

If smacking works, why are the prisons so full?

Building on voices of respect to reduce physical punishment against young children

Gary Barker and Tatiana Araujo, Instituto Promundo, Brazil*

Brazil is no different to many other parts of the world in that violence against children is widespread – particularly the use of physical or corporal punishment. Household sample surveys carried out by Promundo in three low-income neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro found that between 60 and 77% of parents have used physical violence (mostly physical punishment including slapping, spanking or beating) against children on one or more occasions in the past month. Physical violence was most frequently used against children aged between 4 and 12 years. In the same 543 households, 22–44% reported incidences of physical violence between adults (mostly men against women).

Despite legislation in support of children's rights, Brazil has until recently had few public education campaigns or community-based initiatives aiming to prevent or reduce physical punishment and other forms of physical violence against children. Instead, efforts have mostly focused on responding to serious cases of abuse or neglect and reporting cases of violence. While such interventions are vital, it is equally important to identify ways that physical punishment, and the trauma associated with it, can be prevented. The concept of prevention strikes at the heart of the 'adult-child interaction', i.e. whether children are viewed as subjects in their own right or as objects or inferior beings who must be moulded by their parents. Indeed, from a developmental perspective, when parents give their children respect and 'personhood' from the earliest moments of

their lives, children are more likely to grow up with greater confidence and ability to interact with the world around them.

The project "Children – Holders of Rights"

In conducting the research reported here, it was important not to stigmatise low-income families and parents; corporal punishment and child abuse are also widespread among middle-income families in Brazil and elsewhere. Furthermore, poverty is associated with limited opportunities, a range of stresses (financial, physical and emotional) and social inequalities that in and of themselves represent forms of violence against children and families. In the low-income *favelas*¹ of Rio de Janeiro, structural inequalities² (also known as structural violence) contribute, for example, to the existence of *comandos* or *bandidos* (armed drug trafficking groups), who control the drug trade and other criminal activities, recruit young people from the favelas and engage in conflict with rival *comandos* and the police.

Such conditions place great stress on parents, who frequently take extreme measures to ensure the safety of their children, such as locking them up at home. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of recreational activities and early childhood or after-school programmes that could provide safe spaces for children outside their homes. Promundo's research and longstanding collaboration in these communities has led to the observation that parents

* Gary Barker is Executive Director of Instituto Promundo, and Tatiana Araujo is Program Assistant, coordinating the "Children: Holders of Rights – The First step for Eradicating Corporal Punishment" project and the "Parenting Styles in Latin America and the Caribbean" project.

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of various partner organizations and individuals in carrying out the research and developing the initiatives described here. These include Irene Rizzini, Alexandre Bárbara Soares and Maria Helena Zamora from CIESPI; Caius Brandão, Marcio Segundo and Isadora Garcia at Instituto Promundo; Save the Children-Sweden, Save the Children-Spain, the Oak Foundation, CHILDHOPE-UK, International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), DFID – Department of International Development (UK), the Bernard van Leer Foundation and LACRI (Laboratório de Estudos da Criança, University of São Paulo).



Photo: JON SPAULL

Violence in the low-income favelas place great stress on parents. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of recreational activities and early childhood or after-school programmes that could provide safe spaces for children outside their homes.

frequently use physical punishment as a way to protect their children from community violence. We have observed, for example, parents slapping or hitting a child to get their attention, often when the child is outside the home and not responding to instructions to come inside away from the violence. The following statements describe the level of community violence:

"We live in fear...when we hear gunshots, we all go running...we hide under the bed...[my children] say they are afraid. This is not a good place to raise a child."

Mother of young children, Bangu

"The violence comes from both sides: the *bandidos* and the police. Depending on where you live, you may trust the *bandidos* more than the police."

Mother of young children, Bangu

"We know that our children need to play... that they should not stay locked up inside the house. They want to go out and play. But we know we have to lock them up inside the house. Outside it's too much of a risk."

Mother of young children, Santa Marta

'Voices of resistance'

At first glance, the activities of Promundo suggest a pessimistic outlook for children living in the *favelas*. However, 'voices of resistance' can be found. These are parents and caregivers who do not believe in using physical violence against children and who have found alternatives. It is important not to oversimplify the difference between 'violent' and 'non-violent' parents. The vast majority of parents in the communities where we work have positive intentions toward their children, but face numerous stresses in caring for them. Focusing on the voices of resistance can help identify protective factors or voices that can mitigate against or prompt others to question the use of corporal punishment.

Promundo researchers interviewed parents about their relationships with their children, their knowledge and use of existing services and their use (or not) of physical punishment and other forms of violence. The process led to identification of four (sometimes overlapping) categories:

1. Parents who use and justify physical punishment as a way to maintain parental authority and see it as a valid educational practice.
2. Parents who say they are opposed to corporal punishment in principle but sometimes (or frequently) use it because they lose control or don't know what else to do.
3. Parents who use serious forms of physical violence against children and display negative feelings toward their children (violence that could be classified as abuse).
4. Parents who do not believe in physical punishment and, for the most part, use non-violent forms of discipline. Some use verbal aggression and threats; others demonstrate relationships based on respect, dialogue and negotiation.

Category 4 has provided the best insight for designing community-based interventions. Listening to the parents who question violence against children has led to the identification of several key factors:

- **Their own experiences of violence when they were children.** Some had themselves been subjected to physical violence when they were children but did not believe that it was right or appropriate. Others did not suffer corporal punishment as children and wanted to pass on their experience of a positive relationship to their own children.
- **Their knowledge, belief and experience of non-violent forms of discipline.** These parents showed some experience and belief in the use of dialogue, time-outs and grounding their children, instead of using physical punishment. Thus they not only knew about other forms of discipline, they had tried them and found them effective, and thus felt confident to use them again.
- **Their description and belief in children's rights.** Some showed a degree of respect for even young children as being able to make certain decisions, having rights to opinions and expressions and being complete human beings, not simply extensions of themselves. As one mother said:

“A child is a person just like us. They have desires, a will... They get mad just like us. We have to understand the child's universe. We have to know how to negotiate and there are times when we have to set limits. But I don't believe that we are the kings of it all.”

Mother of children aged 0–6 years

- **Their awareness that the parental style of interaction can influence how children interact with others.** Some parents were concerned about how their children perceived them. They understood that if they presented a role model for violent behaviour, their children would be more likely to repeat the same behaviour when interacting with others. The following quotes illustrate how these parents viewed the issue:

“Do you know why I don't agree with spanking? The world is already too violent... If I use violence, I'm just going to show them how to be violent and they'll pass that on to their children.”

Mother of children aged 7–12 years

“Beating your children just generates fear... He'll be afraid of you but he won't respect you.”

Father of adolescent children

“I talk with my children and if necessary give them a time-out. I believe that it has to be done with dialogue. If violence worked, there are so many prison inmates who were beaten as children and it didn't serve anything.”

Mother of children aged 0–6 years

The research led to another important finding from both qualitative and quantitative aspects: parental knowledge of children's rights and child development was not necessarily associated with lower rates of corporal punishment. Indeed, nearly all the parents interviewed (those who used violence and those who did not) showed a fairly high level of knowledge about children's rights legislation in Brazil and basic aspects of child development. Although such knowledge is obviously important, it appears that other parental conditions, factors and characteristics seem to be more important in explaining whether parents use or do not use physical punishment. Indeed, the key seems to be the quality of the interaction between parent and child, and secondly, whether parents believe

that children are independently minded, complete human beings with rights, as the mother above said, ‘just like adults’. Parents with such beliefs do not allow their children to do anything they want. They perceive that, as parents, they have a responsibility to protect and care for their children. They also perceive that they have power over their children, but believe that they should use this power to protect and teach rather than to dominate.

An additional component of the research involved asking children aged 5–12 years about corporal punishment. The consultation consisted of 11 two-hour sessions with 65 children (separated into groups aged 5–8 and 9–12 years). The researchers used activities such as role-plays, clay modelling, storytelling and drawing. In these sessions the children affirmed that they felt fear, sadness and anger when subjected to physical punishment and that they acutely resented those all-too-frequent moments when they felt that their parents did not listen to them and take their wishes into consideration. Many children described desperate attempts to get their parents to listen to them. In one activity, the children were asked to pretend that they were the parents and that their make-believe son or daughter was acting up. Most of the children said they would talk to their ‘child’, perhaps use a time-out or send the disobeying ‘child’ to their room. The children were then asked what they would do if after using a time-out, their ‘children’ continued to disobey them. Their responses showed that children as young as five were already reproducing their parents' behaviour. One child said angrily, “If my child didn't obey me I would get the broom and beat her just like my mother does with me.”

From research to practice: Components of a community intervention

The research results, together with Promundo's ongoing experiences with low-income communities, provided the basis for introducing a series of activities designed to promote discussion on raising children without violence. One of the first steps was to develop a manual, entitled *Caring without violence: Everyone can*, aimed at community workers. The manual was developed in collaboration with the Centro Internacional de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Infância (CIESPI) and was inspired in part by materials produced by Save the Children–Spain. It

presents a series of group educational activities that can be carried out with parents. These include role-plays, group brainstorming exercises and personal reflections about physical punishment and about the recognition of children as ‘subjects of rights’, i.e. that children are ‘just like adults’ and that parents are not ‘the kings of it all’ (see box).

The manual and its activities were tested and used initially with parents in three communities as part of a five-year initiative to build community-based service networks for children and young people. Activities were also conducted with staff at early childhood education centres and after-school programmes for school-age children. It emerged that daycare staff were already aware of children's rights and showed a high degree of respect towards children. The challenge, as voiced by teachers and daycare staff, was to get the same message to the parents and to encourage them to reflect critically about the issues.

Strategies to find time in parents' busy schedules involve offering flexible meeting hours (evenings or weekends), child care, snacks and sometimes

Persons and things

In the ‘Persons and things’ activity, the group of parents is divided into two groups: one is the ‘persons’, and the other is the ‘things’. Each ‘person’ is assigned one ‘thing’. During the course of about 15 minutes, the ‘persons’ control their ‘things’. They tell them what to do, what not to do and make them perform various tasks. The ‘things’ must obey the ‘persons’; they are not allowed to talk back and they have no will of their own. After the 15 minutes, the group discusses how it feels to be a ‘person’ or a ‘thing’. They then reflect on how the activity might resemble family dynamics and how they may treat young children as ‘things’ or how parents may also be treated as ‘things’, for example, in the workplace.

This and other similar activities can help parents think about how they view their children. The activities also help them analyse how they learned their parenting behaviour and how various life conditions – including stress related to work and community violence – may lead to physical punishment.

combining an immediate need (such as storytelling with the children) with a more abstract need (e.g., improving parent-child relations). Community-based workers (who are from the communities themselves and are paid a stipend as part of the project) often have contact with the families (as friends, neighbours, etc.) and can serve as outreach workers, visiting their homes if they miss a session, or distributing information about forthcoming activities.

Voices of resistance in action

As a result of this initial experience, Promundo began a new initiative aimed at reducing physical punishment of children. This is based on the premise that the key factor is to engage parents in critical reflection of the parent-child interaction and to encourage a supportive community environment that builds on the voices of parents and other community members who already question the use of violence. The key hypothesis, based on this research, is that parents who see their children as 'subjects of rights', having full 'personhood', are less likely to use physical punishment than parents who do not view their children as having inherent rights, or who see their children as inferior or as extensions of themselves and their own needs. The initiative uses four key components:

1. **Parent discussion groups.** These will include activities from the *Caring without Violence* manual and other group educational activities and discussions, using a Paulo Freirean approach³ to raise awareness and promote critical reflection about parent-child interactions. Rather than simply a presentation of information, the groups will focus on increasing awareness based on reflection about the parents' beliefs.
2. **Community campaign for a non-violent environment.** This is currently being designed in collaboration with an advertising agency. It is based on the voices of resistance and the baseline research, and will reinforce existing messages of non-violence in the community. Rather than chastising or criticising parents, the campaign will feature discourses from parents who already question violence.
3. **Educational video and booklet to promote critical reflection.** Presented as a cartoon without words, the video follows in the tradition of the Promundo/Program H series on gender (*Once*

upon a boy, Afraid of what? and *Once upon a girl*). These videos have been used in the public education sector and by NGOs worldwide to promote gender equality. They are designed for use with groups. The facilitator can stop the video at any point and ask the participants to construct the dialogue themselves, thereby promoting critical reflection about the issues. The video on children as subjects of rights will show children at several different ages or stages of evolving capacities and present parents interacting in violent ways with them. An adult, in this case a grandmother, intervenes, showing the parents the effects of their negative attitudes. (The example of a grandmother acting as a positive voice was prompted by recent research.) The video (like the campaign) will not seek to make parents feel guilty, but will demonstrate the positive aspects of parenting in addition to the challenges.

4. **Impact evaluation model.** As with previous work promoting gender equality, Promundo is carrying out qualitative and quantitative impact evaluation to assess changes in attitudes, behaviour and social norms related to physical punishment of children as a result of our program activities. The centrepiece of this evaluation is an attitude scale that measures the extent to which parents see their children as subjects of rights. This combines questions and indicators from existing measures of parenting styles to develop a new scale, which is being validated with a household sample.

Lessons learned

Previous work conducted by Promundo, looking at ways to reduce men's violence towards women, has provided significant input for the work on violent behaviour against children. Previous research confirmed that group education focusing on critical reflection combined with community campaigns can change attitudes and behaviour and create a supportive community environment. Previous work also built on identifying positive discourses – in that case the voices of men who showed more gender equitable views toward women and who actively questioned the role of violence against them. Similarly, the ongoing work with children listens to the voices of parents who already question violent behaviour directed towards children. Emerging lessons include the following:

- **Early childhood programmes and their staff are**

key allies in the process, particularly in reaching parents, and often already question the use of violence against children. Indeed, a child rights perspective already exists in the public education system and in early childhood centres located in the communities where Promundo works. There are few reported incidents of teachers using physical violence against children, and teachers (at the primary and pre-school level) advocate children as being subjects of rights. The staff can therefore represent important allies in engaging parents and helping create a supportive community environment.

- **Engaging parents and caregivers, while challenging, is the key to the process.** Many parents in low-income neighbourhoods work long and irregular hours. They may also have more than one job. They are often physically too exhausted to participate in group activities. Others lack the childcare arrangements that would allow them to participate. This is why Promundo provides childcare facilities while the parents participate. It is often difficult to engage the men/fathers, particularly in low-income urban settings like those in Rio de Janeiro, where approximately one-third of households are female-headed. Special recruiting processes aim to include as many fathers as possible in the groups.
- **It is important to build on existing protective factors and positive practices.** Initial interactions with parents confirm that it is unfair and unproductive to carry out activities that point the finger at parents, highlighting what is negative about their behaviour. Even in the most stressed settings, where there is extensive community violence and parents frequently use physical violence, the vast majority of parents have positive intentions and want the best for their children. Rather than chastising parents, our intervention starts from the premise that raising young children is a formidable challenge (especially for low-income families) and parents need help and support. Similarly, our community messages build on the positive things parents already do, rather than starting with a deficit perspective.

While there is still much to do, initial work through a process of critical reflection is beginning to show

impact. Some community workers were initially distressed by the widespread acceptance of corporal punishment. However, after a series of sessions in which the parents reflected about what it means to be parent (and carried out the 'Persons and things' activity, among others), their attitudes changed.

"At the beginning, some of the parents would say 'Why would you hug your child? If you take care of them, feed them, give them a roof over their head, that's enough.' But then the mothers' attitudes started to change, they saw the importance of not using violence...of spending more time with their children."

Community worker

Clearly a community-based intervention like this one will not change attitudes and behaviour on its own. It is important to point out that, in addition to its community work, Promundo is working closely with Save the Children-Sweden (scs) and other partners on national-level advocacy efforts. The Brazilian office of scs is leading efforts to enact national legislation specifically condemning corporal punishment. It is also promoting a national awareness campaign about ending corporal punishment. Working together, the two organisations, and their partners, are exerting a synergistic effect, each complementing the other's activities.

Notes

- 1 Slums.
- 2 Structural violence occurs whenever people are disadvantaged by political, legal, economic or cultural traditions. Unequal access to resources, political power, education, health care, or legal standing are forms of structural violence. See Deborah DuNann Winter and Dana Leighton, 1999. Structural violence introduction <www.psych.ubc.ca/~dleighton/svintro.html>.
- 3 Paulo Freire was one of the most important educators in Brazil and is known worldwide for creating what he called a 'pedagogy of the oppressed', a process for promoting critical reflection and a critical conscience among low income individuals in which, by analyzing their own conditions, they become active participants in transforming their realities. See Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Editora Paz e Terra, 23^a Edição, 1996. <www.paulofreire.org>