it was imperative to define abusive parenting in the context of present study which was done by conducting a preliminary survey on adolescents (both boys and girls) to know their perceptions about abusive behaviour of their parents by holding discussions with them. Based on the information revealed by the adolescents during discussions, the definition was derived 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 and emotional abuse was conceptualized in terms of failure of parents to provide for the well-being of child, such as refusing/neglecting medical problems, criticizing, ignoring and discouraging attitude of parents, comparing the adolescents with friends, not appreciating and not involving them much in family decisions etc"

Tools: A Personal Information Sheet and a Self Structured Interview Schedule were employed to collect data.

Personal Information Sheet was used to assess the background of the respondents including age, gender, birth order, family type (single/intact), family size, reason of single parenthood, age, education and occupation of parents, family structure (joint/nuclear) and number of siblings and monthly income of the family etc.

Interview Schedule contained information relating to incidence of abusive parenting viz. nature of parents, parental interest in 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.

Data Collection and Analysis: Data collection was initiated in the year 2005 and the

adolescents were approached in the schools itself. The information relating to abusive parenting was recorded by personally interviewing the adolescents and by holding focus group discussions. Frequencies, percentages and chi-square were used for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data relating to the extent of abusive parenting among adolescents in single parent and intact families with respect to different variables such as discouraging, ignoring, criticizing, rejecting, biased attitude of parents and physical punishment is presented in Table 1. It is evident from the table that both male and female adolescents perceived their parents to be discouraging but more boys (11.62%) than girls (7.75%) perceived to be discouraged regularly. Moreover adolescents, both boys and girls from intact families, compared to single parent families reported to be discouraged more by their parents. The value of chi-square was also calculated to be highly significant ($\chi^2(2) = 12.76$; $P < .01$). Straus and Field (2003) also reported that nearly all parents in their sample of teenagers used severe psychological aggression frequently as a means of controlling and correcting their behaviour and about half of all parents were found to be using yelling, screaming or shouting as a method of controlling or correcting the behaviour of child.

Regarding parental preference for a particular sibling, more girls than boys perceived their parents to be biased most of the times ($\chi^2(2) = 6.06$; $P < .05$) similarly the differences in both single parent ($\chi^2(2) = 6.54$; $P < .05$) and intact families ($\chi^2(2) = 7.12$; $P < 0.05$) were also found to be significant statistically. With respect to ignoring nature of parents, again a higher percentage of girls (13.60%) compared to boys (9.52%) perceived their parents to be ignoring them regularly followed by 22.00 percent girls and 14.96 percent boys frequently. These differences were also statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 7.74$; $P < .05$). This may be attributed to the fact that our society is a male dominating society and many parents still tend to have more inclination and favourable attitude towards male child and female children get a feeling of biased and ignoring nature of parents, however it may not actually be so. In the context of family structure more boys from single parent families (13.79%) compared to

intact families (1.34%) reported to be ignored by parents regularly ($\chi^2(2) = 11.21$; $P < .01$). A similar trend could be seen in case of girls also as more of them from single parent families compared to intact families reported to be ignored by the their parents regularly (12.35%) ($\chi^2(2) = 8.28$; $P < .05$) (Table 1). The single parents are running the household single headedly along with performing the role of lost partner, they are overburdened with the responsibilities and hence may be perceived as ignoring parent.

Boys and girls however did not differ in their perceptions towards criticizing nature of parents, as almost equal number of boys (13.20%) and girls (10.50%) reported to be criticized regularly. But more number of boys (17.60%) and girls (15.70%) from intact families compared to single parent families perceived their parents as criticizing them regularly with a statistically significant differences ($\chi^2(2) = 8.44$; $P < .05$) (Table 1). Kang (1994) also investigated that adolescents perceived their parents as having criticizing nature.

A higher percentage of boys and girls reported to be rejected for their demands regularly by their parents in single parent families as compared to intact families with significant differences. The chi-square value was also calculated to be significant ($\chi^2(2) = 7.06$; 7.44 , $P < .05$) (Table 1). Bharat (1986) also investigated that single parents have to shoulder all the problems and responsibilities themselves and all the roles carried out by the absent parent have to be taken over by the single parent therefore due to a stressful life these parents may reject the demands of adolescents. Again a higher percentage of boys compared to girls reported to be physically punished by their parents regularly (10.08%) and frequently (11.70%). The chi-square value ($\chi^2(2) = 50.38$; $P < .001$) also attracts one's attention to assess a

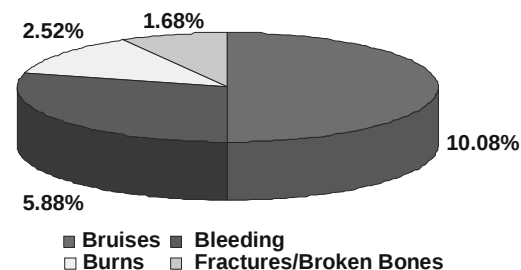


Fig. 1. Extent of injuries experienced by adolescents in single parent and intact families

Table 1: Extent of abusive parenting perceived by the adolescents in single parents and intact families

Variables and extent	Boys		χ^2 value	Girls		χ^2 value	Total families		χ^2 value
	Single parent families	Intact families		Single parent families	Intact families		Boys	Girls	
1. Discouraging Attitude of Parents									
a. Occasionally	17(25.37)	11(16.41)	12.36**	21(33.80)	14(22.58)	6.30*	28(21.70)	35(27.13)	3.32 ^{NS}
b. Frequently	9(13.40)	15(22.38)		7(11.29)	10(16.12)		24(18.60)	17(13.17)	
c. Regularly	2(7.98)	13(19.40)		1(1.61)	9(14.50)		15(11.62)	10(7.75)	
2. Parental Preference for a Particular Sibling									
a. Occasionally	5(19.20)	5(19.20)	6.51*	16(37.20)	13(30.20)	7.12*	21(30.40)	18(26.08)	3.32*
b. Frequently	3(11.50)	6(23.00)		2(4.60)	7(16.27)		5(7.20)	13(18.84)	
c. Regularly	3(11.50)	4(15.30)		1(2.32)	4(9.30)		4(5.79)	8(11.59)	
3. Ignoring Nature of Parents									
a. Occasionally	12(20.68)	10(17.24)	6.54*	20(22.47)	16(17.97)	8.28*	22(14.96)	36(24.48)	7.12*
b. Frequently	14(24.13)	8(13.79)		18(20.22)	15(16.80)		22(14.96)	33(22.40)	
c. Regularly	8(13.79)	6(10.34)		11(12.35)	9(10.11)		14(9.52)	20(13.60)	
4. Criticising Nature of Parents									
a. Occasionally	24(29.60)	13(16.04)	8.44*	23(32.86)	11(15.70)	8.28*	27(24.50)	34(22.50)	3.40 ^{NS}
b. Frequently	9(11.11)	15(18.50)		7(10.00)	13(18.57)		24(15.80)	20(13.20)	
c. Regularly	6(7.4)	14(17.30)		5(7.10)	11(15.70)		20(13.20)	16(10.59)	
5. Rejection of Demands by Parents									
a. Occasionally	20(28.60)	13(18.60)	7.06	7(10.60)	17(25.75)	7.40*	33(24.26)	24(17.64)	5.62 ^{NS}
b. Frequently	12(17.10)	10(14.78)		10(15.15)	9(13.60)		2(16.17)	19(13.97)	
c. Regularly	9(12.80)	6(8.58)		8(12.12)	5(7.50)		5(11.02)	11(8.08)	
6. Extent of Physical Punishment									
a. Occasionally	28(40.00)	16(22.80)	0.47 ^{NS}	22(44.89)	11(22.44)	6.97*	44(36.90)	33(27.70)	50.38***
b. Frequently	4(5.70)	10(14.20)		3(6.12)	6(12.24)		14(11.70)	9(7.56)	
c. Regularly	6(8.57)	6(8.57)		2(4.08)	5(10.20)		12(10.08)	7(5.88)	

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate percentages

* $P < .05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$; NS = Non Significant

highly significant difference in the perception of boys and girls on this dimension (Table 1). These findings are also in line with that of Kewalramani (1996) who investigated that more boys than girls were the victim of physical abuse. With respect to type of families a sizeable proportion of girls in intact families compared to single parent families reported to be punished regularly and frequently ($\chi^2(2) = 6.97$; $P < .05$). But the trend was not similar in case of boys as equal percentage of boys (8.57%) each from single parent and intact families reported to be punished physically by their parents regularly (Table 1).

Table 2 presents the data relating to extent of injuries experienced by the adolescents in single parent and intact families as a result of physical punishment. Few adolescents (20.16%) suffered from various types of injuries such as bruises (10.08%) followed by bleeding (5.88%). Adolescents both boys and girls even experienced burns (2.52%) and fractures/broken bones (1.68%). Adolescents from intact families experienced more physical injuries as compared to single parent families; bruises (5.88%), bleeding (4.20%), burns and fractures 1.68 per cent each.

Table 2: Extent of injuries experienced by the adolescents in single parent and intact families n=24 (20.16%).

Type of injury	Single parent families (n=8)	Intact families (n=16)	Total adolescents(n=24)
Bruises	5(4.20)	7(5.88)	12(10.08)
Bleeding	2(1.68)	5(4.20)	7(5.88)
Burns	1(0.84)	2(1.68)	3(2.52)
Fractures/Broken bones	0(0.00)	2(1.68)	2(1.68)

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

SUGGESTIONS FOR APPROPRIATE PARENTING/DISCIPLINARY TECHNIQUES

- Parents should promote a warm parent-adolescent relationship by providing special time and close and warm interaction with adolescents daily. It was also suggested by 30 per cent adolescents (both boys and girls) in the present study that their parents should be friendly with them and involve them in healthy conversation.
- More than thirty nine percent adolescents from intact families and 24.60 percent from single parent families expressed that their parents should give them a bit freedom in making their decisions. Thus it is suggestive of the fact that adolescents' opinions and thoughts must receive adequate attention and they should not be reluctant to grant freedom to them.
- Parents should not impose their authority on adolescents rather ensure them of their valuable suggestions, advice and guidance whenever it is sought.
- Parents should create an informal environment and encourage their adolescent children to discuss all the significant and non-significant problems with them pertaining to any issue related to school, peer, career etc. as most of the adolescents (65%) have also suggested that their parents should discuss and guide them to solve their problems and make them understand things in an easier way.
- Parent should not be too liberal or lenient so that they may not be overpowered by the children. But they can use more effective disciplinary techniques which deviate from abusiveness and are authoritative in nature like verbal reasoning with them, showing just

angry gestures rather punishing them physically, withdrawing love for some times, deprive them of some of privileges for a short period etc.

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

REFERENCES

- Bank LMS, Forgatch GR, Patterson RA 1993. Parenting practices of single mothers: Mediators of negative contextual factors. *J of Marriage and Family*, 55: 371-384.
- Bharat S 1986. Single parent families in India. Issues and implications. *Ind J of Social Work*, 49: 227-337.
- Darling N, Steinberg L 1993. Parenting style as context, an integrative model. *Child Dev*, 113: 387-396.
- Glasgow KL, Dornbusch SM, Troyer L, Laurence S, Ritter PL 1997. Parenting styles, adolescents attributes in nine heterogeneous high schools. *Child Dev*, 68: 507-529.
- Kang TK 1994. Disciplinary techniques used by fathers as perceived by adolescents in rural and urban areas. *J of Marriage and Family*, 50: 380-395.
- Kewalramani GS 1996. Child abuse. A systematic analysis. *Ind J of Social Work*, 57: 397-413.
- Krishnan L 1991. Parental acceptance-rejection and attitudes to helping: A study of Indian mothers. *Psycho Studies*, 33: 185-193.
- Montemayor R, Raymond E 1983. Parents and adolescents in conflicts: All families some of the times and some families most of the times. *J of Marriage and Family*, 48: 4-15.
- Pillai MG 2004. *Child Abuse*. Jaipur: Pointer Publishers.
- Straus MA, Field CJ 2003. Psychological aggression by American parents: National data on prevalence, chronicity and severity. *J of Marriage and Family*, 65: 795-808.
- Tower CC 1993. *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect*. Toronto: Allyn & Bacon.