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# Physical Discipline in Singapore: Prevalence, Perspectives and Experiences of Parents and Young Adults



## Study Aims and Background

Parents raise their children based on their own experiences and beliefs, as well as the surrounding social and cultural context. They consequently also use a range of disciplinary practices with their children, including physical, psychological, and non-physical discipline.

In Singapore, physical discipline is not banned under the law, except in preschool centres. As an Asian society that upholds the parenting goals of “control and strictness”, this method of discipline is still rather common today<sup>1</sup>.

However, physical discipline has also become increasingly contentious in the recent decades, due to research studies that have highlighted its negative impact on children’s developmental outcomes and parent-child relationships.

In 2021, Singapore Children’s Society, in collaboration with Yale-NUS College, embarked on a research project comprising two mixed-methods studies that focused on parental disciplinary practices in Singapore, with specific attention on the use of physical discipline.

### Definitions of terms used:



**Physical discipline**, also known as corporal punishment, involves disciplinary actions where the child experiences pain but not injury, with the purpose of controlling or correcting a child’s behaviour<sup>2</sup>.



**Psychological discipline** involves practices such as love withdrawal, where children are made to believe that their parents’ love is dependent on their good behaviour, or shaming children by expressing disappointment towards their misbehaviour<sup>3</sup>.



**Non-physical discipline** includes practices such as reasoning or offering children something else to do as an alternative to the undesired behaviour<sup>4</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Ngiam, X. Y., & Tung, S. S. W. (2016). The acceptability of caning children in Singapore. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 37(2), 158–163. <https://doi.org/10.1097/dbp.0000000000000247>

<sup>2</sup> Straus, M. A. (1994). *Beating the devil out of them*. Lexington Books.

<sup>3</sup> Fung, H. (1999). *Becoming a moral child: The socialisation of shame among young Chinese children*. *Ethos*, 27(2), 180–209. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.1999.27.2.180>

<sup>4</sup> Quail, K. R., & Ward, C. L. (2022). Nonviolent discipline options for caregivers and teachers: a systematic overview of the evidence. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 23(2), 620–638. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020967340>

## Overview of Studies

	Quantitative Surveys	Qualitative Interviews
<b>Parents</b>	Study 1A, N = 747  Aims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the types and frequency of different discipline methods used by parents</li> <li>• Investigate parents' attitudes towards physical discipline</li> </ul>	Study 1B, N = 20  Aims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand when, why, and how physical discipline was used</li> <li>• Examine parents' thoughts and feelings when they used physical discipline</li> </ul>
<b>Young Adults</b>	Study 2A, N = 667  Aims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the types and frequency of different discipline methods experienced by young adults before age 18</li> <li>• Understand how various patterns of discipline affect young adults' current levels of self-esteem, relationship with parents and emotion regulation</li> </ul>	Study 2B, N = 25  Aims: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand when, why, and how physical discipline was experienced by young adults</li> <li>• Understand young adults' thoughts and feelings towards their experiences with receiving physical discipline</li> </ul>

Table 1: Study Aims

Data on participants' housing type and parents' education level were collected as an indicator of socioeconomic status.

Indicators	Parents		Young Adults		National Average (2021)
	Study 1A	Study 1B	Study 2A	Study 2B	
Living in subsidised public housing	64.4%	90.0%	74.7%	80.0%	77.5%
Having a university degree	81.0%	70.0%	Mothers 30.1%  Fathers 38.1%	Primary caregiver <sup>5</sup> 40.0%  Secondary caregiver <sup>5</sup> 32.0%	36.0%

Table 2: Data on participants' housing type and parents' education level

<sup>5</sup> The primary or secondary caregiver could refer to either mother or father.

# Study Findings

## Prevalence of Discipline Types

For an overview of the commonly used discipline practices in Singapore, we asked participants to rate the frequency with which they have used or experienced a list of 36 discipline practices<sup>6</sup>. The items in this list can be categorised into **non-physical, physical, or psychological discipline**.

	Used in the past year ("once or twice" or more)	Used frequently in the past year ("several times" or more)
Non-physical	99.6%	99.1%
Physical	44.8%	29.9%
Psychological	84.7%	71.8%

Table 3: Frequencies of the categories of discipline

In each of the discipline categories, these were the top three most commonly used disciplinary practices.


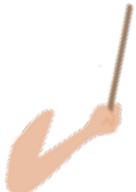

Non-physical 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Told the child to start or stop doing something</li> <li>2. Explained to the child why something s/he did was wrong</li> <li>3. Gave him/her a reward for behaving well</li> </ol>
Physical 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spanked the child on the bottom with bare hand</li> <li>2. Hit elsewhere "not buttocks" with an object (such as a stick, broom, cane, or belt)</li> <li>3. Hit the child on the buttocks with an object (such as a stick, broom, cane, or belt)</li> </ol>
Psychological 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Shouted, yelled, or screamed at the child</li> <li>2. Refused to speak to the child</li> <li>3. Insulted the child by calling him/her dumb, lazy or other names like that</li> </ol>

Table 4: Top three most commonly used disciplinary practices in each discipline category

<sup>6</sup> International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2015). *Manual for Administration: The ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool (ICAST)*. <https://www.ispcan.org/learn/icast-abuse-screening-tools/?v=402f03a963ba>

The graph below shows how parents' frequent use of physical discipline (used several times a year or more) changed with the child's age.

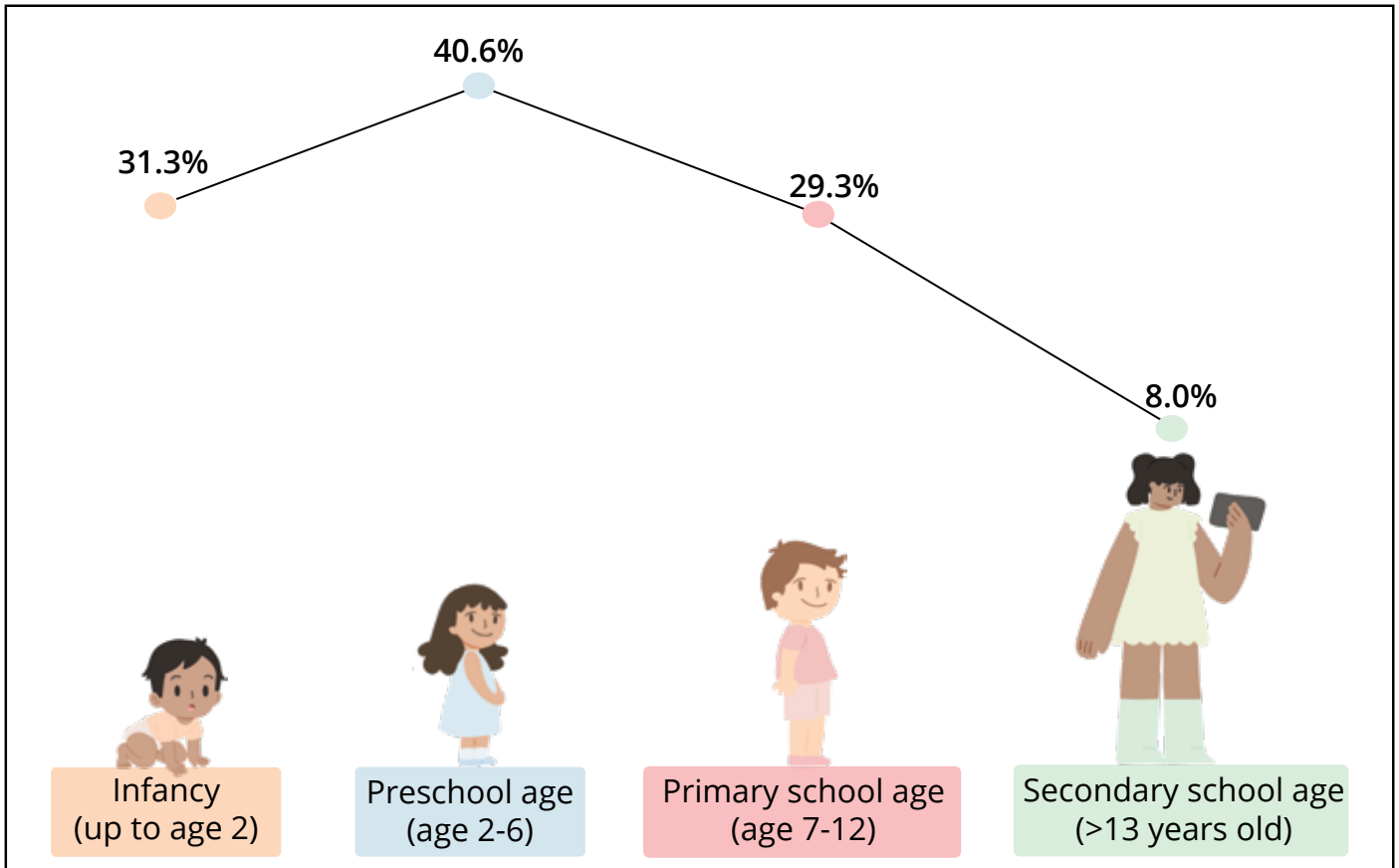


Figure 1: Percentage of parents who reported frequent use of physical discipline (several times a year or more) on their children across age groups (n = 218)

Table 5 shows the percentages of young adults who reported experiencing various types of discipline “several times a year” or more, at varying stages of their childhood, before they turned 18.



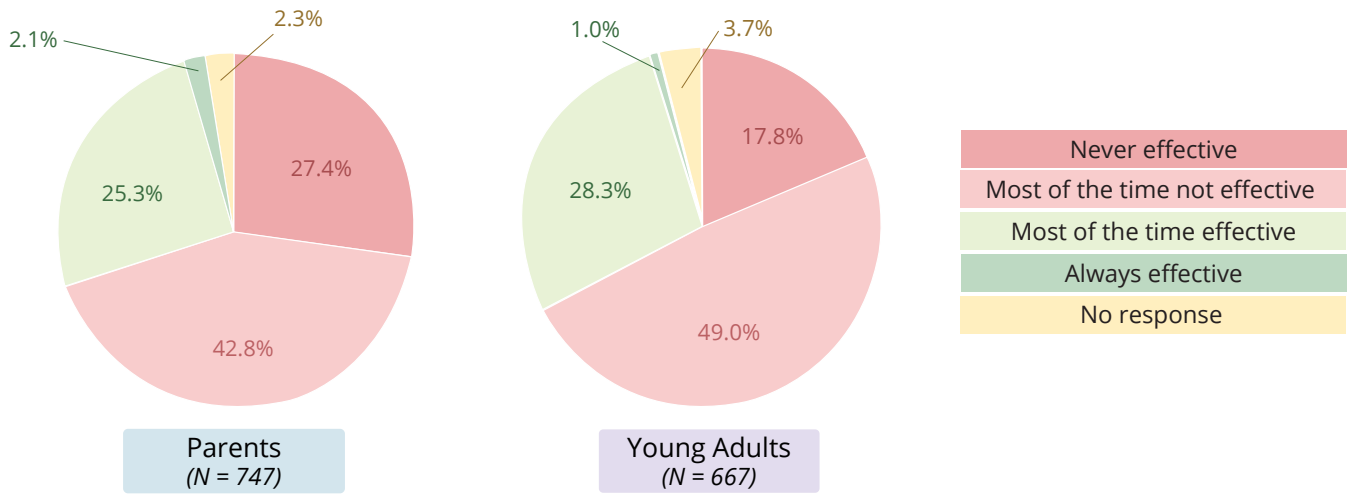
Parent	Non-physical	Physical	Psychological
Mother	99.3%	63.1%	85.2%
Father	97.2%	44.7%	63.7%

Table 5: Percentage of young adults who received various types of discipline from their parents “several times a year” or more before age 18 (N = 667)

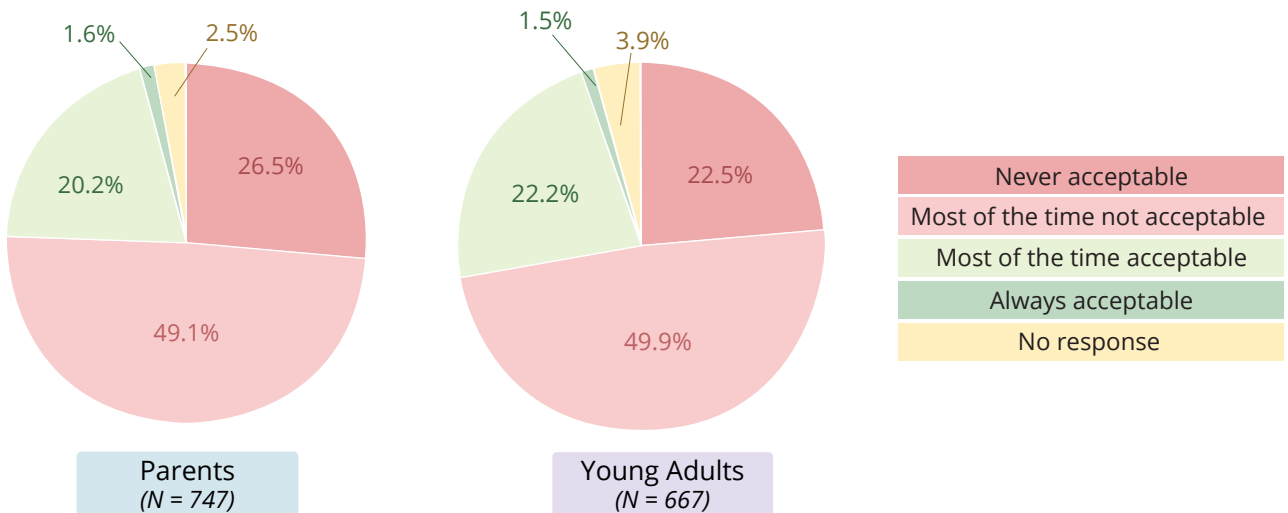
## Attitudes Towards Physical Discipline

Parent and young adults were asked about their opinions regarding the effectiveness, acceptability, and necessity of physical discipline.

Do you think that physical punishment is **effective** as a method of children's discipline?



Do you think that physical punishment is an **acceptable** disciplinary method?



Do you believe that physical punishment of children **must be used** as a method of discipline?

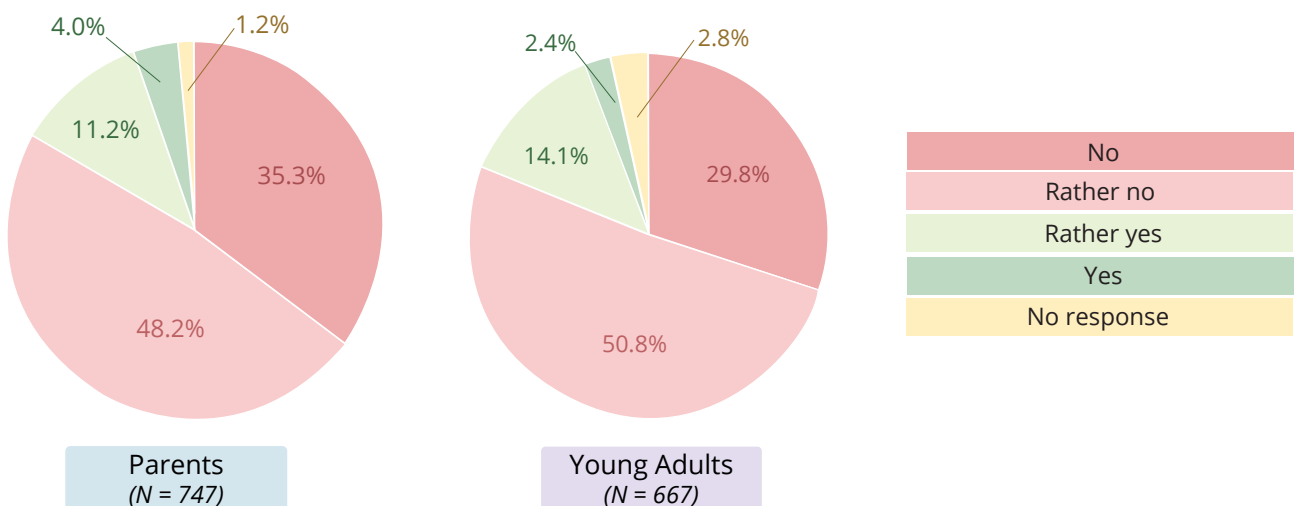


Figure 2: Parents' and young adults' attitudes towards the use of physical discipline

## Profiling of Parents' Disciplinary Practices

We conducted analyses to generate profiles of parents based on the discipline methods which they used in the past year. For parents, three distinct groups emerged.

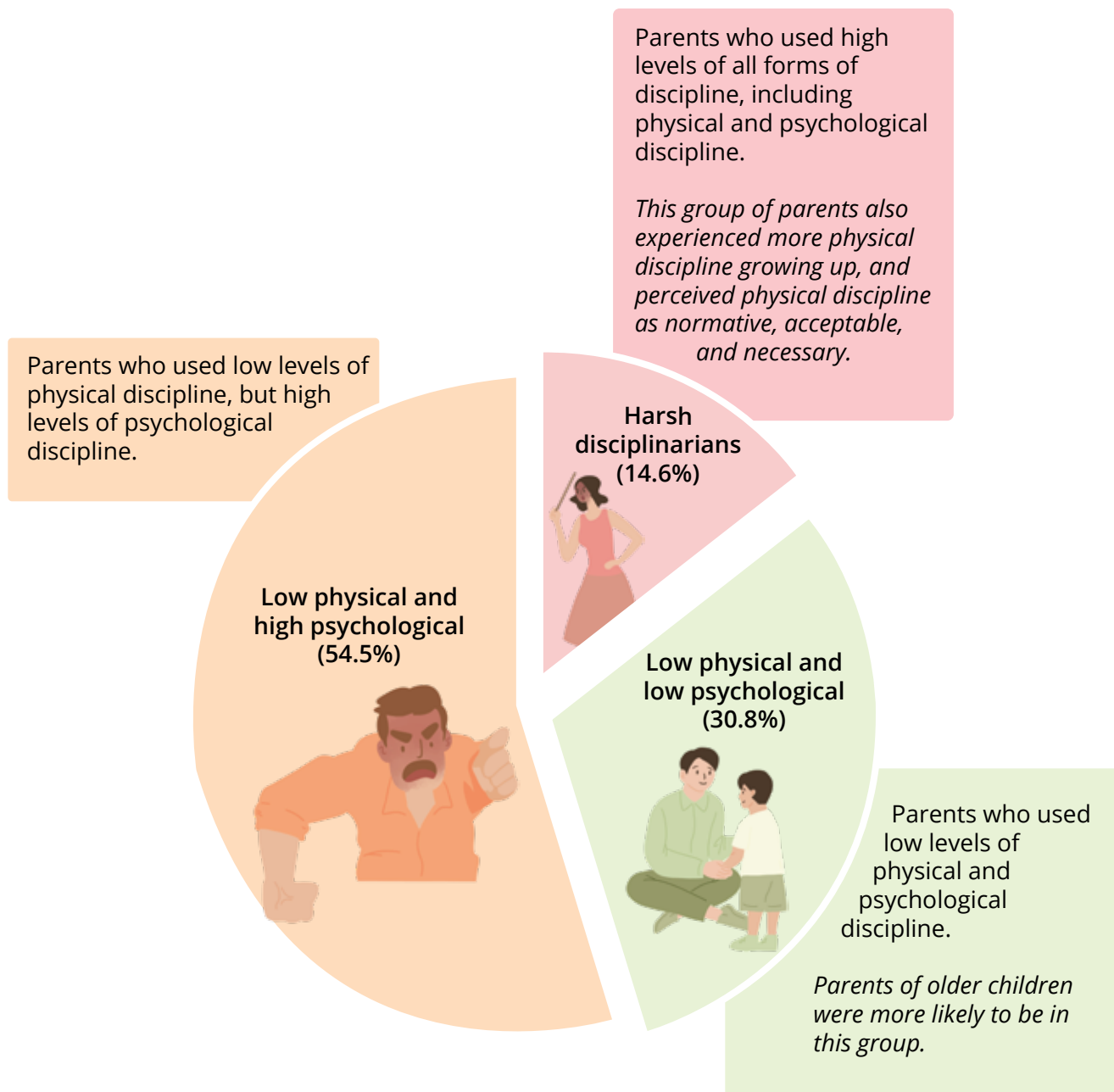


Figure 3: Disciplinary profiles of parents (n = 746)

## Why Do Parents Use Physical Discipline?

Through semi-structured interviews with parents, we examined the reasons why parents used physical discipline on their children.

### “When all else fails”

Parents rarely used physical discipline as an immediate response to children's misbehaviour. It was usually described as a last resort.

## **“I was hit before so it’s okay to hit my children”**

For some parents, their experiences of physical discipline as a child normalised its use, resulting in them using it with their own children.

Others spoke of physical discipline as something they would “subconsciously” default to out of “muscle memory”, even if they had wanted to discipline differently from their own parents.



*It's just like a so-called 一代传一代, [meaning from] generation to generation.... Because my grandfather hit my dad, then my dad will hit me. Then now it's my turn to hit my children.*

## **“Our prison also canes, so it’s okay for me to hit my children”**

Singapore’s use of judicial caning was an example raised by parents as an external, macrosystem influence that backed their use of physical discipline.

## **When Do Parents Use Physical Discipline?**

From the interviews, we summarised the key considerations that parents had when they used physical discipline:

### **1. Type and nature of child misbehaviour**

Parents tended to use physical punishment for behaviours that they deemed to be severe (e.g. fighting or hurting others), as well as those that carried an element of danger (e.g. playing with electrical appliances or sharp objects).

### **2. Child factors**

**Child age** - Most parents felt that physical discipline should be used more frequently with younger children, who they think are hard to reason with. However, a handful of parents said that physical discipline should not be used on young children who may not comprehend their wrongdoing.

**Child maturity and temperament** - A few parents mentioned that they used physical discipline if the child was sensible enough to understand that it was used out of parental love or as a result of the child’s wrongdoing. Parents added that if a child was especially emotionally sensitive, it might deter them from using physical discipline because the child may struggle to regulate themselves, resulting in “more unhappiness” for a sustained period of time.

**Child’s remorse** - Where a child demonstrated remorse, parents were less likely to use physical discipline. However, when children “[refuse] to admit” to their wrongdoing, it can exacerbate parents’ anger and thus “escalate into [discipline that is] more severe”.

Although the parents took into account the child’s characteristics and behaviours when deciding if physical discipline should be used, they also brought up how their mood and stress levels could affect their decision.



### 3. Parents' mood, stress levels, and available time

These were cited as strong influencing factors, which may lead to the impulsive use of physical discipline arising from parents' anger or frustration.

Moreover, non-physical discipline methods such as reasoning and time-outs require time, which parents cited as a "luxury" that may not always be available. In such instances, parents may "take the easy way out" and resort to the use of physical discipline.



*Usually it depends on my mood and my stress rather than what they did... If I'm really stressed out, that's when I don't really think and I react to the situation, so then I find myself physically punishing them.*



### Parents' Experiences Using Physical Discipline

For most parents, administering physical discipline was an intensely negative emotional experience.

#### **Guilt and regret**

Many parents reported feeling guilt and regret after using physical discipline, as well as doubt over whether there could have been better alternative methods. Often, parents described feeling guilty even if they had previously said that physical discipline was acceptable or justifiable.

Parents also expressed some emotional conflict and tension, being torn between the belief that the child deserved to be physically disciplined, and their own sense of guilt.



*But of course, after that, when you're kind of calmed down, then, you tried to speak to the child and you find out exactly what went on and why he was, you know, reacting this way then, of course you feel bad. So after that of course I feel very regretful like that lah. So I tell myself, shouldn't do that anymore lah, I shouldn't do that again lah.*

#### **Pain and hurt**

While most parents reported feeling very angry prior to using physical discipline, the majority also continued to experience negative emotions of "pain" and "hurt" after caning their children.



*Even though [he's] being punished physically itself, the pain is actually on all of us. Not just on me, on him, but also to the younger [child] as well. It has the physical impact on every one of us.*



## Profiling of the Disciplinary Practices Experienced by Young Adults

Using young adults' ratings on how frequently their mothers and fathers have used different discipline methods, we generated separate profiles for mothers and fathers. We found a high degree of similarities between the maternal and paternal profiles, such that they can be categorised into three broad groups, as show in Figure 4.

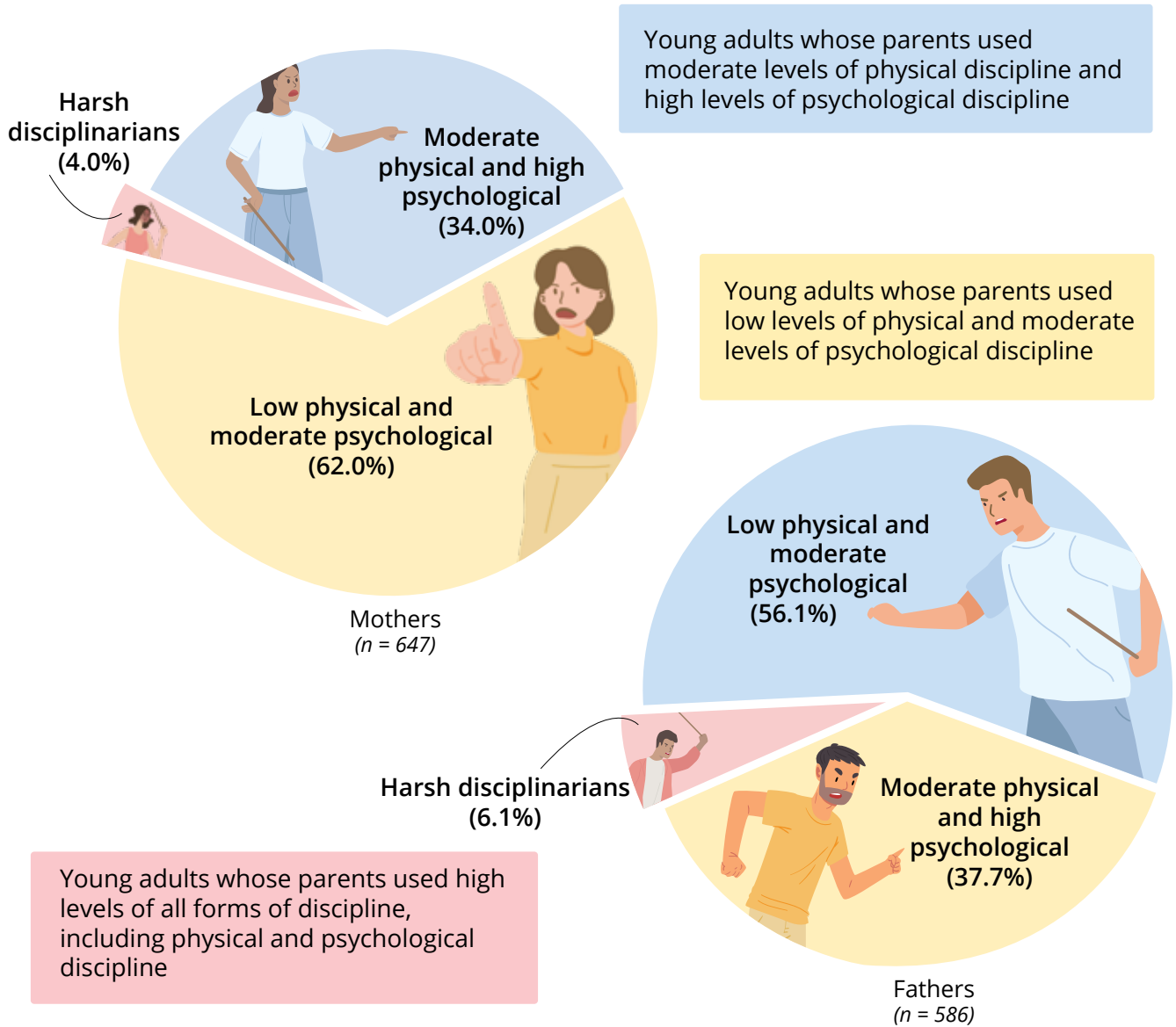


Figure 4: Disciplinary profiles experienced by young adults

## **Young Adults' Experiences with Receiving Physical Discipline During Childhood**

Much like the parents' experiences, young adults described physical discipline as being ineffective, and they expressed intensely negative feelings being on the receiving end.

### ***Ineffective in teaching values or right from wrong***

Young adults felt that physical discipline had little instructive value; it only taught them how to avoid future discipline.

“



*Physical discipline teaches you that you can get away with these but you can't get away with that... It was just more of like, 'Okay, this is A leads to B, so let's avoid going to B sort of thing ... at that point of time, you don't think of learning anything.*

### ***Distressing emotional experience***

Many young adults described how their younger selves experienced fear and pain when receiving physical discipline.

“

*I was very scared. Because like, they didn't really tell me when they would start or stop the discipline. So it just felt it was going on forever. And I was like, what do I do to make this stop?"*



### ***Resulted in strained and distant parent-child relationship and negative mental well-being***

Several young adults identified the negative impacts that physical discipline had on them in the long-term.

“



*It's definitely not how a parent should treat a child because I had to go through therapy for that. And it has really impacted me in such a way that ... just a few months of therapy alone won't help me. It'll probably take years to really overcome this... it's not in the case that I hate (my parents) a lot. It's more of, they can't do anything to make me love them anymore. And the best thing that they can do is to just keep a distance.*

## Outcomes of Various Discipline Experiences on Young Adults

We also sought to understand the impact of different disciplinary types on young adults' adjustment through:

- Relationship with their parents
- Emotion regulation
- Self-esteem



**Emotion regulation** is the process in which individuals influence which emotions they have, when and how they are experienced, and in what manner these emotions are expressed<sup>7</sup>.

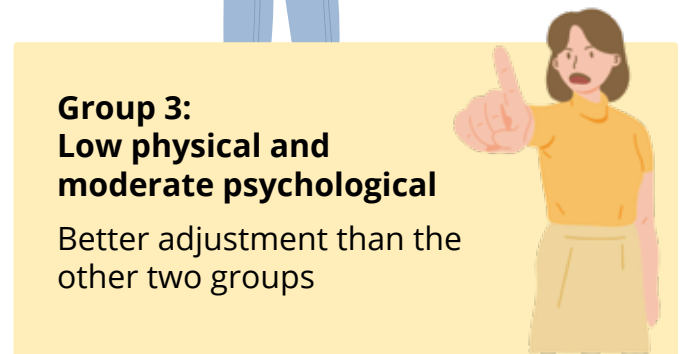
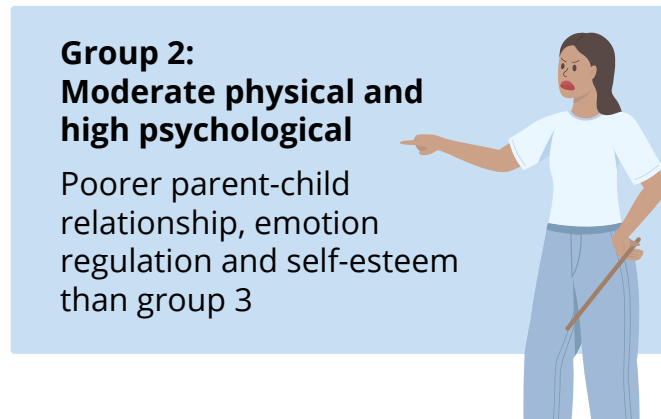
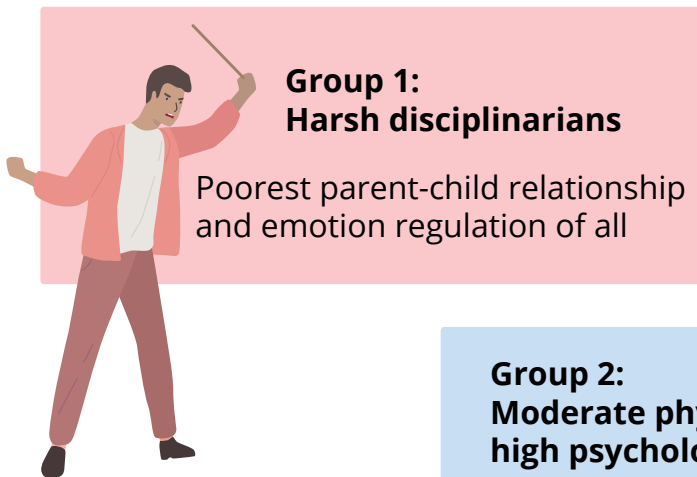


Figure 5: Comparison of young adults' outcomes across different groups of parents

### What do these findings suggest?

- Parents' use of physical discipline is associated with poorer parent-child relationships in the longer run.
- Parents' use of harsh discipline is associated with children's poorer emotion regulation in the longer run.
- Even moderate levels of physical discipline can have detrimental effects when coupled with high levels of psychological discipline.

<sup>7</sup> Gross, J. (1998). *The Emerging Field of Emotion Regulation: An Integrative Review*. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(5), 271–299. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.271>

# Summary of Key Findings

## 1. Patterns of discipline in Singapore families

Singapore parents frequently used a combination of non-physical, physical, and psychological discipline methods in their parenting. It is also apparent that physical and psychological forms of discipline were commonly used together.



While the focus of this study was on physical discipline, the findings related to psychological discipline are concerning as past research have also shown that it produces negative effects such as problem behaviours among children<sup>8</sup>.

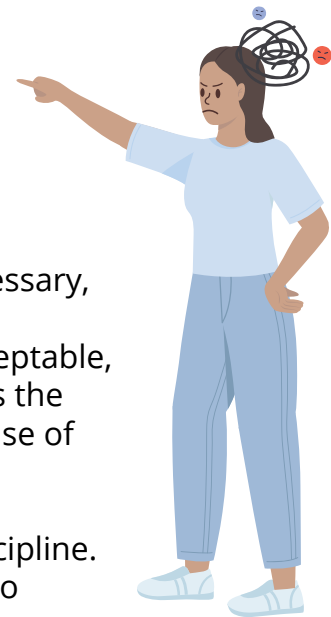
## 2. Younger children are more vulnerable to physical discipline



Infants, pre-schoolers, and primary schoolers were more likely to be at the receiving end of physical discipline. This is concerning as physical discipline reinforces the power difference between the parent and the child as the parent gains more power and authority over the child through pain or fear. Younger children are especially vulnerable because their brains are still developing, and they are likely to have fewer cognitive resources to cope with the negative effects of physical discipline.

## 3. Parents experienced internal conflicts when they used physical discipline

Many parents who perceived physical discipline to be neither effective nor acceptable still used it frequently, suggesting a disconnect between their attitudes and actual behaviour.



Even for parents who perceived physical discipline to be necessary, effective, and may be used as a last resort for more serious misbehaviours, they too recognised that it was wrong, unacceptable, or unfair to use physical discipline on children. This highlights the internal conflicts experienced by parents with regard to the use of physical discipline.

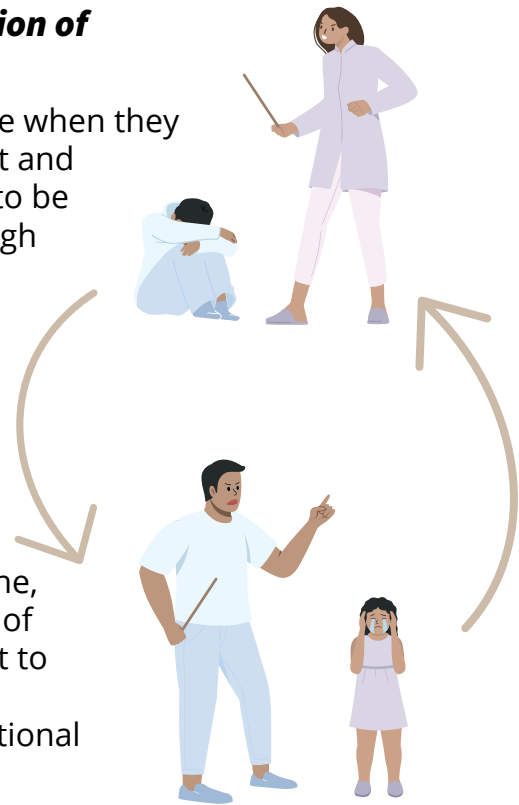
Parents also felt guilty and regretted their use of physical discipline. They questioned whether there could be better alternatives to manage their child's misbehaviour.

<sup>8</sup> Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. E. (2005). The role of parenting styles in children's problem behavior. *Child development*, 76(6), 1144-1159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00840.x-i1>

#### 4. Evidence for the intergenerational transmission of physical discipline

Many parents who experienced physical discipline when they were growing up held favourable views towards it and would use it if needed. They are also more likely to be harsh disciplinarians and use a combination of high physical and psychological discipline on their children. Among the young adults, despite experiencing child distress, strained parent-child relationships, and poorer socioemotional well-being, many interviewees would still use physical discipline if they become parents.

Moreover, our findings suggest that even if parents disapprove of the use of physical discipline, experiencing it as a child increases the likelihood of them using it on their children. They often default to using physical discipline when their emotions are heightened. This could be due to the intergenerational transmission of beliefs and behaviours related to physical discipline.



#### 5. Parental emotion regulation is a key factor contributing to the use of physical discipline

Parents often experience intense feelings of anger and/or distress in situations which lead to the use of physical discipline. Even though parents have expressed a desire to discipline their child in a calm and measured manner, they often find it hard to manage their emotions, and resort to physical discipline.

#### 6. Physical discipline has limited effectiveness and negative impacts

While it may elicit immediate compliance, research has shown that physical discipline is consistently associated with increased child aggression and hinders the long-term goals of helping a child to self-regulate and internalise moral values<sup>9,10</sup>. This is supported by our findings, where the young adults felt that they had only learnt how to avoid further physical discipline, instead of learning the values that their parents were trying to instill.

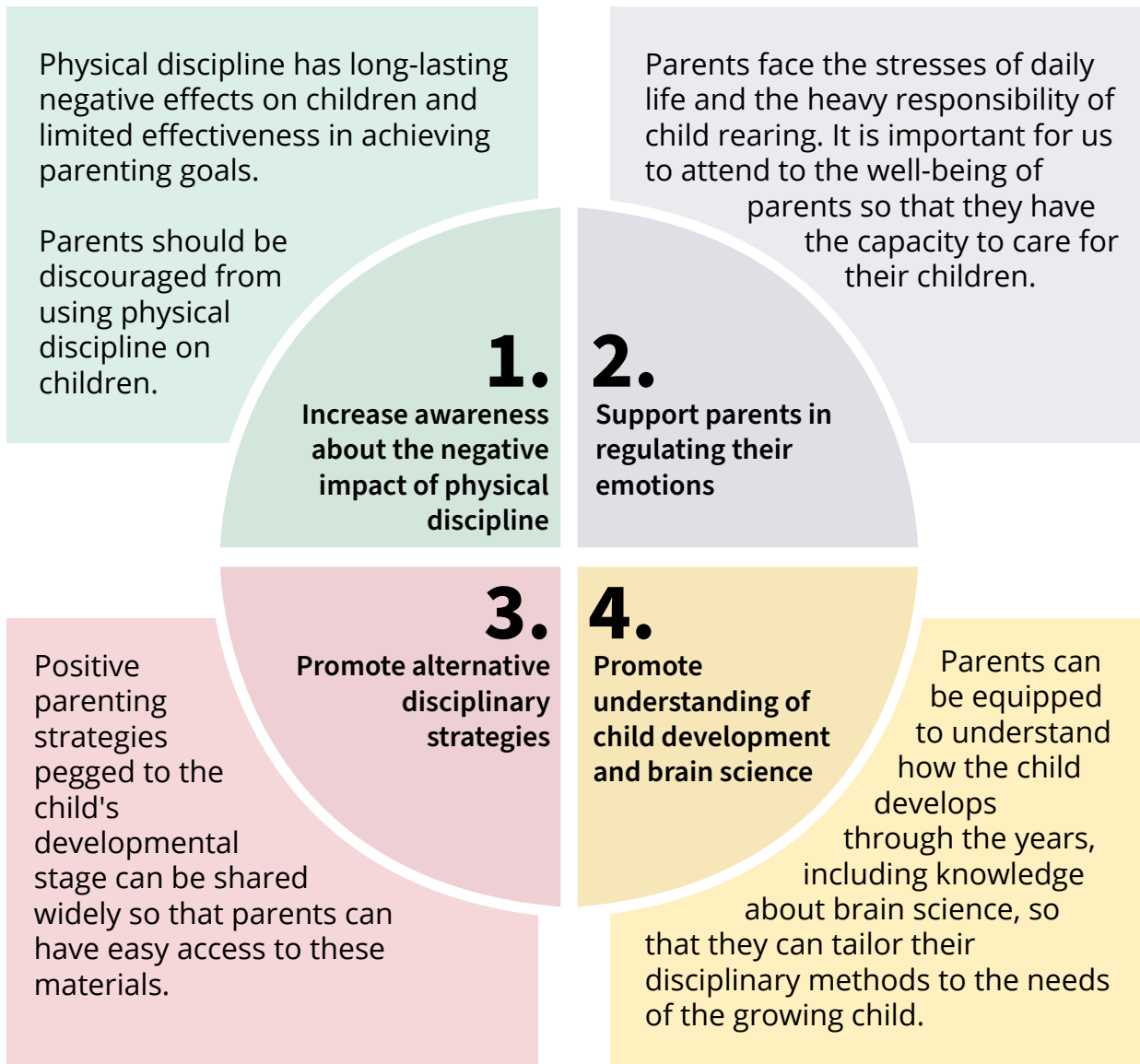
Moreover, the negative effects of physical discipline have been observed even in adulthood. From the study, young adults who had experienced physical discipline in their childhood years reported having poorer relationships with their parents, experiencing poorer emotion regulation, and having lower self-esteem.

<sup>9</sup> Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology, 30*(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>

<sup>10</sup> Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 128*(4), 539–579. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.4.539>

# Recommendations

Based on the study findings, there are four key areas that we want to urge parents, professionals and the public to pay attention to. These recommendations can be integrated into parenting programmes and public education initiatives.



A strategic approach is to target these recommendations at **parents with younger children or parents-to-be**. In this way, they would be more equipped to begin their parenting journey using non-physical disciplinary techniques.

It also takes a **multi-pronged approach** to shift the general population's deep-seated mindsets regarding the use of physical discipline. This would hopefully break the intergenerational use of physical discipline and influence parents' choice of disciplinary methods.



## Study Limitations

### ***The parent samples tend to be more highly educated***

Parents in Study 1A and 1B tend to be more highly educated, and have higher socioeconomic status than the general population. This may be due to our research methodology - the studies were conducted during the pandemic, and we administered the surveys and interviews online. Future studies could focus on the parenting experiences of a more diverse sample of parents.

### ***The study focused only on each parent's discipline methods individually***

The study did not consider important dynamics where the behaviours of more than one parent or caregivers come into play. Future studies can examine how parents and caregivers in the same family affect each other's parenting beliefs and practices, and influence how they discipline.

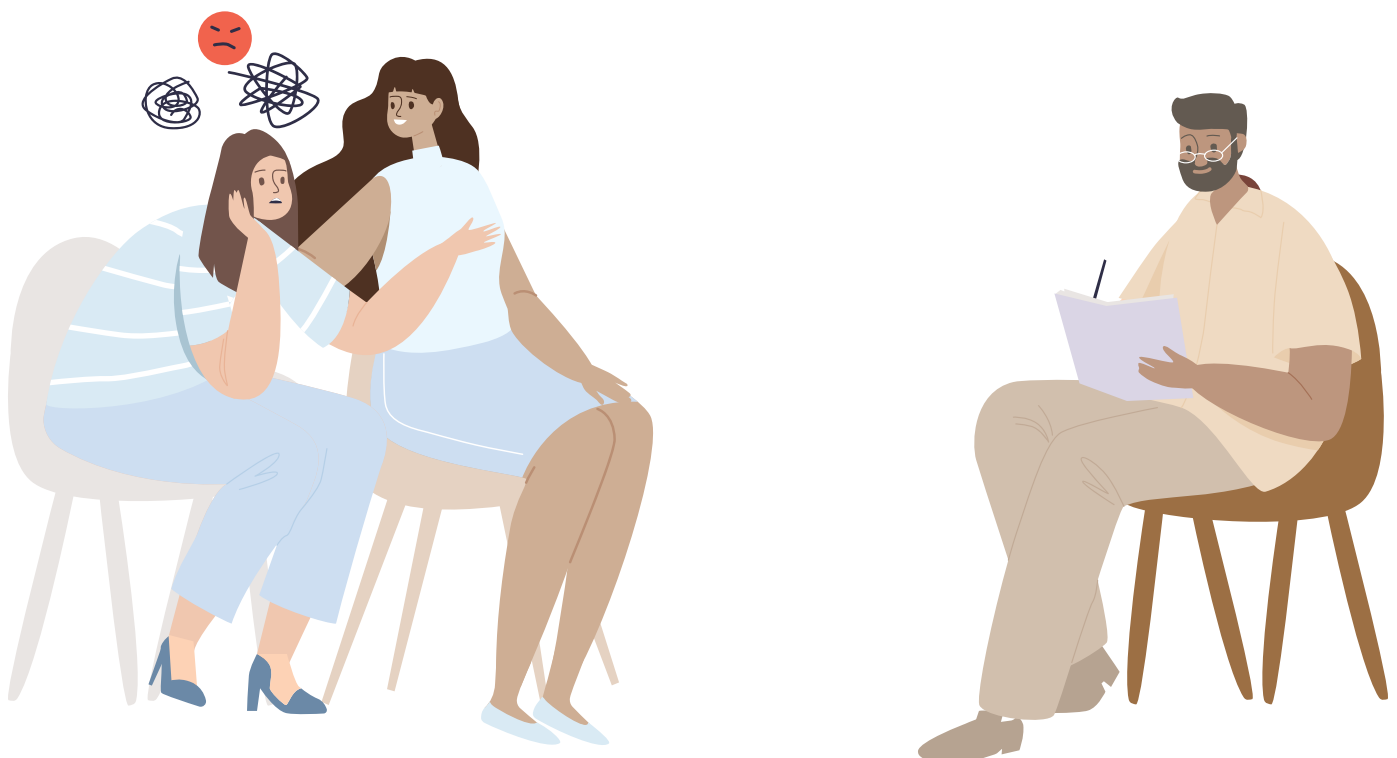
### ***Causality is not inferred from the current study***

It is unclear whether parents' positive attitudes towards physical discipline and perceived normativity of physical discipline caused them to use more physical discipline, or whether parents adopted these attitudes and perceptions in order to rationalise their disciplinary actions.

## Future Directions

Future studies can explore what motivates parents to stop using physical discipline, and to shift to non-physical disciplinary methods. These motivations and enabling factors could guide intervention to change the use of physical to non-physical discipline.

This study surfaced the high rates of psychological discipline being used by parents in Singapore. Future studies can examine the links between psychological discipline and children's adjustment, as well as the contextual factors related to its use.







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