

## An Investigation into Parental Disciplinary Measures and Effects in China

Shi Li<sup>1</sup> and Ingrid Harrington<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The study investigated 13 high school students in Xi'an China on 1) disciplinary measures adopted by their parents, 2) the effects on their academic performance and affection for their parents. The method of in-depth interview was adopted and NVivo was employed in data analysis. The results from this investigation show that 1) physical punishment with good reason in early childhood can be forgiven by them after entering into high school; 2) constructive verbal discipline is the most effective method of discipline for academic performance and the development of a parent-child bond; 3) nagging has a detrimental effect on both school performance and the intergenerational relationship.

**Key words:** parental discipline, constructive verbal discipline, academic performance, affection for parents

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### Introduction

The importance of raising our children to become caring, respectful, and responsible adults is often neglected or much less valued than achievement or happiness by parents nowadays. According to a Harvard study, approximately 80 percent of the youth said their parents were more concerned with their achievement or happiness than whether they cared for others (Joyce, 2014).

The key to raising nice kids is to subjugate their self-interest. Some scholars advocate "gentle parenting". One scholar argued that "we want our children to do the right thing because they know it's right, and because they want to do right" and believed that offering rewards and punishments overrides a "child's natural inclination" (English, 2015b); another expounded that "with punishment (verbal abuse, banishment or corporal punishment), your kids are not learning to behave appropriately because they believe that it's a good idea (internalising a code of behaviour) but because they are terrified of what you will do to them" (Carr-Gregg, 2014, p. 86). Their thoughts may simply be wishful thinking for they are against the basic human nature. Self-interest is fundamentally a natural inclination of human beings, an in-built weakness of human beings. The development of virtues is to subjugate our self-interested inclination (Aristotle, trans. 1976; Hume, 1960; Kant & Gregor, 1996).

To subjugate self-interest, parents need to discipline children by teaching them responsible behaviour (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967; Li, 2015). The child will learn about consequences and taking responsibility for their own actions by rewarding for appropriate behaviour and discouraging inappropriate behaviour. Skinner's operant conditioning theory (1938) holds that

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Senior Lecturer Dr., University of New England, Australia, Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Science and Education (HASSE), sli7@une.edu.au, ORCID: 0000-0002-7801-9081

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Dr., University of New England, Australia, Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Social Science and Education (HASSE), iharring@une.edu.au, ORCID:0000-0002-1898-4795

human behaviour is a consequence of rewards and/or punishments arising from previous actions, Rewards and punishments are the core tools for shaping one's behaviour. The consequence of rewards and/or punishments predicts the future orientation of human behaviour. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977) further elaborates it by stressing that people are active information processors reasoning on the logic between the cause and the effect that will transform external discipline into internal motivation so that children are eventually motivated intrinsically rather than extrinsically. Therefore, understanding what constitutes effective and ineffective parental discipline practice is critical in subjugating children's self-interest and facilitating both the prevention and the treatment of their behaviour problems (Heilmann et al., 2021; O'Leary, 1995; Perez-Gramaje et al., 2019; Yamaoka et al., 2021).

Parental discipline can take a physical form such as spankings, gentle discipline such as time-out or taking away a privilege like watching television, and verbal discipline. Aristotle states that the development of a virtue is a painful process, in consideration of the hedonistic predispositions of human beings (Aristotle, trans. 1976; Hume, 1960; Kohlberg, 1964). The discipline task confronting every parent is very challenging. The use of physical punishment is not encouraged as its negative effects can be daunting, in that repetitive spankings can lead to mental anguish, lack of self-esteem, resentment, aggression and even violence in children (Baumrind, 1978; Fu et al., 2019; Rerkswattavorn & Chanprasertpinyo, 2019; Steinberg et al., 1994). Gentle discipline and verbal discipline sometimes could be very effective for reducing misbehaviour (English, 2015a; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Pfiffner & O'Leary, 1989; Rerkswattavorn & Chanprasertpinyo, 2019). Inconsistent, harsh, and excessively lax discipline practices often result in children's misbehaviour such as delinquency and aggression (Baumrind, 1971; Wang, 2020; Xing et al., 2019). The degree of parental inconsistency, receptiveness to bargaining, use of indirect commands, lack of enforcement and demonstration of affection during discipline episodes are associated with the degree of resistance and noncompliance (O'Leary, 1995; Wang, 2020; Xing et al., 2019). Delayed and gentle (imprudent) reprimands also provoke misbehaviour (Pfiffner & O'Leary, 1989). To make matters worse, some parents themselves could be problematic, which can make this practice of discipline more difficult and less effective (Fu et al., 2019; Kendziora & O'Leary, 1993; Perez-Gramaje et al., 2019). Personality traits and cognitive abilities can affect parental discipline (Mak et al., 2020; Xing et al., 2019; Yamaoka et al., 2021). Some parents may suffer from depression, marital discord, social isolation, and economic and employment stresses, which are all related to dysfunctional parental discipline practices (Hansotte et al., 2021; Kendziora & O'Leary, 1993; Mak et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Yamaoka et al., 2021). In addition, these challenges can be further compounded by environmental influences, such as extended family, school, community, and cultural considerations (Macey, 2017; Perez-Gramaje et al., 2019; Yamaoka et al., 2021). Thus, parental discipline is perceived as the most demanding task for parenting.

This empirical study investigated 13 aged 12 to 14 high school students in Xi'an China with foci on parental discipline practices employed by their parents and the effects on academic performance and relationships with their parents. The study aims to examine the situation of parental discipline in Chinese adolescent families. In what follows, the research method is first described in terms of methodology, interview, participants, and procedures of data analysis; then the results of data analysis are presented by running coding query, matrix query and crosstab; next, discussion and findings are followed on the results; finally, the conclusion is drawn with its limitations stated.

## Method

### Methodology

Grounded theory is adopted in this study for the purposes of allowing the data to speak for themselves (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data start to be examined after the first interview, then initial questions are refined, and a follow-up question is added to facilitate deeper exploration of key ideas the study is seeking. This process iterates until the ideas have been fully explored. Through seeking and collecting pertinent data, categories are emerged and refined, and theoretical sampling is

completed (Charmaz, 2014). Effort is made to minimise the involvement of a researcher in co-constructing the grounded theory with study participants (Charmaz, 2006) such as not eliciting preconceived answers and registering approval and disapproval of participant's responses to ensure that the study's findings are based on the experiences of participants rather than on our own opinions and ideas as researchers.

### **Interview**

In-depth interviewing with semi-structured and open-ended questions is employed for data collection. Interview questions are primarily structured on the aspects of parental discipline, their reactions, and the effects on grades and behaviour. Open-ended questions were created to draw out the feelings and thoughts from student participants in a way to avoid socially desirable responses. For instance, 'how did they discipline you if you did a wrong thing', 'how did you feel about it and react'. Interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese with each lasting approximately 60 minutes.

### **Participants**

The participants are 13 students aged from 12 to 14 from an average high school in Xi'an, capital of Shanxi Province, China. The finding on the thematic saturation of 12–16 participants for an interview-based research by Guest et al (2006) and others (Francis et al., 2010) could justify the number of 13 participants for this qualitative study. The real names of these participants were substituted with pseudonyms consisting of the initials of their surname and first name in Chinese pinyin, such as SYN, SZH.

### **Procedure of data collection and data analysis**

With the ethical approval by the University of New England, Australia, the Bureau of Education of Xi'an, capital city of Shaanxi province, China was contacted in late 2019. Soon after, one average middle school (according to the 2018 local government school ranking) was arranged by the Bureau with one Year 7 class and one Year 8 class randomly selected. After explanation by the teachers in class about the aims and other basic information of the study, students were provided with the Information Sheet, Consent Form for Parents and Assent Form for Minors for voluntary participation. The following day 13 students handed back their filled-up forms. In the weeks after, interviews were underway during the lunch break at the school meeting room.

Data that came in from the first interview were immediately transcribed, translated, generated codes, and analytic memos were written, then initial questions were refined and used for subsequent interviews to better capture important concepts. Such process iterated until interview questions were tuned into their optimal shape. The analysis evolved as data were collected in five steps with the assistance of NVivo, including: 1) open coding and continually revising the codes, identifying meaningful segments of text, naming quotations to describe what was happening in these passages using gerunds as recommended by Charmaz (2006); 2) developing and continually refining categories concerning these topics that were to explore in further interviews. 3) writing memos on the codes. 4) Drawing on the open codes, the properties and their dimensions were identified, then categories established to each other in NVivo. This resulted in eleven axial codes. 5) through selective coding the process of gratitude development emerged as the central concept to which all other categories were related. See Table 1

**Table 1**

Open codes		Axial codes	Selective code
<p>Examples:</p> <p>My mother looks after me, cooking and cleaning, helping with my homework.</p> <p>My dad coaches me maths and my mum does English. They help a lot.</p> <p>Really enjoy talking to my parents about what happened in school.</p> <p>Once I hurt my leg and had stitches, my dad held me in his arms for an entire night. Very moved.</p> <p>My mother taught me how to cook last summer holiday, but I don't have time to do it during school days.</p> <p>Can't you stop talking to me? My parents do not beat me up anymore.</p> <p>I am allowed to use my phone for two hours during weekends.</p> <p>My mother loves nagging all the time, very annoying.</p> <p>My father is good at talking me through mistakes that I made. That helps me a lot.</p>	<p>Properties/Dimensions:</p> <p>Closeness with parents</p> <p>Study support</p> <p>Smooth communication</p> <p>Gratitude to parents</p> <p>Housework</p> <p>Being uninterested in parental guidance,</p> <p>No harsh punishment</p> <p>Screen time</p> <p>Nagging</p> <p>Verbal criticism</p>	<p>Parental warmth</p> <p>Parental support</p> <p>Academic performance</p> <p>Parental reasoning</p> <p>Affections for parents</p> <p>Sharing of housework</p> <p>Estrangement</p> <p>Physical discipline</p> <p>Gentle discipline</p> <p>Destructive verbal discipline</p> <p>Constructive verbal discipline</p>	<p>1) Correlation between parental discipline and academic performance</p> <p>2) Correlation between parental discipline and child's affection for parents</p>

## Results

By running coding query, matrix query and crosstab with NVivo on the categories of parental discipline and relationships with their parents among the attributes of academic performance, gender, family income, parent education and occupation, and family structure, the results on parental discipline practices and their effects emerged.

First, physical punishment almost disappeared in high school, but gentle discipline of restricting a privilege of screen time and the verbal discipline of nagging became prevalent. After open coding, three categories of the axial code parental discipline surfaced, physical punishment, verbal discipline, and extra homework. It was found that all the participating students reported no more physical punishment after entering high school except one, SYN, who still got spanked by her father albeit rarely. The exception appears to bear the nature of physical abuse because her father beat her without reason, always when her mother was away, and he could not refrain from doing so even after being reprimanded by her mother. Gentle discipline was applied across the families but only in terms of depriving the privilege of screen time, such as playing on the mobile phone, and watching TV, except for one student, DCW. The use of time-out obviously had stopped being adopted on these teenagers. Most of these families set the amount of two hours per week for using the mobile phone for pleasure. If breaking it, the mobile phone would be taken away for one week or more, even permanently in two families. The exception on gentle discipline was a girl student who felt very independent in the interview. Her parents (surprisingly mother was a middle school teacher and father was a manager working out of town) seemed too busy to take care of her and she was past caring now. She said that she had been on her own as far as she could remember.

Second, in only half of these families, parents were found to be communicating with their kids reasonably. On the theme of verbal discipline, three subcategories emerged: constructive criticism, nagging, and verbal abuse. Of the total 13 participants, 6 reported that they were ready to accept criticism from their parents, considering it reasonable and acceptable though feeling not good. For example, one said, 'sometimes when I dawdled at the dining table after dinner not wanting to do schoolwork, my mum often said, "you know what you should be doing now, do you?" and wait for my reaction' and 'she often compelled me to find where the problems came from when I had a bad grade'. Another 6 mentioned of nagging as the major manner of parenting at home, mostly by mother, constantly urging them to study and unable to stand even one minute seeing their child unspent on schoolwork. For example, 'finished your dinner? Go do your homework!' 'Go to study, you must study more!' There are also three cases reporting that they experienced what should be termed verbal abuse, two of which came from nagging parents. One said 'my dad has a bad temper, always swears at me over a small mistake. Sometimes I made an error in practice tests before the exam, he said that I would never have a good exam for sure. He always put me down like this'. Another recalled, 'when my mum is in good mood, she unsees me playing on the mobile phone; but when in bad mood, she would swear at me and always found faults with me no matter what I do.'

Third, academic performances were well identified with constructive verbal discipline and the high level of parental education. By running crosstab query among these cases identified with the attributes of academic performance, family income, parent education and occupation, the effects on the application of these parental disciplinary methods were shown as follows: Of the three verbal disciplinary methods, constructive verbal discipline surfaced being a positive effect on academic performance, which six families adopted. The distribution among the six cases in which parents adopted this method is three of the total four upper-level students and three of the total four mid- and upper-level students. Of these parents, four have at least one parent in each family who had university education, five are in middle-income class. While academic performances for the six students of nagging parents are mostly at an average or under average level with only one mid- and upper-average. Among this group, only one parent received tertiary education and five are low-income families. Three students sustaining verbal abuse are with two under average and one at an average level academically; the only participant, SYN, who suffered inexplicable physical punishment, performed at an average level academically; all in low-income families. No indication can be concluded on academic performance when seeing a wide

application of screen time restriction to almost all students. An exception was also spotted with DCW who was with both university-educated and workaholic parents but received no parental warmth, reasoning, and discipline, performed exceedingly well in academic.

Finally, data analysis shows a positive correlation between a parent-child bond and constructive criticism. 6 students from the families in which constructive criticism was reported felt satisfied with their parents. While six students from the nagging and/or verbal abusive families all had a strained relationship with their parents. The strained relationship was found manifesting itself in five aspects: engaging in little communication (e.g., I don't like talking with my parents. I feel annoyed when they talk to me), communicating with good friends only (e.g., if I have worried, I talk to my good friend), stopping consulting parents with their concerns and problems (e.g., I don't like asking them for advice, for their advice is always the same that I don't consider right. I am so sick of my mum nagging me), losing their hope on parents (I don't think my mum is going to change. She shouldn't watch too much television dramas for which make her dumb), and defying them (e.g., don't talk to me, I do not want to talk; can't you stop talking to me). The reasons underneath their estranged relationships are primarily on parental attitude. These students had a shared aversion to their parents' aura of unquestionable patriarchal authority such as 'just shut up and do what I told you to do'. Pitifully, these parents did not have knowledge in keeping with their authority. It is natural that their children felt belittled by their ignorance and unloved by their disrespect, which subsequently resulted in an estranged relationship. Yet, two students felt quite sympathetic to their parents, saying, 'my parents did not receive much education, we are not on the same level of altitude. I shall be a bit slow to give them more time to think and catch up'. It was also found that two participants sustaining verbal abuse were the ones who suffered the most atrocious physical abuse of all before high school. I could feel a deep grudge in the voice of one of them when she told me that her mother could whip all over her with a wrist belt.

### **Discussion and findings**

As we have discussed above, parental discipline acts as a major vehicle in family education of subjugate a child's self-interest inclination and developing his or her sense of responsibility, this study shows that different methods of parental discipline brought about different outcomes in terms of academic results and affection for parents.

Physical punishment clearly had left little psychological trauma on a child if parents gave a good reason for it and did not use excessive force. After entering high school, physical punishment disappeared in most of the 13 families in which their children did not hold any grudge against their parents. They understood that what their parents had to do was for their good, and they had had no complaint for taking responsibility for their mistakes. The exception only occurred to two girls, whose parents could inexplicably and harshly punish them for a small error. One still suffered physical abuse now and the other broke away from her mother's beating because she now grew much stronger and taller than her mother. In both cases, neither of them escaped from verbal abuse. The results show that physical punishment came to a full stop when kids entered into high school in almost all families and can be forgiven by these kids if they recognised a good reason for it, which does not quite concur with the findings of many other scholars (e.g. Fu et al., 2019; Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2019; Heilmann et al., 2021; Xing et al., 2019).

This study further confirms the findings of other research that verbal discipline becomes the major mean of disciplining teenagers (AAP, 2018; Perez-Gramaje et al., 2019; Rerkswattavorn & Chanprasertpinyo, 2019; Taangahar & Ameh, 2019). It was found that children after the age of 11 from the perspective of cognitive development enter the last phase of formal operational thinking in which they exhibit the ability to reason in a hypothetico-deductive fashion (B. Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), i.e., contemplating abstract constructs such as independence, respect, and freedom, and no longer believing all the world to think like themselves (Piaget, 1926/1929, p. 167). Thus, physical punishment will no longer an effect way for parents to subdue their child and win over the heart and mind of their child.



However, it is worrying to see approximately half of the participants suffering improper verbal discipline in this investigation. It is found that constructive criticism could improve academic performance while verbal abuse can be destructive on academic performances of children and their affection for parents. It is also shockingly found that nagging can be as equally damaging as verbal abuse, such as eroding self-esteem and fostering aversion and disrespect, more likely to develop a negative self-schema. To children of this age range, parents need to become aware of their child no longer as a dependent being but an individual who has developed the need for respect, independence, and freedom. Parents need to learn to treat them as such, looking after their feeling, giving them opportunities to do things independently, allowing them to make errors and trusting them in their capacity of self-correction.

It is not surprising to observe that parents with better education and socio-economic status would be more likely to use constructive criticism, less nagging or verbally abusing their kid, in line with the findings of other studies (Lara & Saracostti, 2019; Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020; Taangahar & Ameh, 2019). Better education would equip these parents with better communication skills to explain what mistake their child made and why they had to punish them; and the parents in a better socio-economic status would also be more likely to be in good mood and have spare time to care about the feelings of their kid and putting some thought on their mental growth. In comparison with parent education and socio-economic status, character must be factored into what method of discipline a parent tends to adopt. In one of the two cases that verbal abuse occurred, the mother who had a hot temper could not take the best of knowledge that she received from university.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study was designed to investigate 13 high school students on two aspects of parental discipline: 1) methods of discipline, 2) the effects on their academic performance and affection for their parents. The findings have been mixed.

The most significant finding of this study to surface is physical punishment not as damaging and destructive as it was found in other studies (Heilmann et al., 2021; Österman et al., 2014; Saunders & Goddard, 2010) if parents have a good reason and punish their child in a reasonable degree. It is further confirmed in this study that constructive verbal discipline is the best method of parental discipline for academic performance and a parent-child bond as a result of the data analysis in which 6 out of the 13 participants held deep affection for their parents albeit sustaining beatings before entering high school. It is also surprising to find that nagging as a verbal disciplinary method can be very detrimental to academic performance of children and their affection for parents. The study resonates with the finding of prior studies (Johnson et al., 2001; Ney, 1987; Rerkswattavorn & Chanprasertpinyo, 2019; Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2006) that verbal abuse takes a deadly toll on a child's academic performance and affection for their parents.

### **Limitations for Future Research**

While the present study makes empirical contributions to the literature on gratitude development and aged care, it has two limitations. First, it is important to note that the validity of this study in Xi'an may be limited to urban areas and only Han ethnical group in China. Qualitative research in different areas and countries may provide a differently nuanced outcome. Second, these data are cross-sectional, and no causal inferences can be drawn. Future longitudinal studies should follow the educational, life and career journeys of these students from the present to five, ten, twenty and thirty years, which may provide an in-depth look into the effects of parental discipline.

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