

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN AND PERSONAL CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: THE RELEVANCE OF THE FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS^a

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Abstract

The lack of consensus in public attitudes toward the legal prohibition of the corporal punishment of children (CPC) may, in part, be explained by variations in individuals' personal experiences of corporal punishment in childhood (PECPC). Theories of trauma and learned helplessness suggest the potential significance of the feeling of helplessness during PECPC in shaping attitudes toward CPC (ATCPC). The present study aims to examine the association between PECPC and ATCPC, focusing on the role of the feeling of helplessness, its prevalence in the CP context and how it shapes ATCPC, thereby addressing a critical gap in the existing literature. It was hypothesised that the feeling of helplessness would show a stronger association with, and greater predictive power for, ATCPC than other characteristics of PECPC (prevalence and frequency of CPC, age of onset, use of an object, and five other negative emotions experienced during PECPC – sadness, anger, fear, guilt, and shame). ATCPC were assessed using eight indicators: score on the Corporal Punishment Attitude Scale (CPAS1), attitude toward legal regulation of CPC, willingness to sign a petition to ban CPC, and attitudes towards a single parental slap on the bottom in five hypothetical scenarios of child misconduct. A sample of 104 students completed an online questionnaire. The feeling of helplessness was associated with the greatest number of ATCPC indicators (five out of eight) and emerged as the strongest predictor of the CPAS1 scores. These findings are discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks, prior empirical research, and implications for child protection policies aimed at preventing the inappropriate use of corporal punishment.

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Key words: corporal punishment of children, negative emotions, feeling of helplessness, traumatisation, attitudes toward corporal punishment.

СТАВ ПРЕМА ФИЗИЧКОМ КАЖЊАВАЊУ ДЕЦЕ И ЛИЧНИ ДОЖИВЉАЈ ФИЗИЧКОГ КАЖЊАВАЊА У ДЕТИЊСТВУ: ЗНАЧАЈ ОСЕЋАЊА БЕСПОМОЋНОСТИ

Апстракт

Недостатак консензуса у ставовима јавности према законској забрани физичког кажњавања деце (ФКД) може се делимично објаснити варијацијама у личним доживљајима физичког кажњавања током детињства (ЛИФКД). Теорије трауме и научене беспомоћности указују на могући значај осећања беспомоћности током ЛИФКД у формирању става према ФКД (СПФКД). Циљ овог истраживања је испитивање повезаности између ЛИФКД и СПФКД, са посебним фокусом на улогу осећања беспомоћности, чиме се ово истраживање сврстава међу прва која се баве овим специфичним односом. Пошло се од хипотезе да ће осећање беспомоћности имати снажнију повезаност и већу предиктивну вредност за СПФКД од следећих карактеристика ЛИФКД: преваленција, учесталост, узраст почетка ЛИФКД, коришћење предмета, и пет других негативних емоција доживљених током ЛИФКД (туга, бес, страх, кривица и срам). СПФКД су процењивани на основу осам индикатора: скора на Скали става према физичком кажњавању (ССПФК1), става према законској регулацији ФКД, спремности за потписивање петиције за забрану ФКД и става према родитељској казни у виду једног удараца отвореном шаком по задњици у пет хипотетичких ситуација дејег преступа. Узорак је чинило 104 студента који су попунили онлајн упитник. Осећање беспомоћности је било повезано са највећим бројем СПФКД индикатора (пет од осам) и показало се као најснажнији предиктор резултата на ССПФК1 скали. Добијени налази су разматрани у контексту релевантних теорија, претходних емпиријских истраживања и импликација за развој политика заштите деце од непримерене примене физичког кажњавања.

Кључне речи: физичко кажњавање деце, негативне емоције, осећање беспомоћности, трауматизација, став према физичком кажњавању.

INTRODUCTION

How parents discipline their children affects their emotional, social, and cognitive development, thereby impacting society as a whole. Corporal punishment of children¹ (CPC) is a disciplinary method that generates considerable debate in contemporary society regarding its acceptability and the appropriate forms of its application. In this paper, we seek to explain differences in attitudes toward CPC (ATCPC) by examining the relationship between these attitudes and personal experiences of CPC (PECPC), with a particular emphasis on the link between feelings of

¹ The term “children” refers to an individuals under the age of 18, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, art. 1).

helplessness during CPC and attitudes toward CPC—a connection largely overlooked in previous research.

Corporal punishment (CP) is defined as “physical force resulting in pain or discomfort, but not significant injury, and is meant to alter a child’s unfavourable behavioural patterns” (Straus & Donnelly, 2001, p. 4). A substantial body of research has documented numerous adverse outcomes associated with corporal punishment at both the individual and societal levels (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004; Gagné et al., 2007; Gershoff, 2002; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). At the societal level, the cultural spillover hypothesis posits that CP, though often regarded as a mild form of discipline, contributes to overall societal violence (Straus, 1996). At the individual level, the consequences of corporal punishment of children (CPC) have been shown to be mediated by the specific manner in which the punishment was administered. Studies show that mild forms of CP can sometimes help manage misbehaviour—when used appropriately, i.e., without frustration and anger, between ages 2 and 12, and avoiding blows to the head (Baumrind, Larzelere & Cowan, 2002; Larzelere, 2000). Subsequent studies, however, have identified numerous exceptions to “appropriate” use and have linked frequent spanking to adverse developmental and behavioural outcomes (Gagné et al., 2007). Several studies have directly assessed the harm resulting from CPC (Durrant et al., 2018; Gagné et al., 2007; PolICASTRO et al., 2024). Ateah and Parkin (2002) report that 71.1 % of respondents recalled being injured during CPC, with 8.9 % indicating they were injured “very often.” Durrant et al. (2018) found that 2.1% of children required medical treatment and 0.8% were hospitalized as a consequence of CP. Gagné et al. (2007) observed that 31.5 % of participants believed they were “often” or “very often” injured by CP as children. These findings contributed to the abolition of CPC in several countries (Gershoff, 2002) as advocated by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (General Comment No. 8, 2007), which defined corporal punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used with the intent to cause a certain degree of pain or discomfort, *no matter how mild* (ibid.). However, many countries still accept this form of child discipline, including Serbia, where discrepancies of ATCPC between experts and the general public have sparked debates on the issue (Vujović, 2020), ultimately stalling a 2019 initiative for the complete ban on corporal punishment and its legal sanctioning.

Research shows that the use of CPC is critically shaped by attitudes toward it (Durrant et al., 2018; Gagné et al., 2007; Grujić et al., 2020; PolICASTRO et al., 2024) and toward the fine line between acceptable corporal punishment and physical abuse, which is highly dependent on cultural norms and child-rearing customs (Korbin, 1991).

*Association between Attitude Toward CPC
and the Personal Experience of CP*

Many authors have examined the association between attitude toward CPC (ATCPC) and the personal experience of corporal punishment in childhood (PECPC). While some studies failed to find a clear link (Douglas, 2006; Jackson et al., 1999), many others report a positive association: individuals who experienced CPC in their youth are more likely to endorse its use as parents (Bell & Romano, 2012; Durrant et al., 2018; Gagné et al., 2007; Witt et al., 2017).

The characteristics of CP most commonly researched in its association with ATCPC are its prevalence and frequency. Self-report studies typically yield high rates: in Canada, Ateah and Parkin (2002) found that 75% of adults recalled experiencing CPC, and Durrant et al. (2018) reported the prevalence of 73.4% among students. In the USA, Policastro et al. (2024) observed an even higher prevalence - 86.8% among students, while Whitt et al. (2017) found that 69.9% of a representative German sample had endured at least one form of CPC. By contrast, caregiver-report surveys suggest lower CPC administration rates: 37% in the USA (Finkelhor et al., 2019) and 53.7% in Australia (Haslam et al., 2023). A 2020 Serbian national representative survey of parents found that 63.0% of parents of children aged 0–18 had used CPC at least once (Grujičić et al., 2020). In that study, the most cited reasons for striking a child were perceived danger (23%) and disobedience (22%) (ibid., p. 46). These discrepancies between self and caregiver reports suggest that parents may not always be fully aware of their use of CP.

Research has found that the association between CP and ATCPC is moderated by its severity (Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Gagné et al., 2007; Grujičić et al., 2020). As shown, the most common form of punishment is spanking, with a prevalence above 60% in the adult sample (in Canada 66.4% of participants, Ateah & Parkin, 2002, and 84.1%, Gagné et al., 2007; in Germany 61.9%, Witt et al., 2017) and among students (in Canada 63.5%, Durrant et al., 2018). Gagné et al. (2007) found that more than one-tenth of Canadian adults experienced frequent spanking in childhood. The Serbian study by Grujičić et al. (2020) reported that 36% of parents had used spanking to discipline their children in the previous year. Less common forms of CPC are whipping (18%; Ateah & Parkin, 2002) and shaking (12%; Ateah & Parkin, 2002), and the least used are kicking and choking (1.4% and 0.3% retrospectively, Witt et al., 2017). Individuals who experienced mild forms of CPC, such as spanking, tend to approve of its use (Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Gagné et al., 2007; Grujičić et al., 2020; Witt et al., 2017). However, Gagné et al. (2007) found that those who endured harsher physical or psychological abuse in childhood held more negative attitudes toward CPC; similarly, individuals subjected to threats, humiliation, or ridicule by parents in childhood were more likely to have a negative attitude toward spanking. In Serbian study of parents, stronger

positive parental attitudes toward CPC were significantly predicted by personal experiences of disciplinary practices involving higher levels of psychological aggression and more frequent mild physical punishment, but fewer instances of severe and very severe physical disciplining during childhood (Grujičić et al., 2020, p. 55). The study found no association between the experience of corporal punishment (CP) per se and attitudes toward CP (ATCPC); however, a significant association was found between the severity of CP and ATCPC. Those who reported being spanked were likelier to report a positive attitude toward CPC than those who reported more harsh forms of CPC.

One of the indicators of CPC severity is the use of objects for administering the punishment (Lansford, Tapanya & Oburu, 2022). Policastro et al. (2024) found that 77.1 % of students who experienced CPC reported being struck with an object by a parent or caregiver, while Durrant et al. (2018) and Ateah & Parkin (2002) report that approximately one-third of those sampled experienced the use of an object. In Serbia, 6.0% of parents admitted using hard objects during CPC (Grujičić et al., 2020). Across studies, the belt emerges as the most frequently used object (Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Grujičić et al., 2020; Policastro et al., 2024).

The age at which corporal punishment is first administered is another PECPC characteristic frequently examined in studies. Ateah and Parkin (2002) found that the most common age at which CP occurred was between 6 and 10 years, while the first instance of CP took place before the age of 6 in 50% of cases, and between the ages of 6 and 10 in 40% of cases. In a Serbian national sample, 47% of parents reported that they first used CP when the child was between 2 and 3 years old (Grujičić et al., 2020). Notably, some studies indicate that CP is more harmful when used with children younger than two years (Cuartas et al., 2021) or older than 13 years (Lansford et al., 2005; Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1996). Still, despite its importance, the relationship between the age of CP and attitudes toward its use (ATCPC) seems to remain insufficiently explored in the literature.

Surprisingly, feelings associated with the personal experience of CP and their association with ATCPC are rarely investigated in studies. Quantitative research among university students (Durrant et al., 2018) found that the most frequently reported emotions during CPC were anger (77.3 %), sadness (74.5 %), and guilt (55.4 %), whereas fear (40.5 %) and humiliation (30.9 %) were less common. In that study, none of these emotions significantly predicted ATCPC. Qualitative interviews with children have identified sadness (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004, New Zealand) and fear (Saunders & Goddard, 2008, Australia) as the predominant emotional responses to CP. Remarkably, despite the prevalence of CPC and its impact, no empirical studies have examined how often children feel helpless during CP, nor how this helplessness influences their attitudes toward

corporal punishment, despite evidence that such helplessness can result from CP-related trauma (Levine, 2008; Ruppert, 2014). According to relevant theories of traumatisation and learned helplessness, feelings of helplessness is expected to arise in the context CP when a child is traumatised by it, as it perceives the situation as dangerous — because it is frequent, excessive, unpredictable, or otherwise inappropriate — and is unable to fight or flee (*ibid.*) or otherwise control the source of distress (i.e. unable to control the adult who punishes or to change the behaviour/characteristic for which they are punished (Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Seligman, Maier & Geer, 1968). Attributing the cause of the unpleasant situation as stable, global, and internal further exacerbates feelings of helplessness. Described pattern is likely to emerge during CPC since the punishment is most frequently repetitive and administered by senior family members (Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Durrant et al., 2018), which leads to attribution of the cause as stable and global; furthermore, as CPC is presented to a child as a consequence of its behaviour, this favours attribution of the cause as an internal.

Levine (2008) emphasises that traumatisation leads to hypersensitivity of the nervous system and an exaggerated, dysregulated autonomic nervous system response. Consequently, individuals traumatised by CPC are more prone to interpret even mild forms of CP as threatening and to adopt more negative attitudes toward all forms of CP. Consistent with this, research indicates that those who experienced more severe CPC hold more negative ATCPC (Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Gagné et al., 2007; Grujičić et al., 2020), and that children spanked early in life exhibit greater brain activation in response to mildly threatening facial expressions than children without CP experience (Cuartas et al., 2021).

Feelings of helplessness represent a distinct indicator of trauma during CP and constitute one of its most severe consequences which can exert enduring adverse effects on a child's autonomic nervous system functioning, emotional regulation, cognition, behaviour, social relationships, and broader psychosocial development (Levine, 2008; Ruppert, 2014) and thus warrants attention from researchers and societal-level preventive effort. However, empirical studies on the prevalence of feelings of helplessness during PECPC and its association with ATCPC are lacking. We conducted the present study to address the critical gap in the literature regarding how often children experience helplessness in CP contexts and how that helplessness shapes their subsequent attitudes toward CP.

CURRENT STUDY

This study aims to shed light on contemporary discrepancies in attitudes toward CPC (ATCPC) by examining the association between these attitudes and personal experiences of corporal punishment in child-

hood (PECPC), with a special focus on the relationship between ATCPC and feelings of helplessness during PECPC. Because feelings of helplessness are a specific indicator of traumatisation during CP (Levine, 2008), they may be particularly predictive of negative attitudes toward any form of corporal punishment.

The specific objectives are: 1) To describe the key characteristics of participants' PECPC and their mutual associations. 2) To examine the relationship between participants' ATCPC and PECPC. 3) To compare the association between the feeling of helplessness and ATCPC with the associations between other PECPC characteristics and ATCPC.

Firstly, we hypothesise that ATCPC will be significantly associated with PECPC characteristics: frequency of CPC, use of an object, occurrence of CPC at very young or late ages, and negative emotions (feeling of helplessness, fear, sadness, anger, shame, and guilt).

The central research hypothesis further posits that the feeling of helplessness will have a stronger association with, and greater predictive power for ATCPC, compared to other characteristics of PECPC. This leads to second and third specific hypotheses: more indicators of ATCPC will be significantly associated with the feeling of helplessness than with other PECPC characteristics; the feeling of helplessness will emerge as the strongest predictor of ATCPC.

Previous research on ATCPC in Serbia (Stajkić, Hrnčić & Blagojević, 2025) demonstrated that the ATCPC varies within the same sample depending on the method used to measure this attitude. Therefore, in this study, we assessed the association between PECPC and ATCPC using eight indicators: the score on the Corporal Punishment Attitude Scale (CPAS1), recognised for its strong psychometric properties; attitude toward legal regulation of parental spanking as a more stringent response to CP²; attitude toward signing a petition to ban CPC legally as a behavioural measure of activism; attitude toward parental use of CP in the form of a single slap on the bottom in five hypothetical situations of child misbehaviour, to capture contextual influences on ATCPC.

The characteristics of PECPC examined for their association with ATCPC were the prevalence, frequency, and use of objects during PECPC as indicators of the severity of CP, the age at which PECPC occurred, and the negative emotions experienced during PECPC (sadness, anger, fear, helplessness, guilt, and shame).

Gender was not included as a control variable due to the small number of male participants (n=10).

² Only this CPC form was considered, as previous research (Stajkić, Hrnčić & Blagojević, 2025) found it to be the sole one of four examined forms that was discriminative for ATCPC.

METHOD

A quantitative, descriptive study was conducted using retrospective self-assessment.

Sample

The sample comprised 104 undergraduate humanities students from the University of Belgrade. Most participants were female (90.4%, $N = 94$), with 10 male participants (9.6%), reflecting the typical gender distribution in these programs. Participants ranged from 21 to 24 years, with a mean age of 22.05 ($SD = 0.75$). The vast majority resided in the urban area (95.2%, $N = 99$), with 3.8% ($N = 4$) living in suburban areas and 1.0% ($N = 1$) in a rural settlement. None of the socio-demographic variables displayed sufficient variability to justify their subsequent inclusion in the analyses.

Instrument

The data were collected using the *Questionnaire on Corporal Punishment of Children*, constructed in 2023 by Hrnčić and Blagojević. It consists of five sections, the first of which pertains to socio-demographic data (gender, age, place of residence).

The second section includes the *Corporal Punishment Attitude Scale (CPASI)*³ which assesses attitudes toward CPC through 16 items (for example: “Corporal punishment is an effective method for reducing children’s disobedience”). Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale (1—strongly disagree, 5—strongly agree). A higher score indicates stronger opposition to corporal punishment (i.e., a more negative attitude toward its use). Certain items were reverse-coded prior to analysis. The scale showed a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha $\alpha = 0.95$.

The third section assesses *attitude toward legal provisions on corporal punishment* using two 1-item measures: “Parents should be legally allowed to slap their child on the bottom with an open hand when the child is disobedient”, and: “Would you sign a petition to introduce a legal ban on corporal punishment of children in the Family Law of the Republic of Serbia?”, both with binary responses (Yes/No).

The fourth section assesses participants’ *attitudes towards CP in realistic scenarios of child misconduct*, designed to reflect everyday parenting challenges at different ages: a 5-year-old running into the street; a 7-year-old causing property damage by disobeying; a 9-year-old display-

³ Provided in the Appendix

ing physical aggression toward others; a 10-year-old using verbal aggression; and a 12-year-old lying with severe consequences. These ages were selected because children at each stage understand the specific wrongdoing, and each behaviour is common for that age and of similar severity. After reading each scenario, participants indicate whether they agree with the parental reaction, “The parent delivers a light slap to the child’s bottom and explains why their behaviour was inappropriate,” by selecting Yes/Not Sure/No.

The fifth section concerns the *characteristics of self-assessed PECPC*. It consists of nine questions assessing: the prevalence of CP (“Were you physically punished as a child when you did something wrong?”; Yes/No); frequency of CP (“How often were you physically punished as a child when you did something wrong?”; five-point scale); use of objects (“Were objects used during corporal punishment, such as a slipper, wooden spoon, belt, etc.?”; Yes/No, with an option to specify which object); age at which CP was experienced (“At what ages were you physically punished?”; options: 0–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, and 16 years or older, with the possibility to select all that apply); age of last CP (“How old were you when you were last physically punished?”; numeric entry); and negative emotions experienced during PECPC (“What did you feel when you were physically punished?”; participants could select multiple responses from six emotions—fear, anger, sadness, guilt, shame, and helplessness—or provide an additional response under “Other.”)

Procedure

Data collection took place in 2023. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously online via Google Forms. Invitations, including a link to the survey, were distributed by email to faculty mailing lists and shared in several student Facebook groups.

Statistical Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods in IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

RESULTS

Self-assessment of PECPC Characteristics

Regarding the prevalence, 76.0% of participants reported experiencing corporal punishment during childhood, whereas 24.0% reported never having been punished. Among those who experienced corporal punishment, 6.7% indicated they were punished “almost always,” 11.5%

“frequently,” 25.0 % “sometimes,” and 32.7% “rarely.” Of participants who were physically punished, 48.8% reported that an object was used; the most common implements were a slipper (24.6% of those punished with an object), a rod (23.2%), and a belt (21.7%).

Participants most frequently experienced CP between the ages of 6 and 10 years (41.8%), followed by ages 11–15 (27.8%) and 0–5 years (23.5%), with the lowest frequency occurring at age 16 and older (7.0%). Most participants reported experiencing PECPC in two of the specified age ranges (39.5%), whereas only 6.2% reported experiencing it across all four age ranges. The mean age at which participants were last punished was 12.09 years ($SD = 3.83$), ranging from 4 to 21 years.

The most frequently reported emotions during PECPC were anger (51.2%), sadness (50.0%), fear (48.8%), and guilt (48.8%), followed by shame (37.5%) and helplessness (35.0%).

Table 1. Phi-squared and Eta-squared Effect Sizes between PECPC Characteristics

	Anger	Sadness	Fear	Guilt	Shame	Helplessness	Age CP ended
Frequency	/	/	0.16**	/	/	0.06*	/
Anger		0.07**	/	0.06*	/	/	/
Sadness			0.05*	/	/	0.10**	0.08**
Fear					0.11**	0.19**	0.10*
Guilt					/	/	/
Shame						/	/
Helplessness							/

* significant at the 0.05 level. ** significant at the 0.01 level.

The strongest association (effect size) between emotions felt during PECPC was found between helplessness and fear [$\chi^2(1) = 15.33$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.19$], followed by the association between shame and fear [$\chi^2(1) = 8.67$, $p = 0.003$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.11$] and between helplessness and sadness [$\chi^2(1) = 7.91$, $p = 0.005$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.10$] (Table 1). Significant positive associations were also found between anger and sadness [$\chi^2(1) = 6.05$, $p = 0.014$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.07$], and sadness and fear [$\chi^2(1) = 4.05$, $p = 0.044$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.05$], while association between anger and guilt was negative [$\chi^2(1) = 4.98$, $p = 0.026$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.06$]. Associations between other emotions were not statistically significant.

The analysis of the association between the emotions and age at the last CP experience showed a positive association between the age of the last punishment and sadness [$t(63) = 2.19$, $p = 0.032$, $N = 65$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$] and fear [$t(63) = 2.63$, $p = 0.011$, $N = 65$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$] — the older age at last punishment was significantly associated with greater reports of sadness and fear. No significant associations were found between age and other emotions. A significant positive association with CPC frequency

was also observed: fear [$t(67.56) = 3.59$, $p = 0.001$, $N = 80$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$] and helplessness [$t(78) = 2.32$, $p = 0.023$, $N = 80$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$] were more common in cases of frequent punishment. Associations between the use of an object and other characteristics of PEPC were not significant.

ATCPC Indicators

Participants' scores on the CP Attitude Scale (CPAS1) ranged from 1.19 to 5.00 ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.01$, $N = 104$), with higher scores indicating a more negative attitude toward CP. Skewness (-0.50) and kurtosis (-0.86) values indicate that the CPAS1 scores do not deviate markedly from normality. Overall, participants tended to hold negative attitudes toward CPC: 79.8% agreed that CPC is harmful, and the same percentage (79.8%) agreed that it violates children's rights. Despite this prevailing negativity, 47.1% of respondents nonetheless considered it acceptable to administer a mild slap on the buttocks when a child is disobedient.

Analysis of attitudes toward legal provisions on corporal punishment shows that 45.2% of participants think that parents should not be legally allowed to slap their child on the bottom with an open hand when the child is disobedient. Additionally, 30.8% would sign a petition to introduce a legal ban on corporal punishment of children.

Table 2. Phi-squared and Eta-squared Effect Sizes between ATCP Indicators

	Legal permission for CP	Petition to ban CP	CP when in danger	CP for material damage	CP for physical aggression	CP for verbal aggression	CP for lying
CPAS1	0.52**	0.55**	0.21**	0.31**	0.09**	0.19**	0.06*
Legal permission for CP		0.63**	0.39**	0.41**	/	0.36**	/
Petition to ban CP			0.31**	0.35**	/	0.25**	/
CP when in danger				0.54**	0.30**	0.42**	0.34**
CP for material damage					/	0.60**	/
CP for physical aggression						0.27**	0.28**
CP for verbal aggression							0.37**

* significant at the 0.05 level. ** significant at the 0.01 level.

Attitudes towards CP in scenarios of child misconduct reveal that 31.7% of participants agree with a light slap to the bottom with an explanation of why their behaviour was inappropriate when a 5-year-old runs into the street, 32.8% when 7-year-old causes material damage by diso-

beying, 3.8% when a 9-year-old displays physical aggression toward others, 6.8% when a 10-year-old uses verbal aggression, and 1.9% when a 12-year-old lies with severe consequences.

There are significant positive associations between the CPAS1 score and all other ATCPC indicators (Table 2). Also, almost all the other ATCPC indicators are mutually associated. Strongest associations were found between two indicators of attitudes toward legal provisions on CPC (legal permission for CPC and petition to ban CP, $\chi^2(4) = 40.77$, $p < .001$, $N = 104$, $\phi^2 = 0.63$), between attitudes toward CPC for material damage and for verbal aggression [$\chi^2(4) = 75.45$, $p < .001$, $N = 104$, $\phi^2 = 0.60$], between the CPAS1 score and attitude towards petition to ban CP [$F(1, 102) = 61.73$, $p < .001$, $N = 104$, $\eta^2 = 0.55$], and the CPAS1 score and attitude towards legal permission for CPC [$F(1, 102) = 110.35$, $p < .001$, $N = 104$, $\eta^2 = 0.52$]. The poorest associations are found between the CPAS1 score and attitude towards CPC for lying [$F(2, 101) = 3.33$, $p = 0.040$, $N = 103$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$], and the CPAS1 score and attitude towards CPC for physical aggression [$F(2, 101) = 5.16$, $p = 0.007$, $N = 103$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$].

ATCPC and Self-assessment of PECPC Characteristics

The feeling of helplessness is the PECPC characteristic with the strongest association with the CPAS1 scores, which measure attitudes toward ATCPC (Table 3). Those who reported feeling helpless had significantly higher CPAS1 scores and more negative attitude toward CP ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.65$, $n = 28$), than those who did not report it ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.99$, $n = 52$), [$t(74.77) = 5.99$, $p < 0.001$, $\phi^2 = 0.32$]. Additionally, the CPAS1 scores were significantly higher among participants whose last CP experience occurred at age 16 or older [$t(20.66) = -2.20$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$]. The CPAS1 score was not significantly associated with CP prevalence, CP frequency, or use of an object during PECPC.

Agreement with legally allowing parents to discipline a child by slapping them on the bottom with an open hand was negatively associated with all PECPC characteristics, most strongly with the feeling of helplessness [$\chi^2(1) = 22.94$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.28$], then with anger [$\chi^2(1) = 4.29$, $p = 0.032$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.05$], fear [$\chi^2(1) = 4.09$, $p = 0.038$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.05$], and shame [$\chi^2(1) = 3.95$, $p = 0.047$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.05$], as well as with the use of objects [$\chi^2(2) = 4.85$, $p = 0.028$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.06$].

Table 3. Phi-squared and Eta-squared Effect Sizes between ATCP and PECPC Variables

PECPC Characteristics	ATCP Indicators				
	CPAS1	Legal permission for CP	Petition to ban CP	CP when in danger	CP for material damage
Frequency of CP	/	/	/	/	/
Using an object	/	0.06*	/	/	/
Anger	/	0.05*	/	0.14**	/
Sadness	/	/	/	/	/
Fear	/	0.05*	/	/	0.16**
Guilt	/	/	/	/	0.17**
Shame	/	0.05*	/	/	/
Helplessness	0.32**	0.28**	0.15*	0.11*	0.09*
CP age 16+	0.06*	/	/	/	/
Age CP ended	/	/	/	/	0.11*

* significant at the 0.05 level. ** significant at the 0.01 level.

The total number of negative emotions reported during PECPC

Willingness to sign the petition to introduce a legal ban on corporal punishment was positively associated only with helplessness [$\chi^2(2) = 12.26$, $p = 0.002$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.15$].

Approval of the statement “The parent delivers a light slap to the child’s bottom and explains why their behaviour was inappropriate” was associated with PECPC characteristic only in two out of five hypothetical child-misbehaviour scenarios. In the first scenario (the child runs across the street), approval of this form of CP was negatively associated with anger during PECPC [$\chi^2(1) = 10.25$, $p = 0.006$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.14$] and helplessness [$\chi^2(1) = 8.55$, $p = 0.014$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.11$]. In the second scenario (the child breaks a crystal vase), approval was negatively associated with fear during PECPC [$\chi^2(1) = 12.73$, $p = 0.002$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.16$], helplessness [$\chi^2(1) = 7.06$, $p = 0.029$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.09$] and the age at which PECPC ended [$F(2) = 3.81$, $p = 0.027$, $N = 65$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$], but positively associated with guilt [$\chi^2(1) = 13.27$, $p = 0.001$, $N = 80$, $\phi^2 = 0.17$].

PECPC Characteristics as Predictors of CPAS1 Score

A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict the CPAS1 scores from PECPC characteristics, including punishment frequency, use of an object during PECPC, negative emotions experienced (anger, sadness, fear, guilt, shame, and helplessness), occurrence of PECPC at ages 0–5, occurrence of PECPC at age 16 or older, and age at last PECPC (Table 4). The overall model was significant [$F(11, 53) = 2.59$, $p = 0.01$], explaining 35% of the variance in CPAS1 scores ($R^2 = .35$).

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting CPAS1 score

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant (Intercept)	3.85	0.58		6.58	<0.001
Frequency of CP	0.33	0.14	0.03	0.23	0.821
Use of an object	-0.37	0.29	-0.19	-1.45	0.152
Anger	0.21	0.27	0.11	0.78	0.438
Sadness	0.34	0.25	0.17	1.34	0.185
Fear	-0.10	0.29	-0.05	-0.34	0.730
Guilt	-0.37	0.26	-0.19	-1.45	0.152
Shame	0.24	0.27	0.12	0.87	0.385
Helplessness	0.92	0.27	0.45	3.44	0.001
CP age 0-5	0.55	0.26	-0.28	-2.11	0.040
CP age 16+	0.42	0.37	0.17	1.14	0.260
Age CP ended	-0.02	-0.02	0.44	-0.04	0.698

Dependent variable: CPAS1 score. B = unstandardized regression coefficient;
SE B = standard error of B, β = standardised beta coefficient.

When controlling for the effects of all other variables in the model, only feeling of helplessness [$\beta = 0.45$, $t(80) = 3.44$, $p = 0.001$] and early CP at age up to five years [$\beta = -0.28$, $t(53) = 2.11$, $p = 0.040$] emerged as significant predictors of the CPAS1 score.

DISCUSSION

Compared to previous studies conducted among student samples, our prevalence of PECPC (75.0%) closely matches the results of Durrant et al. (2018) and is slightly lower than the rate reported by Policastro et al. (2024). The result that nearly half of our participants recalled the use of an object during CP is higher than findings from Durrant et al. (2018) but lower than in the study of Policastro et al. (2024). Our finding that most punishments occurred between ages 6–10 is consistent with the results of Ateah and Parkin (2002) but contrasts with a finding of the national Serbian parent sample, which identified preschool years as the peak period for CP (Grujičić et al., 2020). In terms of emotional responses to CP, rates of sadness, fear, and anger in our study were consistent with those found in the study of Durrant et al. (2018), although we observed somewhat lower frequencies of anger, sadness, and guilt, and a marginally higher frequency of fear.

ATCPC and Characteristics of PECPC

Our first hypothesis—that ATCPC would be significantly associated with PECPC characteristics—was supported for the occurrence of CPC at very young or late age, use of an object during CPC, and negative

emotions (helplessness, fear, sadness, anger, shame, and guilt), but not for CPC frequency. The absence of an association between ATCPC and PECPC frequency mirrors findings from Douglas (2006) in a student sample.

The link we observed between a later age of PECPC and more negative ATCPC mirrors our finding that older children report greater sadness and fear during PECPC. This is consistent with evidence that CPC administered after age 12 produces more adverse effects (Gagné et al., 2007). Since only 7.0% of our sample experienced PECPC at 16 or older, this suggests that punishment outside culturally expected age ranges may provoke shame relative to peers and thus foster more negative attitudes toward CPC. The predictiveness of the early age of first CP for the CPAS1 score is consistent with the finding that CP is more harmful to children under the age of two (Cuartas et al., 2021), which could be interpreted as a consequence of their limited ability to exert control over the source of distress.

The observed association between feelings of fear and anger during PECPC and two indicators of ATCPC was anticipated, since these negative emotions reflect how distressing the experience was, thereby contributing to more negative attitudes. An association between guilt and more positive ATCPC was also anticipated, as guilt is considered an indicator of the violation of group norms (Hellinger, Weber, & Beaumont, 1998) and is therefore related to the perceived fairness of the punishment.

ATCPC and Feeling of Helplessness during PECPC

Although other PECPC characteristics were each linked to at most two of the eight ATCPC indicators, feelings of helplessness during PECPC were associated with five. Notably, helplessness was the only PECPC feature related to the CPAS1 score—the most psychometrically robust ATCPC measure in this study—thereby confirming our second hypothesis. Furthermore, helplessness emerged as the single strongest predictor of the CPAS1 score, in line with our third hypothesis. This finding is pivotal for understanding ATCPC, as the feeling of helplessness represents a specific indicator of traumatisation—an experience that contributes to increased sensitivity to adverse stimuli (Levine, 2008; Ruppert, 2014), which in turn fosters more negative attitudes toward CPC. The findings suggest that approximately one-eighth of the participants likely experienced traumatisation during their PECPC. The observed association between the feeling of helplessness and the frequency of CPC indicates that such traumatisation is often recurrent.

Moreover, these findings may help explain prior research linking corporal punishment to later depression (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Policastro et al., 2024), given that the feeling of helplessness has been widely confirmed as a predictor of depression (Hrnčić, 2019).

Limitations of the Study

This study is based on a relatively small and convenience sample. A larger, more diverse, and representative sample—particularly one that includes parents—would enhance the external validity of the findings. Also, the data rely on retrospective self-reports of CPC, which may be influenced by memory biases, social desirability effects, and personal reinterpretations over time.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research could explore the relationship between the feeling of helplessness and the severity and inconsistency of punishment, its connection to emotional and sexual abuse, as well as effective interventions that are alternatives to inappropriate punishment that places children in a position of helplessness.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study demonstrates that corporal punishment of children (CPC) is widespread in the Serbian population, that in half of the cases it evokes negative emotions, and that more than a third of the participants reported feeling helpless during their personal experience of CPC (PECPC). This study is among the first to investigate the relationship between the feeling of helplessness, conceptualised as an indicator of traumatisation by CPC, and attitudes toward corporal punishment of children (ATCPC). It reveals that the feeling of helplessness is most strongly associated with and is the best predictor of negative ATCPC, thereby lending support to the assumption that traumatisation may lead to heightened sensitivity to adverse experiences (Levine, 2008; Ruppert, 2014).

The finding that more than a third of the participants reported feeling helpless during PECPC suggests that the punishment they endured was likely highly inappropriate. This underscores the importance of societal intervention in cases of child traumatisation resulting from CP, whether through legislation, engaging in school-based discussions with children about their disciplinary experiences to assess the adequacy of parental practices, or educating parents on appropriate, non-violent disciplinary methods.

Since a legal ban on all forms of CPC currently lacks consistent support in Serbia, a potential solution for gaining broader societal backing could be to establish clear legal definitions of CPC's severity, method, appropriateness, and age limits, beyond which CPC would be explicitly prohibited, while promoting nonviolent alternatives for regulating a child's behaviour.

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СТАВ ПРЕМА ФИЗИЧКОМ КАЖЊАВАЊУ ДЕЦЕ И ЛИЧНИ ДОЖИВЉАЈ ФИЗИЧКОГ КАЖЊАВАЊА У ДЕТИЊСТВУ: ЗНАЧАЈ ОСЕЋАЊА БЕСПОМОЋНОСТИ

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Резиме

Недостатак консензуса у ставовима јавности према законској забрани физичког кажњавања деце (ФКД) може се делимично објаснити варијацијама у личним искуствима физичког кажњавања током детињства (ЛИФКД). Теорије трауме и научене беспомоћности указују на могући значај осећања беспомоћности током ЛИФКД у формирању става према ФКД (СПФКД). Циљ овог истраживања је испитивање повезаности између ЛИФКД и СПФКД, са посебним фокусом на улогу осећања беспомоћности, чиме се ово истраживање сврстава међу прва која се баве овим специфичним односом. Пошло се од хипотезе да ће осећање беспомоћности имати снажнију повезаност и већу предиктивну вредност за СПФКД од других карактеристика ЛИФКД: преваленца, учесталост, узраст почетка ЛИФКД, коришћење предмета, и пет других негативних емоција доживљених током ЛИФКД (туга, бес, страх, кривица и срам). Специфичне хипотезе су биле: 1) Став према физичком кажњавању деце (СПФКД) биће значајно повезан са учесталошћу ФКД, коришћењем предмета током ФКД, појавом ФКД у веома раном или касном узрасту, и негативним емоцијама (осећај беспомоћности, страх, туга, бес, срам и кривица); 2) Осећање беспомоћности биће значајно повезано са више индикатора СПФКД него друге карактеристике ЛИФКД; 3) Осећање беспомоћности ће бити најснажнији предиктор СПФКД.

СПФКД су процењивани на основу осам индикатора: скор на Скали става према физичком кажњавању (ССПФК1), става према законској регулацији ФКД, спремности за потписивање петиције за забрану ФКД и става према родитељској казни у виду једног ударца отвореном шаком по задњици у пет хипотетичких ситуација дејег преступа. Узорак је чинило 104 студента који су попунили онлајн упитник.

Карактеристике ЛИФКД. Показало се да је 76% испитаника изјавило да је у детињству било физички кажњавано, од тога је 48,8% доживело кажњавање уз употребу предмета (најчешће папуча, прут и каиш). Кажњавање је најчешће

примењивано у узрасту од 6 до 10 година (41,8%), затим од 11 до 15 година (27,8%), док је најмање присутно након 16. године (7,0%). Најчешће пријављене емоције током ЛИФКД биле су бес (51,2%), туга (50,0%), страх (48,8%) и кривица (48,8%), док су срамота (37,5%) и беспомоћност (35,0%) биле нешто ређе.

Повезаност између карактеристика ЛИФКД и СПФКД. Међу испитиваним карактеристикама ЛИФКД, осећање беспомоћности је показало најснажнију повезаност са СПФКД. Наиме, показале су се значајне повезаности са пет од осам индикатора СПФКД: скор на скали ССПФК1, противљење законској дозволи да родитељи дисциплинују дете ударцем отвореном шаком по задњици, негативан став према коришћењу ФКД у две хипотетичке ситуације дејег престапа и спремност да се потпише петиција за законску забрану ФКД. Такође, осећање беспомоћности је било снажнији предиктор скора на ССПФК1. Следеће карактеристике ЛИФКД које су биле најчешће повезане са СПФКД су биле страх и бес. Обе емоције су биле повезане са противљењем законској дозволи да родитељи примене ФКД и са негативним ставом према ФКД у по једној хипотетичкој ситуацији престапа детета. Анализа је такође показала да су учесталије казне биле повезане са чешћим осећањима беспомоћности и страха. Повезаност између варијабли СПФКД и карактеристика ЛИФКД показала је да је употреба предмета током ЛИФКД повезана са ставом према законској регулацији ФКД. Такође, особе које су биле кажњаване након шеснаесте године имале су негативнији став према ФКД, док је кажњавање на раном узрасту до 5 година било предиктивно за скор на ССПФК1.

Пошто је осећање беспомоћности специфичан индикатор трауматизације, добијени налази сугеришу да трауматизација током ЛИФКД доприноси каснијем противљењу свакој форми физичког кажњавања. Налази истичу важност друштвене интервенције у циљу смањења трауматизације деце кроз физичко кажњавање. Како недостаје конзистентна подршка за потпуну забрану ФКД у српском друштву, могућа решења укључују прецизно законско дефинисања граница дозвољеног физичког кажњавања у односу на његову примереност, начин спровођења, тежину и узраст детета, пријављивање случајева непримереног кажњавања надлежним институцијама, као и едукацију родитеља о алтернативама физичком кажњавању детета, и разговоре са децом у школама о њиховом искуству физичког кажњавања ради ране превенције.

APPENDIX

Corporal Punishment Attitude Scale (CPASI)

Instruction. Circle one of the numbers provided at the end of each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree with it. The numbers correspond to the following meanings:

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither Agree nor Dissagree	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
1. Corporal punishment of children directly violates children's rights.			1	2 3 4 5
2. Corporal punishment harms children's development and well-being.			1	2 3 4 5
3. The state should legally prohibit corporal punishment of children.			1	2 3 4 5
4. Parents have the right to corporally punish their children when they believe it is necessary to raise them properly.			1	2 3 4 5
5. A mild slap on the bottom is acceptable when a child is disobedient.			1	2 3 4 5
6. Parents should never use corporal punishment as a method of child-rearing.			1	2 3 4 5
7. Just as it is prohibited to corporally punished adults, corporal punishment of children should also be prohibited.			1	2 3 4 5
8. Fair corporal punishment does not leave negative consequences for children.			1	2 3 4 5
9. Corporal punishment of children contributes to the establishment of parental authority.			1	2 3 4 5
10. As a parent, I would use corporal punishment on my child when I judge it necessary.			1	2 3 4 5
11. Corporal punishment of children is not the same as physical abuse.			1	2 3 4 5
12. Corporal punishment of children is justified if other disciplinary methods have failed.			1	2 3 4 5
13. Corporal punishment increases the likelihood that children will experience violence from their parents.			1	2 3 4 5
14. Corporal punishment of children is an effective way to curb disobedience.			1	2 3 4 5
15. The state has no right to interfere with how parents choose to raise their children.			1	2 3 4 5
16. It is always wrong to corporally punish a child.			1	2 3 4 5