

## **Spoil the Rod and Spare the Child: Examining the Colonial and Missionary Implications of Corporal Punishment in Contemporary Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Using theoretical methodology as a basis for discourse, this paper discusses the long history of corporal punishment in Kenya and links it to colonial and missionary influences. Deconstructing scriptural justifications often used to support corporal punishment is a necessary process, and this paper argues that current psychological research strongly suggests that corporal punishment has negative and far reaching consequences. The paper concludes with a faith integration model of healthy discipline and recommends a systemic approach to dismantling beliefs and practices related to corporal punishment in educational, religious, and societal settings.

### **Introduction and Background**

Corporal punishment has a long history in Kenya today and, to this day, is commonly found within multiple systems in society, including academic and religious institutions. It inflicts tremendous pain on children and adolescents. Kenya, like other parts of the world, has suffered from incidences where children have died from corporal punishment; in addition, their deaths have often been justified by unexamined cultural norms (Shelley 2013).

To set the groundwork for examining this troubling method of discipline, we begin with a vignette, born out of the personal experience of the lead author (Chege).

Alex was a biology student in my class. He was in his junior year at a rural-urban high school in Kenya nearly 30 years ago. I was a typical teacher; I believed in corporal punishment. It was, and continues to be, especially prevalent throughout primary school and high schools. I was also typical of the overwhelming majority of people in the Christian church who believed in it as a means of instilling discipline and good morals among children and adolescents (Dutton & Madison, 2020; Kindiki, 2015; Lansford et al., 2005; Lansford et al., 2014; Mbogo, 2015; Mweru 2010). It was also typical of the ordinary Kenyan citizen who believed in it particularly for furthering moral development

(Mbogo, 2015; Oburu & Palmërus, 2003). Most teachers and the society as a whole believed the colonial and racist saying that permeated, and still is very prevalent in Kenya that: “the ears of an African child are in his or her buttocks and only listens to the cane!” There was explicit permission to cane children, especially in schools, indiscriminately. In regard to Alex, on a cold July afternoon, I was poised to hit him with a big ruler commonly used by teachers to discipline students because he had not finished his homework, part of which included drawing a detailed biological diagram! He was seated behind his desk in a room crammed full of 53 other students. Suddenly, as I was towering over him, I noticed that his feet were significantly swollen. My body shook. I was embarrassed and angry with myself and, in that moment, immediately decided never to use corporal punishment again. The shortsightedness and harm involved in the use of corporal punishment to discipline youth became very real and clear to me.

The lead author later would learn that for a number of months, Alex had managed to conceal that he was dealing with a kidney problem. In hindsight, his physical illness explained his frequent absences, emotionally withdrawn presence, and declining academic performance. Alex dropped out of school shortly after this incident and unconfirmed reports had it that he died not too long afterward due to kidney complications. His legacy lives on in that he instantaneously transformed the lead author personally and made him a crusader against corporal punishment.

We are particularly troubled by corporal punishment in Kenya because many of its victims are orphans of HIV/AIDS or are otherwise vulnerable children (OVCs) who are dependent on others for their livelihood and survival, having already experienced multiple traumas (Oburu & Palmërus, 2003). Our Christian convictions and our profession as a clinical psychologists enable us to uniquely understand the psychological and emotional toll this scourge takes on society and, as such, we are very committed to do what we can to address the matter. In this paper, we will first trace the beginnings of corporal punishment in contemporary Kenya to colonial and early Christian missionary influences. Second, we will examine how corporal punishment impacts contemporary Kenya society, especially children and adolescents. We will conclude by briefly proposing a faith integration driven intervention model of addressing this problem.

Corporal Punishment

Ocobock (2012) provides one of the most exhaustive examinations of corporal punishment in Africa. He examines its history in Kenya in particular, tracing it back to 1897. The coverage starts with the period soon after the colonization of African countries by Western European powers following the Berlin Conference of 1885 which partitioned the continent into respective colonies of these countries (Wabuke, 2010). As administered during the colonial days, Ocobock (2012) defines corporal punishment as “the infliction of physical pain and injury on an individual believed to have committed wrongdoing” (p. 29). Presently, it is defined generally as the use of physical force with the intention to inflict pain, not necessarily injury, in order to correct or control a perceived behavior (Dutton & Madison, 2020; Hecker et al, 2014; Le & Nguyen, 2019). In contemporary Kenya, it is not uncommon for children to be caned as a form of corporal punishment, wherein the individual receives lashes with a long, thick stick or similar item. Slapping, pinching ears, pulling hair, kicking, and biting are also used. Le and Nguyen (2019) saliently emphasize that corporal punishment is the child’s first experience with violence.

#### The Colonial and Missionary Influences on Corporal Punishment in Kenya

The Portuguese were the first to have some Christian influence on Kenya, especially around the coast in 1498 when explorers such as Bartholomew Diaz and Vasco da Gama arrived, often enroute elsewhere (Bogonko, 1992; Kimengi & Lumallas, 2009). However, real European interest in Kenya began in the early to mid-1800’s. The initial visitors were comprised of explorers and missionaries. The most well-known missionaries were John Krapf in 1844 and Johan Rebman in 1846, both sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in England to evangelize the “dark African continent” (Kimenig & Luvallas, 2009, p.112) and civilize them through Western education (Bogonko 1992).

Events accelerated between 1895, when the British acquired Kenya as their protectorate, and 1920, when the country officially became a colony of Great Britain (Bogonko, 1992). During this period, more missionaries and mission agencies, including those from the United States, arrived, and so did traders, settlers, and administrators. By 1918, there were 16 mission agencies in the country led by CMS and the Roman Catholics (Bogonko, 1992). Aided by infrastructure developed by the colonial government, missionaries, traders, and settlers began to speedily

penetrate the deep interior of the country to fulfil their respective interests. Missionaries established mission stations that each had three components, including a church, a school and a hospital. In addition, they translated the Bible into Kiswahili and some of the local languages such as Kikuyu (Bogonko 1992; Kimengi & Lumallas, 2009).

The education provided was mostly aimed at literacy in an effort to evangelize, and very little emphasis was placed on teaching trade skills. Eventually, the imbalanced educational offerings led to dissent both by Africans and the colonialists. Africans needed their children to gain skills that would lead to employment in order to form a labor force for an expanding economy. Many natives felt that both the missionary education and other schools established for them by the colonial government were inadequate due to the fact that they devalued their culture (Bogonko, 1992). In the end, there were missionary schools, colonial schools, independent African Christian schools (breakaways from missionary schools), and other secular schools controlled by Local Native Councils (Bogonko, 1992; Kimengi & Lumallas, 2009 ).

The schools were mostly racially segregated, catering to Whites, Asians (who were brought by the British from their India Colony to provide skilled labor), and Africans. The colonial government established policies and guidelines for the schools, and the quality of education followed this descending order (Bogonko 1992; Kimengi & Lumallas, 2009). There are conflicting reports that indicate that the harshness of corporal punishment was administered in this same direction, with Africans bearing the brunt of it. What is clear, however, is that corporal punishment made a foothold in the country as a whole and infiltrated its institutions (Ocobock, 2012).

It is uncertain whether some aspects of corporal punishment existed in Kenya specifically and in African societies in general before colonization. However, there is clear documentation about its prevalence in Britain during that era (Ocobock, 2012). Indications are that most African societies leaned toward other, non-violent approaches before colonization (Lynch & Ross, 2010). However, once colonial and mission institutions were established, corporal punishment became the norm. Ocobock (2012) succinctly captures this change noting:

In Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, as Africans came into increasing contact with Europeans, the diversity of individuals and institutions laying claim to this form

of violence expanded. Colonial governments relied on corporal punishment to broadcast their authority, often through military barracks, schools, courts, and penal institutions...European settlers bruised houseboys and harvesters with steel-toed boots to instill a sense of station in Kenya's racial hierarchy. School teachers 'broke' pupils' backs to mold their minds (pg. 9, 29).

Since most missionaries were at least partly identified with colonial rule, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, they emulated European cultural and political imperialism (Fasholé-Luke, 1978). There was an intimate relationship between the colonists and the missionaries, although there was not a total alliance. Both parties shared common values and attempted to instill these mores into social, cultural, educational, and religious institutions. Over time, the use of corporal punishment was woven into the fabric of Kenyan life.

Kenya gained independence from the British in 1963. Unfortunately, the use of corporal punishment did not die out with the end of colonial rule. For example, growing up, in both educational and religious settings, the lead author was subjected to corporal punishment and, later, as a high school teacher, administered it. This autobiographical trajectory illustrates how the insidious dynamic has been passed on throughout generations; the abused become abusers. The Biblical justification for corporal punishment that predominated early missionary and colonial experience is still very strong. Because the Christian worldview is an integral part of Kenyan life, the church and its institutions have significantly influenced society by sanctioning it and justifying it Biblically. It is endemic and systemic. Although corporal punishment was banned in schools in 2010 by the Kenyan government and abolished as a form of judicial punishment in 2003 (Ocobock 2012), incidences continue to occur, particularly in the educational system, in significant and alarming ways (Ajowi & Simatwa, 2010; Archambault, 2009; Kindiki 2015; Mweru, 2010). In addition, Fakunmoju (2022) noted that a study completed in 2010 found incidences of corporal punishment were lowest in Sweden and highest in Kenya.

#### Christian Justification for Using Corporal Punishment

Having traced the roots of corporal punishment in contemporary Kenya to colonial and missionary influences, we now turn to looking at its justification by Christians as a primary

approach to disciplining children and adolescents in homes and schools. The Afrocentric religious and Christian worldview of Kenyans permeates all institutions within society, secular or otherwise (Mwiti, 2007). It is not uncommon for teachers in secular schools, for example, to invoke the Bible as their basis for using corporal punishment (Lansford et al., 2014). Those who are overtly Christian, even from different faith backgrounds, directly link their adoption of corporal punishment to biblical and church tradition mandates (Dutton & Madison, 2020; Huckel, 2016; Socolar et al., 2008). So, no matter their station in society, most Kenyans have a familiarization with general biblical references and regularly use them to support corporal punishment.

It is important to consider the justifications for corporal punishment that are associated with key figures in church history, including influential theologians like Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Due to the political and ecclesiastical challenges of their day, Augustine and Luther were often asked to address contemporary issues, and this included corporal punishment (Johnston, 2011). Interestingly enough, both men were punished very harshly and even severely as children and, as adults, advocated for the “judicious” and “loving” use of corporal punishment (Huckel, 2016; Johnston, 2011, p.14). Calvin, however, was much more liberal in his support of corporal punishment (Huckel, 2016).

Relying on key theologians, however, is not prudent without thoughtfully considering the influences of their own personal experiences, the sociopolitical and historical context of their writings, and the psychological effects of such punishment. Without taking the full context of Luther’s writings into account, for example, many fail to see that Luther advocated for forgiveness and reconciliation in the process of administering corporal punishment, if it had to be executed at all (Huckel, 2016). In addition, their authority within church tradition does not make them experts on all subjects, and there is a lack of understanding about how they might not have had the ability to incorporate or integrate psychological research and an understanding of human developmental processes into their theological positions.

It is necessary to examine how scripture is used to justify corporal punishment. There are many conservative Christians, especially Protestants, who are known to favor the corporal punishment of children and cite scriptures such as Exodus 34:6 – 7 as the basis for what they view as their biblical mandate (Danso et al., 1997; Ellison, 1996; Ellison et al., 1996). Other commonly used

scriptures used to support this form of punishment include Proverbs 13:24 and Proverbs 22:15. These two passages are particularly popular because they refer to the “rod.” In addition, Proverbs 23:13-14 goes further, urging parents not to withhold discipline from children. For many conservative Christians, using scripture in this manner, without incorporating context, engaging in exegetical rigor, or integrating information from other human disciplines, is based upon three major tenants. First, this position is based on the belief that the Bible should be literally interpreted as the inerrant word of God. Second, there is a strong conviction that human nature is fundamentally sinful and corrupt. Finally, many conservatives believe that anyone who violates God’s word should be punished (Ellison, 1996).

Some argue that punishment is a central aspect of Christian theology (Socolar et al., 2008). Since all humans are descendants of Adam and Eve, it is thought that we are predisposed to willful and selfish rebellion to authority, necessitating some means of imposing proper discipline to submit to God. A study on Protestant fundamentalism and attitudes toward corporal punishment indicate that Biblical literalness has the strongest direct effect of all independent variables examined on support for corporal punishment (Grasmick et al., 1991). This same study found that the correlation between Biblical literalness and corporal punishment is greater than the correlation between variables measuring religiosity and a punitive image of God. Corporal punishment, then, is seen as inculcating moral values and training children to submit to human and divine authorities. Furthermore, it is even potentially seen as a sign that the parent has love and affection for the child (Ellison, 1996). Research by Dutton and Madison (2020) found that conservative Christians practice corporal punishment more often than individuals who are considered to be non-religious. Accordingly, it serves the purpose of demonstrating to others what behaviors are unacceptable and provides reinforcement against group deviant behavior.

Although colonialism as a formal practice ended, the long-term effects of its presence linger in society as a whole, including the Church and its institutions. Aspects of neo-colonialism in present day Kenya include a proclivity to rely on prominent figures from the West to dictate or affirm cultural practices. For example, James Dobson, a leading evangelical voice who also happens to have been trained as a clinical psychologist, has influenced generations of parents across the globe. His writings, such as in the book *Dare to Discipline* (1981), endorse at least

some form of corporal punishment, and there are many Christians in Kenya who justify the use of corporal punishment for this very reason.

### Psychological Research on Corporal Punishment

It is clear from many studies that corporal punishment is generally ineffective and has many harmful effects (Ellison 1996; Petts & Kysar-Moon, 2012). Laible et al. (2020) emphasized that many researchers have found corporal punishment of any form to have contributed to children developing mental health difficulties as well as externalizing (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016) and internalizing problems. As an example, Wang and Liu (2018) concluded that there is a direct link between corporal punishment and externalizing behaviors (Kitano et al, 2018), and such behaviors enacted by children (e.g., aggression and delinquency) lead to peer victimization, substance use, psychiatric symptoms, and low academic performance. Additional negative outcomes include increased aggression, negative developmental trajectories, damaged self-esteem, powerlessness, physical injury and, in certain cases, death (Petts & Kysar-Moon, 2012; Shelley, 2013).

Le and Nguyen (2019) emphasized that corporal punishment hinders childhood development. Specifically, it can lead to deficits in social skills and cognitive abilities, and thwart academic achievement. In addition, these authors found that students subjected to corporal punishment also hinder their classmates' learning by lowering student achievement, instilling negativity within a classroom setting, and increasing the prevalence of bullies. Le and Nguyen (2019) highlighted that this is an important issue to address because their research shows the social cost of such punitive practices and not just the personal cost faced by the children being physically disciplined.

Increasingly, global studies are confirming research conducted in the West, illustrating the association between corporal punishment and physical aggression, verbal aggression, fighting and bullying, and antisocial behaviors (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). Dutton and Madison (2020) also noted its links to antisocial behavior and criminality. It is important to note that the consequences of corporal punishment appear to be both long-term and short-term and vary in intensity, which is controlled by the severity of the punishment. For example, Dutton and Madison (2020) looked at several studies where it was concluded that spanking produced more

negative effects if the punishment was overly severe. On the other hand, these authors also highlighted literature that suggested corporal punishment can result in positive outcomes depending on the parenting style and structure. However, this research did not speak to corporal punishment enacted within a school setting and it was noted that severe corporal punishment is more likely to lead to adverse effects. Adedigba (2020) looked at corporal punishment in a school setting and found that schools refrained from using corporal punishment due to its negative effects on student attendance.

A final point to be made here regarding psychological impact is the notion that corporal punishment damages the relationship between a parent and child (Laible et al., 2020). The pain associated with the physical discipline of corporal punishment evokes negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, and distress) in children. Children can also perceive corporal punishment as unwarranted, which can lead to the child interacting less with the parent over time and/or feeling rejected. This can create a cyclical effect in which a parent has to resort to increasingly harsher punishment because of the child's unwillingness to trust the parent's judgement or social constructs. The child is more likely to be distrustful of the parent because of harboring negative feelings about their experience of physical punishment. However, there is a lack of research to support a clear link between the quality of parent-child relationships and corporal punishment (i.e., that physical punishment damages the relationship). Despite the lack of ample research, Laible et al., (2020) utilized a longitudinal approach and the findings supported the assertion that using corporal punishment is associated with a decline in the quality of parent-child interactions over time.

Due to the negative outcomes noted above and the potentially extremely serious consequences of corporal punishment, resulting in some cases in death, strong calls have been made to disregard cultural differences and end corporal punishment across the globe. Laible et al. (2020) documented that many researchers have found a connection between corporal punishment and negative child and adult outcomes regardless of socioeconomic status and family functioning, which highlights the massive effects of corporal punishment across multiple demographics. Furthermore, countries that have legally banned corporal punishment are associated with less youth violence, and one study completed in Germany found decreased rates of domestic violence as a result of prohibiting corporal punishment (Fakunmoju, 2022). Thus, numerous associations

related to psychology and pediatrics have rallied against the use of physical punishment with children. Despite this, it is disturbing to note that other studies continue to find that theologically conservative parents still tend to favor this mode of discipline (Ellison et al., 1996). Conservative culture continues to use and endorse this method of discipline even after studies, including a meta-analytic study, found that one of the harmful effects of corporal punishment was a failure to internalize the morals of the group (Fakunmoju, 2022; Gershoff, 2002; Laible et al., 2020).

As of 2020, corporal punishment was banned in 59 countries (Fakunmoju, 2022), including majority of Europe (Dutton & Madison, 2020), Australia, Canada, and South Africa (Cheruvath & Tripathi, 2015). However, it is still practiced in many of these countries, despite the aversive effects, because it is socially acceptable. Le and Nguyen (2019) noted that it is an accustomed practice in developing nations and despite it being banned in Indian schools, corporal punishment is still utilized by teachers and remains prevalent in Asia, Africa, and the United States (Cheruvath & Tripathi, 2015). Fakunmoju (2022) further emphasized that corporal punishment remains the default method for discipline. In other words, although there is an enormous amount of data that underscores the negative effects of corporal punishment, there remains a disconnect between knowledge and practice in many countries and communities.

#### Implications and A Faith Integration Intervention Driven Model of Discipline

We have tried to show that there is an urgent need to address the widespread use and cultural acceptance of corporal punishment rooted in colonial and missionary legacies. We would like to end by proposing a faith integration driven intervention model to address this matter. As discussed at length in this paper and demonstrated by the research (Lansford et al., 2005), the use of corporal punishment in Kenya is very high and is systemically embedded within many aspects of the culture. Equally strong are peoples' convictions about its effectiveness and their belief in a biblical support for it. Fortunately, Kenyan society lends itself well to faith integration because of its collectivistic nature and large Christian presence (Barsby, 2008). These interventions can be designed to target educational, religious, and societal institutions collectively or systematically.

The educational system is a natural place to begin implementing interventions because it is the one place where this scourge is most visible. Using a sample of 355 teachers, parents, and students, Kindiki (2015) investigated the awareness of the ban on corporal punishment by the Kenyan government in secondary schools. He found that 86% of the participants knew about the ban (80% students, 100% teachers, and 94% parents). Kindiki also found that even though the participants knew about the ban, they still used and believed in corporal punishment, using the scriptures to justify it. Even Cheruvalath and Tripathi (2015) found in their research conducted in India that teachers continue to perceive corporal punishment as an effective technique to control for indiscipline. As psychologists, we can engage in interventions focused on educating parents, students, and teachers about harmful impacts of the practice, as well suggesting and teaching alternative methods of discipline. We can further incorporate the use of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics to shed light on misquoted and misused scriptures. It would be helpful for these interventions to be done both at the local school level and at a national level, using mass media.

In religious institutions, similar strategies can be adopted, but the focus at first would be on disseminating information on the accurate translation of biblical passages. Following this, general knowledge on the harmful effects of corporal punishment could be incorporated. Alongside these two elements, education on alternative methods of discipline would be provided. It would also be important to integrate contemporary research into the intervention model. For example, Christians were found to be more likely to have less favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment if the nationwide ban was linked to reducing child abuse (Romano & Norian, 2013). In other studies, emphasizing how corporal punishment created a distorted relational image of God was found to be effective means of reducing its use, as was general education in the church (Grasmick et al., 1991; Shelley, 2013).

In society at large, strategic approaches that make cultural sense are desired. Because of the colonial and imperialistic dimensions of this problem, many in Kenya are cautious about interventions proposed by foreigners, especially from the west. An international study found that cultural models that address local values and integrate structural constraints, discouraging the use of cruel means of discipline, were more effective (Lynch & Ross, 2010). Furthermore, Fakunmoju (2022) advocated for practitioners and advocates of child protection to share

knowledge about the adverse effects of corporal punishment and discredit the perceived notion that it is a necessity for child rearing.

Incorporating sensitivity to social justice issues has also been found to be helpful when addressing the issue of corporal punishment. As an example, poverty and being an HIV/AIDS orphan are associated with higher levels of abuse and use of corporal punishment (Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007; Oburu & Palmërus, 2003). Corporal punishment, then, is a complex, multidimensional problem. Fostering educational endeavors within societal institutions that provide information on the factors associated with corporal punishment and using a multi-prong systemic approach to address the various interlocking components is key. Engaging in social justice practices creates a common goal and emphasizes the need to address this problem collectively. Thus, systemic approaches to reduce levels of poverty and address the HIV/AIDS pandemic must simultaneously be implemented in order to truly address this problem.

## **Discussion**

The prevention and interventions related to childhood maltreatment is one of the most pressing public health issue in the world. Adverse environments and maltreatment during childhood has strong implications on long-term health and predicts poor mental health (Kitano et al, 2018). Corporal punishment is one example of this.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, it is clear how strong and intergenerational the scourge of corporal punishment is in Kenya, and the havoc it wreaks today more than 100 years after colonization and 150 years since European missionaries set foot on her soil. It does not matter that Kenya has now been an independent country for almost 54 years, and that the current approach to missions is much less imperialistic. A strong Christian worldview in Kenyan institutions creates an opening where faith integration interventions informed by strong research and intervention models from clinical psychology have strong potential for success. Doing nothing is not an option. Too many voices are crying, and calling for help, and we have some answers.

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