Child discipline in the occupied Palestinian territory: a cross-sectional study

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Background Negative disciplinary methods (NDMs), including corporal and verbal punishment, are often used in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and are reported to be used on 94.5% of children aged 2–14 years. Because such practices can negatively affect the psychological and physical development of children, the factors associated with the use of NDMs by parents in the oPt were investigated.

Methods Nationally representative data from the Pan Arab Project for Family Health (PAPFAM) Survey 2006, which had a section on child discipline, were obtained from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. For this survey, data was gathered from a representative sample of households in the oPt by random-cluster sampling. A questionnaire had been used to obtain information from mothers or other female members of the household about the disciplinary methods used, including types of verbal and physical abuse. Our analysis for this cross-sectional study focused on questions about child rearing and discipline. The relation between sociodemographic variables (child’s age and sex, parents’ education, and family’s wealth status) and NDMs was assessed with bivariate analysis in SPSS (version 17.0), and regression analysis of the significant associations.

Findings The 2006 PAPFAM survey included 13 238 households, with a response rate of 88% (11 661 households). One child aged 2–14 years was selected from each household having children in this age group (4552 households). 2578 (57%) of 4552 children were exposed to the use of fewer than three NDMs, whereas 1974 (43%) to three or four (this split in the NDMs was used in the initial data analysis). Results from the regression analysis showed that girls were less likely to be exposed to NDMs than were boys (three or four NDMs: 916 [40%] of 2276 girls vs 1057 [47%] of 2271 boys; odds ratio 0·79, 95% CI 0·70–0·90) and children in the economically and politically unstable Gaza Strip were more likely to be exposed to NDMs than were those in the West Bank, oPt (1·42, 1·25–1·62). Families who were financially better off (0·69, 0·57–0·83) and mothers (0·77, 0·61–0·96) and fathers (0·76, 0·63–0·91) who were more educated were less likely to use NDMs than were those who were not.

Interpretation Poverty seems to be a strong factor for the use of NDMs by parents. The findings of this study draw attention to the importance of engaging boys and their families who have a low income in interventions to prevent the use of NDMs and to help individuals to cope with the consequences of these practices.

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Conflicts of interest We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.