

PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT EXPLORED: WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK?

BY

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## Abstract

A considerable body of knowledge has emerged over recent decades revealing the developmental outcomes associated with the physical punishment of children. However, researchers have only just begun to investigate what children think about physical punishment. The present study explored children's assessments of parents' motives for using physical punishment, as well as its fairness, justness and outcomes. The findings indicate that while children think physical punishment can be effective, they do not think it is the best way to teach children or that it is necessary in order for them to learn. They also think it has negative emotional consequences for children and parents and that it is morally wrong. Surprisingly, there were few indications that children's thinking about these dimensions changes with age. These findings have implications for parent education and raise interesting questions for future research.

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## Chapter 1

*Introduction*

A considerable body of knowledge has emerged over recent decades revealing the developmental outcomes associated with the physical punishment of children. For example, in a meta-analysis of 88 studies, Gershoff (2002) found that physical punishment is consistently associated with higher levels of aggression and anti-social behaviour, lower levels of moral internalization, and a greater likelihood of mental health problems in children. This finding is particularly telling because the studies included represent a range of reporters, measures of corporal punishment, reference periods, and research designs. Since the publication of this landmark study in 2002, several additional studies have been published that provide further evidence that physical punishment predicts negative developmental outcomes (de Zoysa, Newcombe & Rajakapase, 2005; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Lansford et al., 2005; Rodriguez, 2003).

But what accounts for these relationships? Social learning theorists would suggest that modelling is a likely factor in the relationship between physical punishment and children's aggression – simply witnessing a powerful model responding aggressively to conflict will increase the likelihood of the child responding aggressively to a later conflict (Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). But this approach is not adequate to explain why physical punishment predicts other forms of antisocial behaviour, such as delinquency (Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Haapasalo & Pokela, 1999) and internalizing difficulties, such as depression and anxiety (MacMillan, Boyle, Wong, Duku, Fleming, & Walsh, 1999). It is also inadequate to explain why physical punishment is associated

with poorer parent-child relationships (Coyl, Roggman, & Newland, 2002; Crockenberg, 1987).

The consistency of findings demonstrating that physical punishment has a range of negative outcomes for children suggests that the impact of physical punishment is more complex than simple learning of an aggressive response to conflict. It suggests that the impact of physical punishment may take place at the level of cognitive and affective processing of the experience, which might then be manifested later in externalizing and/or internalizing behaviours.

While we know a great deal about adults' attitudes toward and beliefs about physical punishment (Durrant, 1996; Flynn, 1996; Straus, 1994), very little is known about how children themselves think and feel about the experience. If it is the case that physical punishment is not merely modelled, but processed at a cognitive and emotional level, then an understanding of these processes is critical to an understanding of physical punishment's impact. It may only be through understanding the inner experiences of children themselves that we will come to understand why physical punishment is a risk factor in their development.

The present study begins with a review of literature examining children's perceptions of physical punishment. Following a discussion of the limitations of the present body of literature, which is scant, methods for the current study are presented. In short, the present study examines developmental patterns in cognition, moral reasoning, and affect by asking children ages 3 to 5 and 8 to 10 about their perceptions of physical punishment in the context of a vignette. These children were recruited through Winnipeg day cares and also by word of mouth. With parental and child consent, interviews took

place at the day care centre or alternate location of the parent's choice. Differences in children's perceptions of parental motive, fairness of physical punishment, expectations for children's learning from physical punishment, and feelings following physical punishment were assessed. This study uses the idea of children's "inner logic" (Singer, Doornenbal, & Okma, 2004) and tests hypotheses based in cognitive developmental theory.

#### *Current Knowledge about Children's Perspectives on Physical Punishment*

Children's thinking about physical punishment is a topic that has not received much research attention. It is revealing that, of the 88 studies examined by Gershoff (2002) in her meta-analysis, only four published studies solicited children's perspectives. Three of these four studies (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Engfer & Schneewind, 1982; Frick, Christian, & Wootton, 1999) obtained children's reports of how often they were physically punished, but did not examine children's thoughts and feelings about their physical punishment experiences. The fourth study examined abused and non-abused children's perceptions of their parental treatment (Herzberger, Potts, & Dillon, 1981). In this study, "abuse" was defined as treatment that left the child badly bruised, or more seriously injured, including lacerations, burns, or broken bones. Individual structured interviews were conducted with residents of a group home for boys aged 8 to 14 with behavioural and emotional problems. Overall, the abused children had more negative perceptions of their parents (abusers) than the non-abused children. They were more afraid of their mothers, felt more emotionally neglected, and also felt responsible for and deserving of their abuse (Herzberger et al., 1981). These findings suggest that children do process their physical punishment

experiences cognitively and emotionally and provide some evidence to speculate that their thoughts and feelings might mediate the negative outcomes associated with physical punishment. However, the sample included only boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties, so conclusions about children in the general population cannot be drawn from this study.

In more recent years, several qualitative studies have been conducted in which children in the general population have been interviewed about their thoughts and feelings about physical punishment (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Cutting, 2001; Dobbs, 2002; Dobbs, 2005; Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006; Horgan, 2002; Willow & Hyder, 1998). These studies have utilized both focus groups (Dobbs, 2002, 2005, 2006) and group discussions (Willow & Hyder, 1998). The findings of these studies provide further evidence that children process the experience of physical punishment cognitively and affectively – and that their thoughts and feelings tend to be quite negative. For example, children report that spanking hurts, both physically and emotionally, and that it is wrong. In addition, children associate spanking with angry parents and do not think it is always effective (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Dobbs, 2002; Horgan, 2002; Willow & Hyder, 1998).

While these studies constitute a major step forward in understanding children's inner experiences of physical punishment, they do not provide a systematic examination of children's processing of the experience or of developmental patterns in children's thoughts and emotions. Many are limited in their utility because they are atheoretical and descriptive in nature. More rigorous evaluation of children's perceptions of specific dimensions of physical punishment is needed. In particular, what do children think about

parent's intent in using physical punishment? How do they integrate it into their moral schemas of justice and fairness? How do they respond emotionally to the experience? Do their cognitive and moral judgments and their affective responses follow a developmental trajectory?

*Cognitive-Developmental Theory and Children's Understanding of Physical Punishment*

Cognitive-developmental theory provides a useful framework for the study of children's beliefs, moral judgments, and affect. From this perspective, cognitive development underlies children's moral reasoning and understanding of emotions. The developmental trajectory of cognition reflects an ongoing decline in egocentrism – a process that gradually leads to the ability to reason about abstract concepts, consider multiple dimensions of a situation, and take others' perspectives. Young children are thought to be highly egocentric, a state reflected in their relative lack of schematic differentiation. They tend to view situations in a non-discriminating way and have difficulty taking the perspective of another person. As their egocentrism declines, they become increasingly able to apply more highly differentiated schemas to their understanding of social situations and to understand others' points of view.

According to this theoretical approach, children's moral development follows the same trajectory as their cognition, from a stage characterized by heteronomy (a non-discriminating rule-based approach to moral issues with a focus on rewards and punishments meted out by adults) to one characterized by autonomy (a more complex justice-based approach which involves greater understanding of the origins, functions, and aims of rules) (Piaget, 1932). As a result, children become increasingly discriminating in their reasoning about justice, fairness, punishment, and reward. With

development, they become increasingly able to consider multiple and conflicting dimensions of a situation, understand multiple points of view, and consider others' motivations in making moral judgments.

Cognitive-developmental theory also holds that children's ability to recognize and articulate their own and others' emotions will follow a similar pathway. As they grow older, children become increasingly competent in not only understanding and expressing their own emotional responses, but also in understanding the emotions of others (Brown & Dunn, 1996; Denham et al., 2002). As their egocentrism declines, they also gradually come to understand that they and others can experience two emotions simultaneously (Harris, 1989) and that others' emotional responses to a given situation may differ from their own.

On the basis of this theoretical framework, one could speculate that children's reasoning about, and emotional responses to, physical punishment follow a developmental path reflecting their declining egocentrism and increasingly differentiated and abstract schemas. Specifically, it could be predicted that, compared to older children, younger children are more likely to view physical punishment as fair, and that their ability to articulate their emotional responses to it is more limited. While few studies on children's views of physical punishment have been conducted at all, even fewer have taken a developmental approach. However, the findings of this limited body of research can be useful in generating hypotheses about the developmental trajectory of children's understanding of this experience. These findings will be presented in the following sections.

*Children's Cognitive Judgments of Physical Punishment*

*Acceptability of physical punishment.* The limited research that has been conducted on children's cognitive judgments of physical punishment has largely focused on their views of its acceptability. The findings tend to support the cognitive-developmental perspective; younger children are more accepting of physical punishment than older children (Catron & Masters, 1993; Haviland, 1979; Sorbring, Deater-Deckard, & Palmerus, 2005). That is, younger children tend to have more favourable attitudes toward physical punishment in general and they tend to view it as acceptable for a wider range of transgressions than do older children. For example, Sorbring et al. (2005) found that, among 9- to 12-year-olds, favourability ratings of physical punishment decreased with age. While approximately half of these children were favourable toward physical punishment, it was viewed less favourably than reasoning across the sample.

There is some evidence that the acceptability of physical punishment may vary by culture. For example, Carlson (1986) found that pre-adolescents in the US are highly unlikely to recommend physical punishment as a response to misbehaviour. De Zoysa et al. (2005), on the other hand, found that 99% of 12-year-old Sri Lankan children are at least somewhat favourable to physical punishment and that their views did not differ by age.

While measures of the acceptability of physical punishment provide useful information on children's perspectives, they are limited in their ability to fully describe children's thinking in this area. The concept of acceptability implies that children think about physical punishment in a uni-dimensional way – it is either acceptable or unacceptable. In reality, however, these judgments are likely more complex than this.

For example, children's assessments of the acceptability of physical punishment may reflect their understanding of the reasons for children's behavioural transgressions, the motivations of parents when they respond, the nature of the child's transgression, and their understandings of morality, fairness, and justness. To date, children's understanding of actors' motives in punishment situations has not been addressed in research. Some researchers, however, have examined children's perspectives on the moral dimensions of punishment.

### *Children's Moral Judgments of Physical Punishment*

Children draw distinctions between moral and other types of transgressions from a young age (Ast, 1996; Catron & Masters, 1993; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985; Tisak & Turiel, 1984; Turiel, 1983; Weston & Turiel, 1980). Moral transgressions are those behaviours that put the welfare of others at risk, either physically or psychologically. This domain includes acts such as hitting, stealing, or damaging property. In contrast, prudential violations do not pose a risk of harm to others, but only to oneself, such as touching a hot stove, running into the street, or playing with matches. A third category of transgressions is social conventional. These are rule-based, context specific, and personal, such as hairstyle and choice of friends.

It appears that preschool age children rate prudential transgressions as most serious, followed by moral transgressions and then social convention transgressions (Ast, 1999; Catron & Masters, 1993). Among older children, on the other hand, moral transgressions are judged as most serious of the three types (Catron & Masters, 1993). Younger children typically rate both moral and prudential transgressions as more serious than do older children (Catron & Masters, 1993).

The development of children's beliefs about the acceptability of physical punishment appears to reflect the development of their perceptions of the seriousness of different types of transgressions. For example, Catron and Masters (1993) found that 4- and 5-year-olds tend to consider physical punishment acceptable regardless of the transgression or the agent of punishment, while 11- and 12-year-olds are more discriminating in their acceptance of physical punishment. Younger children rated maternal spanking as more acceptable for social convention transgressions than did older children. Older children rated corporal punishment for prudential and moral transgressions as more acceptable than social convention transgressions, regardless of the agent.

*Fairness of physical punishment.* The few studies that have examined children's thinking about the fairness of punishment in general have found that school-aged children consider proof of guilt to be an important dimension of punishment's fairness; parental punishment administered without proof of the child's guilt is believed to be unfair (Gold, Darley, Hilton, & Zanna, 1984). Interestingly, school-aged children have been found to perceive undeserved reward to be more unfair than undeserved punishment (Evans, Galyer, & Smith, 2001).

Barnett, Quackenbush, and Sinisi (1996) conducted a study that took into account the contribution of fairness judgments to individuals' favourability ratings. In this study, ratings of fairness were combined with ratings of parental sensitivity to form a favourability score. Parents using induction (e.g. reasoning) were evaluated more favourably than parents using power assertion. Consistent with findings demonstrating that younger children view power assertion (such as physical punishment) more

favourably than older children, the second graders in this study rated love withdrawal more favourably and induction less favourably than sixth graders, high school students, and undergraduate students, whose responses did not differ significantly from each other.

Little is known about children's conceptions of the fairness of physical punishment, specifically. Some findings suggest that young children are likely to perceive all transgressions as more deserving of physical punishment than do older children, and to believe that prudential transgressions deserve more severe punishment than moral ones (Catron & Masters, 1993). Other findings, on the other hand, suggest that young children view moral transgressions as more deserving of punishment than conventional transgressions (Smetana, 1981; Wolfe, Katell, & Drabman, 1982).

Only one study has examined the dimension of justness in children's reasoning about physical punishment. Rohner, Bourque, and Elordi (1996) defined perceptions of justness as the sum of children's ratings of fairness and deservedness. They found that 58% of children aged 8-18 viewed physical punishment as more unjust than just. They did not, however, provide analyses of age differences in these findings.

Most definitions of justness equate it with more than fairness or equity; they include the notion of "rightness". An unjust act cannot ever be fair because it is wrongful. Nucci and Turiel's (1993) work on children's beliefs about the moral rightness of various acts raises interesting questions about children's beliefs about the moral rightness of physical punishment. They asked groups of children to judge the rightness of various acts under two conditions: 1) that the child's main religious text (e.g., Bible, Koran, Torah) rules it permissible, and 2) that the text rules it impermissible. Their findings indicate that children classify acts into moral and conventional categories.

Moral acts, such as stealing and killing, are considered wrong under both conditions, while conventional acts, such as how one dresses, are considered wrong only under the second condition. It appears that acts judged by children to transgress moral rules cannot be redefined as rightful simply by a change in the rules.

This conceptualization of morality has not been applied to children's reasoning about the justness of physical punishment. Nucci and Turiel's findings raise the question of whether children place physical punishment into the moral category or into the conventional category of acts. If they consider it to be in the moral category, it would be defined as absolutely right or absolutely wrong regardless of what religious texts or laws permit. However, if they consider it to be in the conventional category, it would be defined as right or wrong in light of what religious texts or laws permit. No study to date has addressed children's reasoning about the justness of physical punishment. Therefore, we do not know whether they consider it to be a moral absolute (right or wrong) or a social convention that could be introduced or eliminated as laws change.

#### *Children's Perceptions of Outcomes of Physical Punishment*

Another dimension of children's reasoning about punishment is their beliefs about its outcomes. Do they believe that it achieves positive effects? Chilamkurti and Milner (1993) asked children aged 6 to 10 to rate the likelihood of their own and other children's compliance following discipline (general categories of power assertion, induction, and love withdrawal) for three types of transgressions. They rated themselves as more likely to comply after discipline for moral transgressions than for personal or social conventional transgressions. This rating did not differ by type of discipline used. When referring to other children, they thought compliance would be more likely following

power assertive techniques than love withdrawal or induction, and following moral transgressions than conventional and personal transgressions (Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993).

Findings of the few studies examining children's beliefs about the effectiveness of physical punishment specifically indicate that children generally believe that it is ineffective. For example, Ritchie, Pain, and Tourelle (1980) found that only one quarter of the boys and one third of the girls in their sample of 110 twelve- and thirteen- year olds thought that physical punishment was effective in improving behaviour. In a study of their beliefs about school corporal punishment, Grade 6 students rated it as ineffective in more than half of the incidents when it was used (Tulley & Chiu, 1998). Of four parental responses to conflict (time-out, withdrawal of privileges, reasoning, and spanking), 6- to 10-year-olds consider spanking to be the least effective in teaching children right from wrong, in both the short term and the long term (Vittrup & Holden, 2005).

Qualitative studies have revealed similar findings (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Dobbs, 2002; Horgan, 2002; Willow & Hyder, 1998). For example, Crowley & Vulliamy (2002) found some children aged 5 to 10 thought smacking could worsen a child's behaviour.

Therefore, most studies have found that children tend to believe that physical punishment is ineffective in teaching them what adults want them to learn. A question that has not been asked, however, is what do children think the outcomes of physical punishment are? Do they think, for example, that they learn that hitting is an acceptable response to conflict? Do they think physical punishment teaches them how to handle

their own frustration? This meta-cognitive approach to understanding children's beliefs about physical punishment has not been addressed in the literature.

### *Children's Emotional Responses to Physical Punishment*

Virtually all of the research on children's views of physical punishment has focused on their cognitive assessments of it. Our understanding of children's processing of this experience is severely constrained by the almost complete absence of data on their affective responses to it or their ability to articulate those responses. The data that do exist suggest that children's emotional expression with regard to parental actions follows the pattern predicted by cognitive-developmental theory. For example, preschoolers have difficulty gauging emotions and putting words to their emotional responses to disciplinary acts (Buck, Vittrup, & Holden, in press)

The few studies that have addressed children's emotional responses to physical punishment specifically have been largely descriptive and qualitative in nature (e.g., Willow & Hyder, 1998). These studies have found that children consider physical punishment ineffective, wrong, and dangerous. This qualitative research has shown children often respond to "how does a smack feel?" with the phrase "it hurts" (Willow & Hyder, 1998).

A recent study by Dobbs (2005) presents some of the first quantitative data on children's feelings about physical punishment. These findings reveal a developmental pattern progressing from a focus on concrete (physical) outcomes to expression of abstract (emotional) ones. Specifically, when asked how it feels to be smacked, 5- to 7-year-olds reported on physical feelings more than emotional ones (e.g., "It hurts you all over."), whereas 12- to 14-year-olds focused more on emotional than physical pain (e.g.,

“You feel real upset because they are hurting you and you love them so much and then all of a sudden they hit you and hurt you and you feel like as though they don’t care about you because they are hurting you.”). Children aged 9 to 11 years focused equally on the physical and emotional effects. In this study, 20% of 5- to 7- year-olds, 60% of 9- to 11- year-olds, and 65% of 12- to 14-year-olds reported feelings of sadness and rejection following physical punishment (Dobbs, 2005).

While this study has begun to shed light on children’s emotional responses, it did not address the interplay between emotion and cognition. We still do not know how children’s emotional responses relate to their beliefs, or what they think about parental intent in the administration of physical punishment. We do not know whether empathy plays a role in children’s acceptance or rejection of physical punishment. Their thoughts about its outcome, fairness, and so on may reflect their ability to empathize with the child and/or the parent in a given situation. As children’s egocentrism declines and their social perspective-taking ability increases, their capacity for empathy also grows. The three domains of cognition, morality, and emotion may develop interactively and, together, account for some of the behavioural outcomes associated with physical punishment.

#### *Summary of the Research Findings on Children’s Perceptions of Physical Punishment*

Children's perceptions of physical punishment are just beginning to be the focus of empirical research. Investigations have uncovered developmental differences in the way children process physical punishment cognitively, affectively, and morally. However, these variables tend to be studied in a limited way. We know that cognition, affect, and moral judgment are highly interrelated. Yet, for the most part, research has examined each dimension in isolation from the others. For example, while Catron and

Masters (1993) looked at several dimensions of cognition, they did not address affective or moral dimensions of children's processing. The present study addresses this limitation and adds to the body of literature on the development of children's perceptions of physical punishment in three ways. First, this study is the first to examine the development of multiple components of children's judgments, namely cognitive, affective, and moral, within the same sample. Second, the development of each of these components is examined in relation to the type of transgression committed. Third, the development of children's affective processing of physical punishment is investigated using a structured, standardized, and quantitative approach to build on the findings of qualitative research in this area.

#### *A Theoretical Framework for the Present Study*

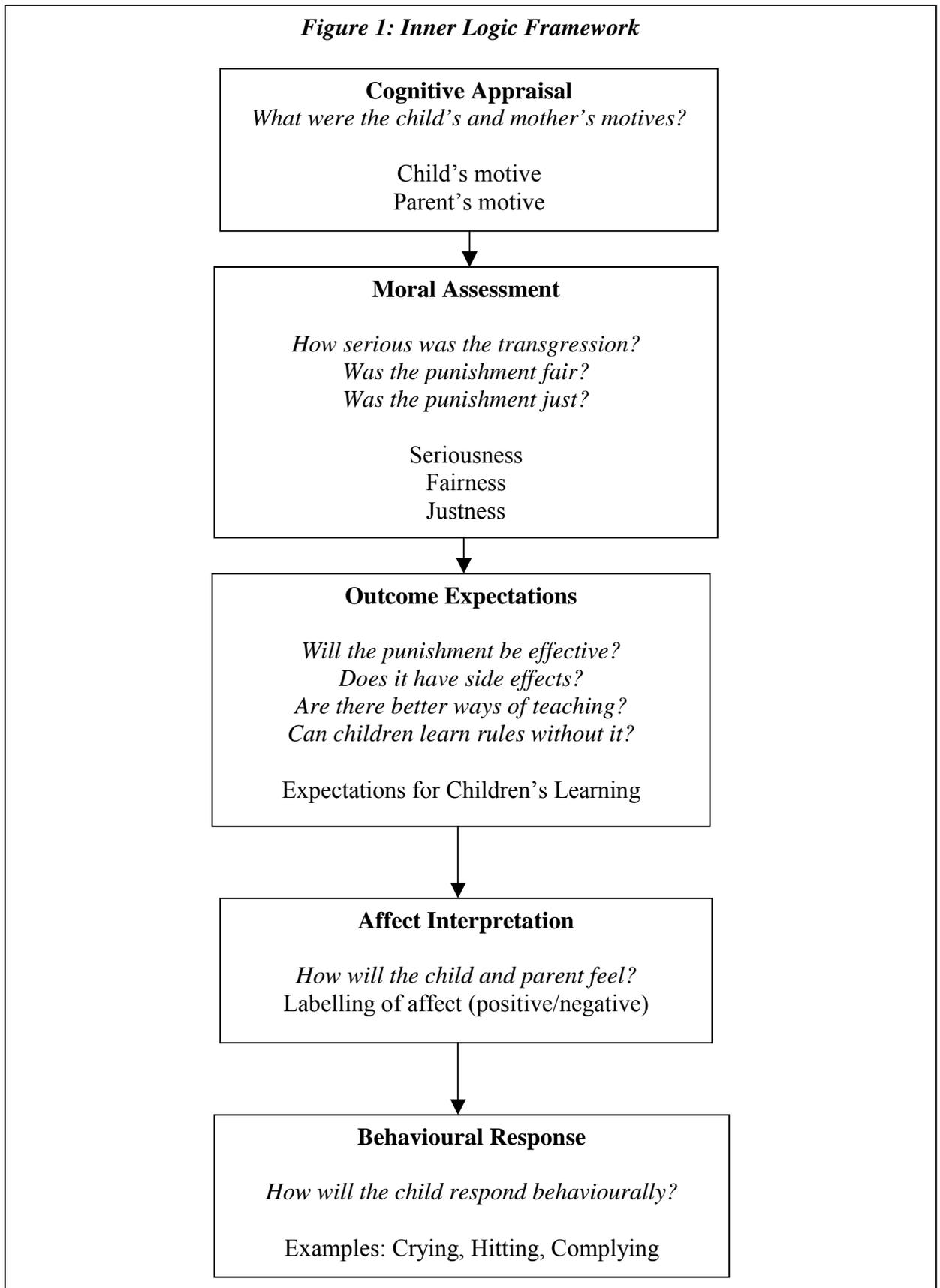
The developmental pathway proposed by cognitive-developmental theory (Piaget, 1932), is characterized by an ongoing decline in egocentrism. As the diversity of children's experiences increases, so does their ability to construct increasingly complex ways of understanding others' perspectives and motivations, as well as reflecting on their own. This developmental pattern is reflected in ongoing changes in their thoughts about social interactions (Garvey & Hogan, 1988; Schmied & Tietze, 1980), relationships (Nucci, 2004), and morality (Killen & Nucci, 1995; Nucci, 2004; Tang & Fang, 1996). From this perspective, behaviour and emotion are reflections of understanding.

Cognitive developmental theory, then, assumes that cognition is the driving force behind all developmental change. While this approach is useful in explaining the developmental patterns found in children's reasoning about physical punishment, it assumes a linearity that may not capture the reality of children's thinking. It may be the

case that children's affective responses to physical punishment drive their cognition, rather than the reverse. For example, as children become increasingly able to identify and articulate their emotions, they may increasingly interpret their affect as indications of the fairness and effectiveness of their parents' actions. Singer et al. (2004) have begun to develop this idea of bi-directional or simultaneous processing. They have proposed the concept of "cognitive-affective structures," which integrate cognition (appraisals, expectations, beliefs), motivation (needs, interests, goals, emotional actions), affect (physiological arousal and feeling), and action (social and motor responses) – and that are constructed on the basis of past experiences. They also propose that these structures are made visible in the children's "inner logic" – the associations the child constructs among his or her actions, goals, interests, emotions, and emotion regulation. They suggest that children's behaviour reflects their inner logic.

Therefore, the diversity in behavioural outcomes associated with physical punishment (Gershoff, 2002) may reflect diversity in children's inner logic regarding the experience. It could be proposed that, on the basis of their experiences, children construct an understanding of physical punishment that integrates cognition, motivation, affect, and action. That is, they appraise the parent's motive, as well as their own, make assessments of fairness and morality, form a goal and an expectation for the interaction, interpret the meaning of their physiological arousal and their verbal and motor responses to it, and regulate those responses in light of their beliefs, expectations, and goals (See Figure 1). A theoretical framework that combines notions of cognition, morality, and emotion has not formed the basis of any published research on the development of

**Figure 1: Inner Logic Framework**



children's understanding of physical punishment. Ultimately, such knowledge could be critical to understanding why physical punishment predisposes some children to externalizing difficulties, such as aggression and delinquency, and other children to internalizing difficulties, such as anxiety and depression. In the present study, a step was taken toward this understanding by investigating developmental patterns in four components of children's processing of physical punishment.

#### *Purpose of the Present Study*

An understanding of the contributions that children's cognitive, moral, and affective processing may make to the behavioural outcomes of physical punishment will require a series of research steps. First, unified *measures* of cognition, moral reasoning, and affect must be developed within a single study. Second, *developmental patterns* in cognition, moral reasoning and affect must be examined. Third, the *interrelationships* among these three components of children's processing must be assessed developmentally to determine whether they constitute cognitive-affective structures. Fourth, the contribution of children's inner logic to the variation in *behavioural outcomes* must be uncovered.

The present study focuses on the first two of these research steps. That is, unified measures of children's cognitive, moral, and affective processing of physical punishment were developed. Second, children's responses to these measures were examined at two developmental stages. The third and fourth steps represent interesting avenues for research; however, these steps were not taken in the present study for feasibility reasons. It is expected that the findings that emerge from the present study will be useful in future studies investigating the interrelationships among the cognitive, moral, and affective

components of children's processing, as well as the contributions of children's inner logic to the behavioural outcomes of physical punishment.

*Definitions of Terms*

The variables to be examined in the present study have been selected to represent the first four components of the inner logic model (Singer et al., 2004).

*Cognitive appraisal.* Previous studies have generally equated children's cognitive appraisals of physical punishment with their beliefs about its overall acceptability (Catron & Masters, 1993; Haviland, 1979; Sorbring et al., 2005). This approach may be overly simplistic, obscuring important dimensions of children's processing that precede their evaluations of acceptability, such as their beliefs about the motives that underlie children's behavioural transgressions and parents' responses to those transgressions. According to the inner logic model (Singer et al., 2004), these motivational attributions are fundamental to children's processing of social events. In the present study, children's beliefs about these motives constitute the measures of their cognitive appraisals of the situation.

*Moral assessment.* The definition of children's moral assessments applied in the present study is based on three key research findings. First, children's reasoning about punishment appears to be related to the type of transgression committed (Catron & Masters, 1993). Therefore, in the present study, children's cognitive and moral reasoning about two types of transgressions – moral and prudential – were assessed. Second, children's moral judgments about punishment may reflect their evaluations of a transgressions' seriousness (Catron & Masters, 1993). Therefore, children's evaluations of the seriousness of moral and prudential transgressions were assessed. Third, morality

is most often defined as judgments of fairness or equity (Barnett et al., 1996, Catron & Masters, 1993; Gold et al., 1984). Therefore, children's judgments of the fairness of physical punishment in response to moral and prudential transgressions were assessed.

Less frequently, measures of moral reasoning about punishment have included the concept of justness, or "rightfulness" of an act. In the present study, children's notions of the justness of punishment for moral and prudential transgressions were examined to add to our understanding of children's moral reasoning about this issue. Specifically, children's evaluations of the fairness and rightfulness of physical punishment were assessed.

*Outcome expectations.* Children's expectations for the outcome of social interactions have been identified as a key component of their inner logic (Singer et al., 2004). In previous studies, children's outcome expectations for physical punishment have generally been defined as their beliefs about its effectiveness. In the present study, children's beliefs about physical punishment's effectiveness were measured in four ways: 1) whether they believe it is effective in teaching children moral and prudential rules, 2) what they believe its secondary effects are (what else is learned from physical punishment, such as compliance, or that hitting is acceptable), 3) whether there are more effective ways to teach children moral and prudential rules, and 4) whether they believe that children can learn to follow moral and prudential rules without it.

*Affect interpretation.* According to the inner logic model, individuals attempt to interpret the meaning of their physiological arousal in social situations (Singer et al., 2004). In other words, they try to identify the source of their physical feelings by putting affective labels to them. Findings of qualitative research suggest that younger children

are more limited in their ability to label their emotions and are more likely to focus on their physical feelings, while older children can articulate their emotions and find affective meaning in physiological responses (Dobbs, 2002; 2005). Older children are also more competent at identifying others' emotions in social situations (Brown & Dunn, 1996; Denham et al., 2002).

In the present study, children's affect interpretations were defined as their ability to label children's and parents' emotions in relation to physical punishment. Past research has not investigated the child's view of parental emotion following the administration of physical punishment. Children's affective interpretations of the act of physical punishment specifically were defined as the valence of their emotional labels (positive or negative).

### *Hypotheses*

In this section, hypotheses for the four main variables (cognitive appraisal, moral assessment, outcome expectation, and affect interpretation) are posited. Hypotheses are given for older and younger children, and for both moral and prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 1: Age and cognitive appraisals of mothers' motives for physical punishment.* Cognitive-developmental theory would predict that younger children's reasoning is more highly egocentric than that of older children. Therefore, it was expected that, the greatest proportion of younger children's attributions for the mother's action would be made to factors within the child (e.g., Mom hit because the child was bad). It was also expected that older children would be more likely than younger children to attribute the mother's motive to factors within the mother (e.g., Mom hit because she was in a bad mood). These developmental differences were not expected to vary by the

type of transgression committed (moral or prudential). There is no previous research or theory on which to base a hypothesis about children's appraisals of parental motives for physical punishment for moral versus prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 2: Age and cognitive appraisals of children's motives for behavioural transgressions.* Cognitive-developmental theory would predict that older children's reasoning is more differentiated and multidimensional than younger children's reasoning. While the majority of children at each age were expected to attribute children's behavioural transgressions to factors internal to the child, younger children were expected to make more attributions than older children to negative behavioural or personality characteristics of the child (e.g., the child was bad, she was being selfish). Older children were expected to make more attributions than younger children to developmental factors (e.g., he is too young to understand hitting is wrong, he hasn't learned how to share yet). These developmental differences were not expected to vary by the type of transgression committed (moral or prudential). There is no previous research or theory on which to base a hypothesis about children's appraisals of motives for moral vs. prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 3: Age and evaluations of transgressions' seriousness.* On the basis of previous research findings (Catron & Masters, 1993), younger children were expected to evaluate both moral and prudential transgressions as more serious than older children. Also on the basis of findings of past research (Catron & Masters, 1993), it was expected that younger children would evaluate prudential transgressions as more serious than moral transgressions, while older children would evaluate moral transgressions as more serious than prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 4: Age and evaluations of physical punishment's fairness.* Previous research findings have demonstrated that younger children are more favourable toward physical punishment than older children (Catron & Masters, 1993). Therefore, it is expected that younger children would be more likely than older children to evaluate physical punishment as fair for both moral and prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 5: Age and evaluations of physical punishment's justness.* On the basis of previous findings indicating that younger children are more favourable toward physical punishment than older children (Catron & Masters, 1993), it is predicted that younger children would consider physical punishment to be more just than older children.

*Hypothesis 6: Age and expectations for physical punishment's effectiveness.* Previous findings of quantitative and qualitative studies (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Dobbs, 2002; Horgan, 2002; Ritchie, Pain & Touelle, 1980; Vittrup & Holden, 2005; Willow & Hyder, 1998) have revealed that children tend to evaluate physical punishment as ineffective. It is predicted that younger and older children in the present study would evaluate physical punishment as more ineffective than effective. There is no previous research or theory on which to base a hypothesis about children's expectations for physical punishment's effectiveness for moral versus prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 7: Age and expectations for physical punishment's secondary effects.* Cognitive-developmental theory would predict that, as development proceeds, children become increasingly able to understand that people for whom they have positive feelings can act in ways that have negative effects. Therefore, it was expected that, when they were asked to identify secondary outcomes of physical punishment, older children would be more likely to identify negative outcomes than younger children. There is no previous

research or theory on which to base a hypothesis about children's expectations for physical punishment's secondary effects in the case of moral versus prudential transgressions.

*Hypothesis 8: Age and beliefs about physical punishment's relative effectiveness.*

Previous findings have suggested that children tend to view physical punishment as less effective than other parental responses (Crowley & Vulliamy, 2002; Dobbs, 2002; Horgan, 2002; Ritchie et al., 1980; Tulley & Chiu, 1998; Willow & Hyder, 1998). In the present study, it was predicted that both younger and older children would consider physical punishment to be a relatively ineffective response to both moral and prudential transgressions. It was also predicted that, due to their greater range of experiences, older children would suggest a wider range of responses to moral and prudential transgressions that are more effective than physical punishment.

*Hypothesis 9: Age and beliefs about physical punishment's necessity.* Previous research has not addressed the question of whether children believe that physical punishment is necessary in order to teach children to follow rules. On the basis of cognitive-developmental theory, it was hypothesized that older children would have more fully differentiated disciplinary schemas and would, therefore, be less likely to consider physical punishment necessary than younger children.

*Hypothesis 10: Age and affect interpretations.* In interpreting the affect of a physically punished child, it was predicted that: 1) younger children would identify more physical and fewer emotional responses to physical punishment than older children, and 2) both older and younger children's affect interpretations were expected to be more

negative than positive. This hypothesis is based on the findings of previous research (Dobbs, 2002, 2005; Willow & Hyder, 1998).

No previous research has examined children's interpretations of a punitive parent's affect. However, cognitive-developmental theory would predict that older children's perspective-taking ability is more advanced, increasing the likelihood that they can understand parental emotions such as guilt or regret. Therefore, it was expected that older children would be more likely than younger children to identify negative parental emotions.

## Chapter 2

*Method**Sample*

*Size and composition.* Two samples were generated. First, a pilot sample was recruited to permit testing of the measures developed for the study. The pilot sample consisted of 8 children, 5 of whom were 3 to 5 years of age and 3 of whom were 8 to 10 years of age. The data from the pilot sample were not analyzed; rather, the children's responses were used to refine the measures that would be used for the study sample.

For the study sample, 42 children were recruited. Of these, 12 were excluded from the study because they did not know what spanking is. Therefore, the final study sample consisted of 30 children. Of these, 15 were 3 to 5 years of age ( $M = 4.25$ ; 8 female, 7 male), and 15 were 8 to 10 years of age ( $M = 9.1$ ; 10 female, 5 male)

*Inclusion criteria.* Children in two age groups were recruited in order to assess developmental change in their cognitive, moral, and affective processing of physical punishment. Children in the younger age group are old enough to respond to questions in an interview format (Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998), but young enough to be in an early stage of cognitive development. Children in the older age group have progressed in their cognitive development and provide an appropriate comparison. To increase the homogeneity of the sample and to optimize the validity of children's responses, participants must have spoken English as their first language and have had no diagnosed developmental or language delays.

*Sampling procedure.* Children were recruited in two ways. First, day care centres in Winnipeg, Manitoba were chosen from the Government of Manitoba Child Care

Online website. Only day care centres that also ran after-school programs were approached. To maximize the diversity of the sample, the researcher attempted to recruit children from day care centres in various areas of the city, including Downtown East, River Heights East, and Fort Garry North. These areas were selected on the basis of their average household incomes, which range from \$27,122 (Downtown East) to \$45,194 (River Heights East) to \$73,528 (Fort Garry North) (City of Winnipeg & Statistics Canada, 1996). The proportions of low-income households in these areas are 52.6, 27.8, and 8.9 percent, respectively (City of Winnipeg & Statistics Canada, 1996). The lower incidence of low-income households in both River Heights East and Fort Garry North increased the chances of selecting families with higher incomes, thus increasing the representativeness of the sample. For ease of data collection, the centre with the highest number of licensed child care spaces was chosen.

Unfortunately, the response rate was extremely low. To address this problem, recruitment was expanded to include Assiniboine South, recognizing the limitation this would place on the generalizability of findings to low-income areas. However, the response rate did not increase. Out of 26 recruitment letters distributed, only 4 parents consented to their children's participation in the study. As a result, I obtained ethics approval to generate a snowball sample. I advertised the study through personal and professional e-mail networks, as well as posters placed on campus and at public libraries and community centres.

#### *Recruitment and Ethics Procedures*

*Procedure for obtaining day care centre Directors' consent.* Contact with each centre was initiated through a letter sent to its Director (Appendix A). The letter

contained the following information: purpose of the study, method to be used, an invitation to meet with me, and assurance that I will minimize disturbance of the centre's schedule. One week after the letter was mailed, I contacted the Director by telephone to explain the study further, answer questions, and request the Director's consent to the centre's participation.

*Procedure for obtaining parental consent.* Once a Director had consented to that centre's participation, I delivered a box of large envelopes to the centre. Each large envelope contained a parent information letter (Appendix B), a parent consent form (Appendix C), and a small envelope addressed to me in care of the centre. One large envelope was sent home with each child who met the inclusion criteria for the study. The parent information letter contained the following information: the purpose of the study, the method to be used, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of data, and a request for consent to have the child participate in the study. The letter also instructed the parent to: 1) indicate whether they consent to the child's participation on the enclosed consent form, 2) sign the consent form, 3) place the consent form in the enclosed envelope addressed to me and seal the envelope, and 4) return the envelope to the centre. In an effort to increase parental motivation to consent, each participating family was entered into a draw for a \$50 gift certificate from a toy store of their choice.

*Procedure for obtaining child assent.* For each child whose parent provided consent, an individual meeting time was arranged. Meetings were arranged at a time that was convenient for the centre's staff and for the child and parents. At the beginning of the meeting, I introduced myself and read aloud a description of the research and the procedure, written in developmentally appropriate language (Appendix D). It was

imperative that children be fully informed and have the right to decline participation in the study regardless of whether their parents have granted consent. Therefore, each child was informed that: 1) participation was voluntary, 2) confidentiality would be maintained, 3) withdrawal from the study would not be penalized, and 4) choosing not to answer a question was permissible.

In the Province of Manitoba, professionals who suspect that a child is being maltreated are obligated by law to report their suspicions to child welfare authorities or to the police. It was conceivable that some of the children who participate in this study were being maltreated at home. For this reasons, the following measures were put in place. While the measures used in the present study focused on children's thoughts and feelings about physical punishment in general, rather than on their personal experiences, it was possible that some children may have disclosed actual experiences of maltreatment. If a child made statements suggesting that maltreatment was occurring, I would have been obligated by law to report those statements, violating my promise of confidentiality. To be fully informed, then, children were told that everything they told me would be kept private unless they told me that they were being harmed in any way. In that case, I would need to tell someone who could make the hurting stop (Knight et al., 2000; Mahon, Glendenning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996)<sup>1</sup>.

Children were informed and then asked if they would like to participate. Verbal assent was recorded on the tape recorder, as young children may have had difficulty printing their names. If a child did not assent, there was no penalty of any kind. They were thanked for their time visiting with the interviewer and escorted back to their

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<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, no children disclosed experiencing harm of any kind, so this measure was not put into practice.

activities. This only happened in one instance. If a child appeared at all hesitant or uncomfortable with assenting to participation, they were not pressured, but asked if they would like to know anything else about the study, or ask any other questions. It was re-emphasized that their participation was voluntary. One child did appear hesitant and nervous prior to the interview, so he was asked if he would like to do it later or not at all, and he chose later, after another child had been interviewed.

#### *Calculating Response Rate*

The response rate was calculated separately for parents and children. The response rate for parents was 4.57%, calculated by dividing the number of parental consents obtained by the number of parent letters distributed. It is important to note that this response rate applies only to recruitment done through day cares. It was impossible to calculate parental response rates for the snowball sampling phase. The children's response rate, 97.7%, was calculated by dividing the number of children who assented to participate by the number of parents who consented to their child's participation. Only one child whose parent had given consent refused to participate.

#### *Child Interview Procedures*

*Setting.* The child interviews took place in one of two locations. For those families who learned about the research through a day care centre, the interviews took place in the day care centre. With the help of each centre's Director, a specific location was identified where the child's privacy and comfort would be ensured and where interruptions would be unlikely. For families who learned of the research through advertisements or word of mouth, interviews took place in convenient locations. In total,

14 children were interviewed in a day care setting, 15 were interviewed in the family's home and 1 was interviewed on the university campus.

*Rapport-building.* In the interview setting, approximately five to ten minutes were spent building rapport and allowing the child to become comfortable with the interviewer and the surroundings. During this time, the child was given colouring materials and asked about some of their favourite activities. This began to put the child at ease and opened the lines of communication.

*Format.* To begin, the child was asked what, if anything, they were told about the interview. The interviewer corrected or reinforced the message they were given by their parents or the day care staff.

The interview format was adapted from an approach developed for qualitative studies of children's views about physical punishment (Dobbs, 2002, 2005; Willow & Hyder, 1998). In these studies, children were introduced to a drawing of an imaginary alien named Splodge, who wanted to learn about spanking. A storybook format was used to present questions to children as if they were being asked by Splodge.

In the present study, Splodge was presented as a puppet in order to maximize the child's attentional focus on the character and his questions, rather than on the interviewer. It was expected that a puppet format would optimize the child's communication, comfort, and enjoyment of the interview. All interviews were tape recorded to ensure that none of the children's responses were lost and to maximize the accuracy of the data. Children were told about the recording device and allowed to experiment with it before the interview began.

The interview began with an introduction to the puppet, Splodge, who was described as an alien from the Planet Azote (Appendix E & F). Children were told that Splodge is very interested in life on Earth and that he would like to ask a few questions about things that he has seen or heard about. The interviewer then presented a series of practice questions that familiarized the children with the questionnaire format and sequencing (Appendix E & F). The practice questions were designed to facilitate children's ease in answering questions about pleasant (e.g., ice cream) and unpleasant (e.g., sickness) things in their lives in an effort to convey the acceptability of talking about their thoughts and feelings and to demonstrate that their responses would not be judged by the interviewer.

*Screening for knowledge of spanking*<sup>2</sup>. Following the practice questions, Splodge asked the child what spanking is. Responses that indicated a lack of knowledge of spanking include, for example, "a fish" or "I don't know". If the child did not know what spanking was, the interview was terminated. In order that a sense of failure was not communicated to the child, Splodge asked a few neutral questions ("What is a car?" "What is a tree?" "What is a skateboard?") prior to thanking the child. The child was then returned to the day care centre's activities. Thirty children out of forty-two children had knowledge of spanking. The 12 who did not know about spanking were all from the 3- to 5-year-old group.

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<sup>2</sup> The word "spanking" was used to refer to physical punishment because, in the Canadian culture, it is the most frequently used label for common forms of physical punishment and the one most likely to be used by parents to describe their actions to children.

Responses that indicated knowledge of spanking included, “a hit”, “what you get when you’re bad”, and “like slapping, but harder”. For children who knew what spanking was, the interview proceeded.

### *Child Measures*

*Type of transgression.* The child interview was designed to focus children’s attention on spanking for two types of transgressions, moral and prudential. Children were presented with one vignette depicting each type of transgression (Appendix E & F). To optimize the child’s identification with the child in each vignette, the hypothetical transgressing child was described as being of the same gender as the child being interviewed. To control for the potential effect of parent gender on the child’s responses, the parent in each vignette was described as the hypothetical child’s mother.<sup>3</sup>

Splodge introduced the first vignette by saying, “I saw something happen the other day that I would like to understand.” He then presented the vignette. The moral transgression vignette depicted a situation in which one child hits another child. Splodge introduced the second vignette by saying, “I saw something else happen the other day that I would like to understand.” He then presented the vignette. The prudential transgression vignette described a situation in which a child runs into the street to chase a ball.

In each vignette, the transgressing child is spanked by his or her mother. Following each vignette, the child being interviewed was asked the following series of questions assessing their thoughts and feelings about spanking. These measures were

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<sup>3</sup> Although I had planned to control for order effects by alternating the order of the moral vignette and the prudential vignette across children, this was not done.

developed for this study, and informed by the literature reviewed. (The complete interview protocols for boys and girls are provided in Appendix E and F, respectively).

*Cognitive appraisal of the mother's motive for spanking.* Children were asked to state why they believe the mother in the vignette spanked the child. Each child's response was coded into one of three categories: 1) factors internal to the child (e.g., because he hit, she could get hit by a car, because he behaved wrong), 2) factors internal to the mother (e.g., she was angry at Wendy for hitting Susie, so she spanked her for punishment, to discipline her and make sure she learns from it<sup>4</sup>), or 3) other. In the event that a child provided more than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the main reason for the mother's action and that response was coded. Therefore, each child was given a score of 1, 2, or 3 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

*Cognitive appraisal of the child's motive for transgressing.* Children were asked to state why they believe the child in the vignette hit the other child/ran into the street. Each child's response was coded into one of four categories: 1) negative behavioural/personality characteristics of the child (e.g., he was bad, she was being selfish), 2) developmental characteristics of the child (e.g., he doesn't know the rule, he's too young to know better, she hasn't learned to share yet), 3) other factors internal to the child (e.g., he wanted the red crayon, she was mad at her), or 4) factors external to the child (e.g., because Michael picked up the train). In the event that a child provided more

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<sup>4</sup> In total, 5 children attributed the mother's actions to factors internal to the mother. Two responses related to the mother's emotions, while another two indicated a concern for the child's learning. The fifth related to concern for the child's safety. Because of their small frequencies, these three types of responses were collapsed into one code – factors internal to the mother.

than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the main reason for the child's action and that response was coded. Therefore, each child was given a score of 1, 2, 3, or 4 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

*Evaluations of transgressions' seriousness.* Children's evaluations of the transgression's seriousness were assessed in two steps. First, children were asked whether the child's transgression was good or bad. This question was asked so that an assumption of "badness" of the transgression was not conveyed by the interviewer. Second, children were asked to rate, on a four-point scale, how good or bad the transgression was. The scale was presented as a series of cartoon faces ranging from very sad to very happy. This visual representation is easier for young children to understand than a numbered rating scale, and has been used by Smetana (1981) and Catron and Masters (1993). The psychometric properties of the face rating scale have not been evaluated. Each child's seriousness score corresponded to the face that they chose (1 to 4).

*Evaluations of physical punishment's fairness.* It was proposed that children be asked to rate the fairness of physical punishment using a four-point scale. However, after the pilot test, it was evident that this scale was confusing for children and could have yielded invalid results. Therefore, children were asked if it was fair for the mother in the vignette to spank her child. A child who said "yes" was given a score of 1, and a child who said "no" was given a score of 2.

*Evaluations of physical punishment's justness.* The item measuring children's evaluations of the justness (moral rightness) of physical punishment was adapted from Nucci (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Nucci & Turiel, 1993). This item assessed whether children believe that spanking is a moral issue (absolutely right or wrong) or a conventional issue (rightness defined by authority). First a filter question was presented: "Do you think that spanking is right or wrong?" Children who said that spanking is right were asked the following question: "Imagine that the police say that parents can't spank their children for hitting/running into the street any more. If that happened, would that make spanking wrong in that situation?" Children who responded to the filter question by saying that spanking is wrong were asked the following question: "Imagine that the police say that all parents should spank their children. If that happened, would that make spanking right?"

Children whose responses changed from the filter question to the second question received a score of 1, which represents a belief that spanking is a convention. Children whose responses did not change from the filter question to the second question received a score of 2, which represents a belief that spanking is a moral issue. Three children responded that if the law regarding physical punishment changed, that "may" change the justness of the act. These responses were coded as conventional because they indicated a possibility of change.

*Evaluations of physical punishment's effectiveness.* It was proposed that children be asked to rate the effectiveness of physical punishment using a four-point scale. However, after the pilot test, it was evident that this scale was confusing for children and could have yielded invalid results. Therefore, children were asked if it was fair for the

child to receive a spanking. A child who said “yes” was given a score of 1, and a child who said “no” was given a score of 2.

*Evaluations of physical punishment’s secondary effects.* Following the item measuring their evaluations of spanking’s effectiveness, children were asked what else they think the child in the vignette will learn from being spanked. Responses to this item were coded into two categories: 1) positive outcomes (e.g., child will learn to comply, child will learn the rules), and 2) negative outcomes (e.g., child will learn how to hit and punch people). In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most likely outcome and that response was coded. Therefore, each child was given a score of 1 or 2, representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

*Evaluations of physical punishment’s relative effectiveness.* Children were asked to state what they believe is the best way for the mother in the vignette to teach her child not to hit another child/run into the street. Each response was coded into one of five categories: 1) physical punishment (e.g., spanking), 2) induction (e.g., talking to him about why it’s wrong, repeating the rule), 3) time-out (e.g., send her to her room), 4) removal of privileges (e.g., taking away the toy), or 5) other. In the event that a child suggested more than one strategy that fell into the same category, only one strategy was coded. In the event that a child suggested more than one strategy and those strategies fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most effective strategy and that response was coded. Therefore, each child received a score of 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

*Evaluations of physical punishment's necessity.* Children were told that parents on Azote do not spank their children. They were asked whether they believe that children there can still learn not to hit/run into the street. Children who said “no” received a score of 0. Children who say “yes” received a score of 1.

*Interpretations of the child's and mother's affect.* Four items assessed children's interpretation of the child's and mothers' affect following physical punishment. First, children were asked to state how they believe the child in the vignette felt after being spanked. Each response was coded into two categories: 1) physical feelings (e.g., it will sting, it will hurt), and 2) emotional feelings (e.g., sad, mad, sorry). In the event that a child provided more than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most likely response and that response was coded. Therefore, each child received a score of 1 or 2 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

Second, children who provided a physical response to the previous item were asked how the child felt inside. All emotional responses from the two items (this item and the previous one) were coded into one of two categories: 1) positive affect (e.g., happy, glad, relieved), and 2) negative affect (e.g., sad, mad, sorry). In the event that a child provided more than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most likely response and that response was coded. Therefore, each child received a score of 1 or 2 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

Third, children were asked how they believe the child's mother in the vignette felt after spanking the child. Each response was coded into two categories: 1) physical feelings (e.g., her hand will hurt), and 2) emotional feelings (e.g., sad, mad, sorry, afraid). In the event that a child provided more than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most likely response and that response was coded. Therefore, each child received a score of 1 or 2 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

Fourth, children who provided a physical response to the previous item were asked how the mother felt inside. All emotional responses from the two items (this item and the previous one) were coded into one of two categories: positive affect (e.g., happy, glad, relieved) and negative affect (e.g., sad, mad, sorry). In the event that a child provided more than one response that fell into the same category, only one response was coded. In the event that a child provided more than one response and those responses fell into different categories, the child was asked to identify the most likely response and that response was coded. Therefore, each child received a score of 1 or 2 representing the category into which his or her response was coded.

#### *Control Variable*

It was possible that variation in children's experiences of spanking would confound differences in their responses due to their developmental stage. Therefore, variation in children's experiences of spanking was controlled. To obtain an estimate of children's experiences of spanking, one parent in each family was asked to complete the Parental Responses to Child Misbehaviour questionnaire (PRCM; Holden, 1995;

Appendix G). The PRCM assessed the frequency with which parents respond in each of 11 ways to their child's misbehaviour – give an order or tell the child to do something without discussing why; reason; divert to an acceptable activity; negotiate; threaten with withdrawing privileges or physical punishment; use time-out, social, or physical isolation; use mild physical punishment (e.g. slap on the fingers, spank on the bottom); use harsher physical punishment (e.g., box on the ears, hit with an implement such as ruler, brush or belt); ignore or give no reaction to child's misbehaviour; withdraw privileges (e.g. child is not allowed to watch television); and yell in anger at the child. Parents indicated, on a 7-point Likert scale, the number of times they or their partner respond in each of the 11 ways in an average week (never, less than once, 1 or two times, 3 or 4 times, 5 or 6 times, 7 or 8 times, and 9 times or more.) Test-retest reliability over a 3-week-period was analyzed for a sample of 21 mothers; the average correlation across items was 0.64 (Holden & Zambarano, 1992).

All of the items on the scale were administered in order to “embed” the physical punishment item, making it less obvious and intrusive. However, only the frequency of physical punishment was analyzed. If the frequencies with which children in the younger and older age groups experienced physical punishment differed significantly, this variable would be controlled in the between-groups analyses. In the present study, the “mild” and “harsher” physical punishment items were collapsed into a single “physical punishment” item. The rationale for this change is that the examples provided for “harsher physical punishment” on the original scale (box on the ears, hit with an implement such as ruler, brush or belt) were declared to be acts of criminal assault by the Supreme Court of Canada in 2004 (Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the

Law v. Canada, 2004). By directly asking parents about their use of such punishments, this would have placed them in a position of having to disclose criminal activity and I would be required to then report those disclosures. Because the purpose of the present study was not to estimate the prevalence of child maltreatment, but to ask children about their perspectives on spanking, it would have been unethical to require such disclosures from parents. Therefore, one item assessed parents' use of physical punishment and I provided examples representing acts that do not constitute criminal assault in Canada (e.g., spanking, slapping). Parents of children who took part in the pilot test were not asked to complete the PRCM because the pilot's purpose was simply to gain information about children's willingness and ability to participate in the research, and these data were not analyzed.

Parents were also asked to report their child's birthday, so that the participants' exact ages at the time of the interview could be calculated.

Gender was also used as a control variable; to investigate it as an independent variable would not have been feasible for this project. I planned to control gender in this study because previous research findings (Straus, 1994) have suggested that boys may be more likely to experience physical punishment than girls, so children's views may be confounded by the differences in their gender-based experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using version 12 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The analyses were conducted as follows:

*Testing Hypothesis 1: Age and cognitive appraisals of mothers' motives for physical punishment.* To test the hypothesis that children's attributions for parents'

punishment motives would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 4 (maternal motive) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 2: Age and cognitive appraisals of children's motives for transgressing.* To test the hypothesis that children's attributions for children's behavioural motives would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 4 (children's motive) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 3: Age and evaluations of transgressions' seriousness.* To test the hypothesis that judgments of the seriousness of moral and prudential transgressions would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 2 (rating of seriousness) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 4: Age and evaluations of physical punishment's fairness.* To test the hypothesis that judgments of the fairness of spanking for moral and prudential transgressions would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 2 (judgment of fairness) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 5: Age and evaluations of physical punishment's justness.* To test the hypothesis that judgments of the justness of spanking for moral and prudential transgressions would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 2 (judgment of justness) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 6: Age and expectations of physical punishment's effectiveness.* To test the hypothesis that judgments of the effectiveness of spanking for moral and prudential transgressions would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (age group) X 2 (judgment of effectiveness) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 7: Age and expectations for physical punishment's secondary effects.* To test the hypothesis that children's expectations for the secondary effects of spanking would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (expectation for secondary effects) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 8: Age and expectations for physical punishment's relative effectiveness.* To test the hypothesis that children's assessments of the relative effectiveness of spanking would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (child age) X 5 (assessment of relative effectiveness) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 9: Age and beliefs about physical punishment's necessity.* To test the hypothesis that children's beliefs about the necessity of spanking for moral and prudential transgressions would vary significantly by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (belief about necessity) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

*Testing Hypothesis 10: Age and affect interpretations.* To test the hypothesis that the category of child feeling (physical or emotional) would vary by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (feeling category) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression. To test the hypothesis that children's affect valence (positive or negative) would vary by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (affect valence) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

To test the hypothesis that the category of maternal feeling (physical or emotional), as assessed by children, would vary by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (feeling category) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression. To test the

hypothesis that mothers' affect valence (positive or negative), as assessed by children, would vary by child age, a 2 (child age) X 2 (affect valence) chi square analysis was conducted for each transgression.

## Chapter 3

### *Results*

The results of the statistical analyses will be presented in two sections. First, the findings of analyses regarding the control variables (parents' use of physical punishment and child gender) will be discussed. Second, the results of the hypothesis-testing analyses will be presented, all of which were one-tailed. The significance level for all tests was set at .10.

#### *Analyses of Control Variables*

A cross tabulation was used to assess the potentially confounding effect of experiencing physical punishment and child gender on the relationship between child age and all other variables. Experience of physical punishment was significantly related to child age, indicating this variable should be controlled ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.222, p = .068$ ). However, due to the small sample size, adding a third variable to each hypothesis-testing analysis would have resulted in cell sizes that were too small. Therefore, a decision was made to not control for experience of physical punishment.

As Table 1 shows, one-half of the younger group, but only one-quarter of the older group, had experienced physical punishment in an average week. Child gender ( $\chi^2(1) = .556, p = .228$ ) was not related to child age (see Table 2). Because child gender was not significantly related to child age in this sample, this variable was not controlled in the hypothesis-testing analyses.

#### *Tests of Hypotheses*

*Age and cognitive appraisals of mothers' motives for physical punishment.* The hypothesis that children's appraisals of mothers' motives for physical punishment would

Table 1

*Experience of Physical Punishment in an Average Week*

	Never Experienced Physical Punishment in an Average Week		Experienced Physical Punishment in an Average Week	
	N	%	N	%
Total sample	19	70.4	8	29.6
3-5 year olds	7	58.3	5	41.7
8-10 year olds	12	80.0	3	20.0

*Note.* Three parents did not complete the PRCM

Table 2

*Gender of Participants*

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	Female		Male	
	N	%	N	%
Total sample	18	60.0	12	40.0
3-5 year olds	8	53.3	7	46.7
8-10 year olds	10	66.7	5	33.3

---

be related to child age was not supported ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.154, p = .142$  for both transgression types). For both moral and prudential transgressions, and in both age groups, most of the children attributed the mother's behaviour to factors internal to the child (e.g. "because he behaved wrong," or "because she hit her friend"). Therefore, children at both ages were more likely to attribute mothers' motives for physical punishment to factors internal to the child than to factors internal to the parent, regardless of the type of transgression (see Table 3).

*Age and cognitive appraisals of children's motives for behavioural transgressions.* The hypothesis that children's appraisals of children's motives for behavioural transgressions would differ by age was not supported, but the p value approached significance (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.563, p = .105$ ; prudential: chi square statistic not computed because child's motive was a constant). Regardless of the type of transgression, children from both age groups almost exclusively made attributions for the child's transgression to "other" factors internal to the child (rather than to behavioural/personality or developmental characteristics of the child, or to factors external to the child). Across transgression types, this type of attribution was made by 96% of the younger group and 100% of the older group (see Table 4). The most common responses of this type were "she wanted to get the ball" or "he wanted the train".

*Age and evaluations of transgressions' seriousness.* The distribution of responses on the seriousness measure was identical in the younger and older age groups for the moral transgression (see Table 5). One-fifth of children in each age group rated the moral transgression as "bad" and the remaining four-fifths rated it as "very bad". Therefore, the hypothesis that child age would be related to evaluations of the

Table 3

*Children's Perceptions of Mother's Motive for Using Physical Punishment*

	Factors Internal to the Child		Factors Internal to the Mother	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	26	86.7	4	13.3
3-5 year olds	14	93.3	1	6.7
8-10 year olds	12	80.0	3	20.0
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	26	86.7	4	13.3
3-5 year olds	14	93.3	1	6.7
8-10 year olds	12	80.0	3	20.0

Table 4

*Children's Perceptions of the Child's Motive for Transgressing*

	Factors Internal to the Child		Factors External to the Child	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	24	96.0	1	4.0
3-5 year olds	9	90.0	1	10.0
8-10 year olds	15	100.0	0	0.0
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	29	100.0	0	0.0
3-5 year olds	14	100.0	0	0.0
8-10 year olds	15	100.0	0	0.0

*Note.* Five children's responses were uncodable for the moral transgression; one child's response was uncodable for the prudential transgression.

Table 5

*Children's Perceptions of the Seriousness of the Transgression*

	Transgression was Bad		Transgression was Very Bad	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	6	20.0	24	80.0
3-5 year olds	3	20.0	12	80.0
8-10 year olds	3	20.0	12	80.0
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	5	16.7	25	83.3
3-5 year olds	5	33.3	10	66.7
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0

transgressions' seriousness was not supported when the transgression was a moral one ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.00, p = 0.5$ ).

However, the hypothesis was supported when the transgression was a prudential one ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.000, p = .007$ ). All of the older children rated this transgression as "very bad," while one-third of the younger children rated it as "bad" and two-thirds as "very bad" (see Table 5).

*Age and evaluations of physical punishment's fairness.* As Table 6 shows, almost two-thirds of the total sample thought physical punishment was a fair response to the moral transgression and almost one-half thought it was fair for the prudential transgression. Of these, the majority were in the older group regardless of transgression type.

The hypothesis that children's evaluations of fairness of physical punishment would differ by age was supported for both transgression types, (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.222, p = .068$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.143, p = .071$ ). Three-quarters of the older group, but only one-half of the younger group, believed that physical punishment was a fair response to the moral transgression (see Table 6). Two-thirds of the older group, but only one-third of the younger group, believed that physical punishment was a fair response to the prudential transgression.

*Age and evaluations of physical punishment's justness.* For both of the transgressions, about one-third of the sample considered physical punishment "right", while the remaining two-thirds considered physical punishment "wrong". Among the younger group, one-fifth considered physical punishment right, while four-fifths considered physical punishment wrong. Among the older group, the children were

Table 6

*Children's Perceptions of the Fairness of Physical Punishment*

	Physical Punishment is Fair		Physical Punishment is Unfair	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	18	60.0	12	40.0
3-5 year olds	7	46.7	8	53.3
8-10 year olds	11	73.3	4	26.7
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	14	46.7	16	53.3
3-5 year olds	5	33.3	10	66.7
8-10 year olds	9	60.0	6	40.0

evenly split between rating physical punishment as wrong or right. A hypothesis was not made regarding children's perception of the rightness or wrongness of physical punishment, but a chi square test of association was used for exploratory purposes (see Table 7). It indicates a significant difference based on age for both transgressions (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 3.589$ ,  $p = .029$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.222$ ,  $p = .068$ ).

The hypothesis that child age would be related to beliefs about physical punishment's justness was supported for both transgression types (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.222$ ,  $p = .068$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .060$ ). As Table 8 shows, for both the moral and prudential transgressions, almost three-quarters of the younger children believed that the justness of physical punishment is absolute (i.e., it is a moral issue) while about half of the older children held this belief.

*Age and expectations of physical punishment's effectiveness.* The hypothesis that children's evaluations of the effectiveness of physical punishment would differ by age was supported for the moral transgression ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.042$ ,  $p = .077$ ). As Table 9 shows, one-half of the younger children and three-quarters of the older children believed that physical punishment would be an effective response to the moral transgression. The hypothesis that children's evaluations of the effectiveness of physical punishment would differ by age was not supported for the prudential transgression ( $\chi^2(1) = .186$ ,  $p = .333$ ). At least three-quarters of children in each age group believed that it would be an effective response in this situation. It should be noted that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of this finding is limited.

*Age and expectations for physical punishment's secondary effects.* For each transgression type, all but one child identified secondary effects of physical punishment

Table 7

*Children's Perceptions of Whether Physical Punishment is Right or Wrong*

	Physical Punishment is Right		Physical Punishment is Wrong	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	11	36.7	19	63.3
3-5 year olds	3	20.0	12	80.0
8-10 year olds	8	53.3	7	46.7
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	12	40.0	18	60.0
3-5 year olds	4	26.7	11	73.3
8-10 year olds	8	53.3	7	46.7

Table 8

*Children's Perceptions of the Justness of Physical Punishment*

	Physical Punishment is a Conventional Issue		Physical Punishment is a Moral Issue	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	12	40.0	18	60.0
3-5 year olds	4	26.7	11	73.3
8-10 year olds	8	53.3	7	46.7
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	10	33.3	20	66.7
3-5 year olds	3	20.0	12	80.0
8-10 year olds	7	46.7	8	53.3

Table 9

*Children's Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Physical Punishment*

	Physical Punishment is Effective		Physical Punishment is Not Effective	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	19	65.5	10	34.5
3-5 year olds	8	53.3	7	46.6
8-10 year olds	11	78.6	3	21.4
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	23	76.7	7	23.3
3-5 year olds	11	73.3	4	26.7
8-10 year olds	12	80.0	3	20.0

*Note.* One child's response for the moral transgression was uncodable.

that were positive, such as “if you run in the street you could get hurt” and “to listen” (see Table 10). However, it should be noted that approximately half of the responses to this question were uncodable, because children simply repeated their response from the previous question. Responses such as “not to hit anymore” and “not to go running on the street” were not considered to be secondary effects, so these were not coded. Only two responses indicated a belief that physical punishment would have negative secondary effects: “to learn how to hit people and punch” for the moral transgression, and “how to steal and do violence” for the prudential transgression.

The hypothesis that older children would be more likely to identify negative secondary outcomes of physical punishment was not supported (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = .481$ ,  $p = .244$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = .598$ ,  $p = .220$ ). The majority of children in each age group identified secondary effects that were positive. It should be noted that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of this finding is limited.

*Age and expectations for physical punishment's relative effectiveness.* The hypothesis that children's evaluations of the relative effectiveness of physical punishment would differ by age was not supported for either type of transgression (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = .914$ ,  $p = .170$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(3) = 4.044$ ,  $p = .129$ ). For both transgression types, induction (e.g., “talk to him,” “tell him to listen,” and “tell him that it was wrong”) was most often identified as the best way to teach the child (see Table 11). It was predicted that older children would suggest a greater number of alternatives to physical punishment. This hypothesis was supported. Although all of the children's responses comprised only four categories (induction, time-out, physical punishment, and other),

Table 10

*Children's Perceptions of Physical Punishment's Secondary Effects*

	Positive Outcomes		Negative Outcomes	
	N	%	N	%
	Moral Transgression			
Total sample	12	92.3	1	7.7
3-5 year olds	4	100.0	0	0.0
8-10 year olds	8	88.9	1	11.1
	Prudential Transgression			
Total sample	13	92.9	1	7.1
3-5 year olds	5	100.0	0	0.0
8-10 year olds	8	88.9	1	11.1

*Note.* Seventeen responses for the moral transgression and sixteen responses for the prudential transgression were uncodable.

Table 11

*Children's Perceptions of Physical Punishment's Relative Effectiveness*

	Physical Punishment		Induction		Time-out		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression								
Total Sample	0	0.0	19	67.9	9	32.1	0	0.0
3-5 year olds	0	0.0	10	77.0	3	23.0	0	0.0
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	9	60.0	6	40.0	0	0.0
Prudential Transgression								
Total Sample	2	7.1	24	85.8	1	3.6	1	3.6
3-5 year olds	2	15.4	11	84.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	13	86.7	1	6.7	1	6.7

*Note.* Two children's responses were uncodable for both transgressions.

older children provided 12 different responses, while younger children provided only 6 different responses.

The hypothesis that children would consider physical punishment to be relatively ineffective regardless of age or type of transgression was supported. Only 7% of the total sample of children thought that spanking would be the best way for the child's mother to teach the child. The two responses indicating that spanking would be the best way for the child's mother to teach the child both came from children in the younger group, in response to the prudential transgression. It should be noted that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of these findings is limited.

*Age and beliefs about physical punishment's necessity.* The hypothesis that older children would be less likely than younger children to consider physical punishment necessary was not supported for either transgression type (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = .453$ ,  $p = .250$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = .370$ ,  $p = .271$ ). Children from both age groups were unlikely to consider physical punishment a necessity regardless of the type of transgression (see Table 12). Only 10% of the total sample considered physical punishment necessary in order for children to learn not to run on the road or hit other children. Of those who considered physical punishment necessary, two children were from the younger group and one child was from the older group. It should be noted, however, that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of this finding is limited.

*Age and interpretations of mother's and child's affect.* The hypothesis that the category of maternal feeling (physical or emotional) would vary by child age was not supported for either transgression (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .146$ ; prudential: chi square

Table 12

*Children's Perceptions of Physical Punishment's Necessity*

	Physical Punishment is Necessary		Physical Punishment is Not Necessary	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	3	10.0	26	90.0
3-5 year olds	2	14.3	12	85.7
8-10 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	3	10.0	27	90.0
3-5 year olds	2	13.3	13	86.7
8-10 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3

*Note.* One child's response for the moral transgression was uncodable.

statistic not computed because mother's feeling category was a constant). Nearly all 60 responses reflected a belief that physical punishment would generate emotional, rather than physical maternal feelings (see Table 13). The hypothesis that children in both age groups would identify more negative than positive maternal emotions was supported (see Table 14). Of the total sample, most children believed that mothers would experience negative emotions following physical punishment (e.g., sadness, anger, guilt). The hypothesis that older children would be more likely to identify negative maternal emotions than younger children was not supported for either type of transgression (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.327, p = .125$ ; prudential:  $\chi^2(1) = .166, p = .342$ ). It should be noted, however, that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of this finding is limited.

The hypothesis that the category of child feeling (physical or emotional) would vary by child age was not supported for either transgression (moral:  $\chi^2(1) = 1.034, p = .155$ ; prudential: chi square statistic not computed because child's feeling category was a constant). Nearly all 60 responses reflected a belief that physical punishment would generate emotional, rather than physical child feelings (see Table 15).

The hypothesis that children would identify more negative than positive child emotions was supported (see Table 16). Of the total sample, most children believed that the children in the vignettes would experience negative emotions following physical punishment (e.g., sadness, anger, embarrassment). The hypothesis that older children would be more likely than younger children to identify negative child emotions was not supported ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.034, p = .154$  for both transgression types). All of the older children, and all but one of the younger children, reported that the child in each vignette would

Table 13

*Children's Perceptions of the Mother's Feelings as Physical or Emotional*

	Mother has Physical Response		Mother has Emotional Response	
	N	%	N	%
	Moral Transgression			
Total sample	1	3.4	28	96.6
3-5 year olds	1	7.1	13	92.9
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0
	Prudential Transgression			
Total sample	0	0.0	29	100.0
3-5 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	14	100.0

*Note.* One response for each transgression was uncodable.

Table 14

*Children's Perceptions of the Mother's Affect Following Physical Punishment*

	Positive Affect		Negative Affect	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	4	13.8	25	86.2
3-5 year olds	3	21.4	11	78.6
8-10 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	5	17.2	24	82.8
3-5 year olds	3	20.0	12	80.0
8-10 year olds	2	14.3	12	85.7

*Note.* One response for each transgression was uncodable.

Table 15

*Children's Perceptions of the Child's Feelings as Physical or Emotional*

	Child has Physical Response		Child has Emotional Response	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	1	3.3	29	96.7
3-5 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0
8-10 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	0	0.0	30	100.0
3-5 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0

Table 16

*Children's Perceptions of the Child's Affect Following Physical Punishment*

	Child's Affect is Positive		Child's Affect is Negative	
	N	%	N	%
Moral Transgression				
Total sample	1	3.3	29	96.6
3-5 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0
Prudential Transgression				
Total sample	1	3.3	29	96.7
3-5 year olds	1	6.7	14	93.3
8-10 year olds	0	0.0	15	100.0

experience negative emotions following physical punishment. It should be noted that several cells had frequencies of less than 5, so the reliability of this finding is limited.

## Chapter 4

*Discussion*

The purpose of this study was to develop unified measures of children's cognitive, moral, and affective processing of physical punishment and examine responses to these measures at two developmental stages. Children from two age groups were interviewed: three-to-five years of age and eight-to-ten years of age. Overall, the findings show that while most children think physical punishment can be effective, they do not think it is the best way to teach children or that it is necessary in order for them to learn – even in the case of transgressions that they consider to be very serious. They also think it has negative emotional consequences for children and parents and that it is morally wrong. Surprisingly, there were few indications that children's thinking about these dimensions changes with age. The implications of these findings will be explored in the following sections.

*Children's Attributions for Actors' Motives in Parent-Child Conflict Situations*

It was hypothesized that the majority of children at each age would attribute children's behavioural transgressions to factors within the child. This hypothesis was supported. Children in both age groups most often attributed child misbehaviour to factors such as "he wanted the red crayon" or "she wanted to get the ball". It was expected, however, that younger children would make more attributions than older children to negative behavioural or personality characteristics of the child (e.g., the child was bad, she was being selfish), while older children were expected to make more attributions than younger children to developmental factors. This hypothesis was not supported, but the age difference approached significance.

There are several potential explanations for the absence of an age-related difference in attributions for child transgressions. First, the stories might not have provided sufficient descriptive detail. For example, children were not told the hypothetical child's age, which could explain why none of the older children attributed the child's behaviour to developmental factors. The stories did not include details such as how hard the child hit his playmate, or whether they were friends. Such details might have influenced the children's abilities to construct theories to explain the hypothetical children's behaviours. A second explanation might lie in the very fact that the children were considering hypothetical situations, rather than their own experiences. It is a well-documented phenomenon that humans tend to attribute others' actions to individual internal factors, but attribute their own actions to contextual factors (i.e., the "fundamental attribution error": Weiner, 1974). Almost every child in the sample attributed the hypothetical child's behaviour to factors within that child. This might not have been the case had they been asked about their own transgressions, rather than hypothetical ones.

It was expected, on the basis of cognitive-developmental theory, that younger children's egocentrism would be reflected in a tendency for them to attribute maternal physical punishment to factors within the child. This hypothesis was supported. Most of the younger children attributed the mother's behaviour to factors such as "she could get hit by a car" or "because he behaved wrong". It was also expected, however, that older children would be more likely than younger children to attribute the mother's motive to factors within the mother. This hypothesis was not supported. Rather, most of the older children, like the younger children, attributed the mother's behaviour to factors within the

child. This was a surprising finding, as one would expect that, with age, children would increasingly consider factors external to the child in explaining misbehaviour. Very few considered factors such as the mother's emotional state, her desire for the child to learn, or her inability to think of alternative responses. Perhaps the eight- to ten-year-old children were not yet able to take the perspective of the mother and speculate on her thoughts and emotions. Such responses might not emerge until children are older than those who participated in this study, whose mean age was 9.1 years old and modal age was 9 years old.

#### *Children's Assessments of the Seriousness of Behavioural Transgressions*

Overall, the majority of children in both age groups considered both types of transgressions to be very serious. On the basis of previous research findings (Catron & Masters, 1993), it was expected that younger children would evaluate both moral and prudential transgressions as more serious than older children. This hypothesis was not supported for either transgression. For the prudential transgression, all of the older children, but only two-thirds of the younger children, considered the transgression to be very serious (although it should be noted that the remaining one-third of younger children considered it to be serious). No age difference was found in children's assessments of the seriousness of the moral transgression; two-thirds of each group considered it to be very serious.

Catron and Masters (1993) found that younger children consider prudential transgressions to be more serious than moral transgressions, while older children evaluate moral transgressions as more serious than prudential transgressions. The findings of the present study did not support this conclusion. Younger children viewed the two types of

transgressions as equally serious, while older children considered the prudential transgression to be more serious than the moral one. A possible explanation for this discrepancy lies in the selection of age groups used in the two studies. In Catron and Masters' study, the older and younger groups differed by approximately 7 years and the mean age of the older group was 12. In contrast, not quite five years separated the groups in this study, and the mean age of the older group was 9. Perhaps the age difference in this study was not large enough to reflect developmental change. Another explanation for the discrepancy lies in the scenarios used in the two studies. Similar vignettes were used in the case of the moral transgression, but the prudential transgression differed. Catron and Masters used two scenarios: lighting matches and opening a bottle of poison, whereas I used running in the street after a ball. Perhaps in young children's view, hitting a child is worse than running in the street, but not worse than lighting matches or opening a bottle of poison.

#### *Children's Beliefs about the Fairness and Justness of Physical Punishment*

*Findings for the total sample.* Overall, half of the children in this study considered physical punishment to be a fair response to the prudential transgression and about two-thirds considered it a fair response to the moral transgression. A very interesting finding emerged when children were asked about their assessments of the justness of physical punishment. First, they were asked whether they considered it to be "right" or "wrong" for each type of transgression. Consistent with previous research findings (Cutting, 2001; Horgan, 2002), most considered it to be "wrong" in both situations. Therefore, in response to the prudential transgression, half of the children considered physical punishment to be unfair and two-thirds considered it to be "wrong".

This finding suggests that the majority of children do not consider physical punishment to be an appropriate response to violations of safety rules.

In the case of the moral transgression, most of the children believed that physical punishment itself was a morally wrong response – but two-thirds had considered it to be fair in this situation. This finding raises important questions about children’s understanding of fairness and justice. It might be the case that they consider fairness to reflect the equivalence between the transgression and the penalty – both are serious – but that they also recognize that if a child’s hitting of a peer is wrong, so is the parent’s hitting of the child. With such a large proportion of children believing physical punishment to be morally wrong, it is puzzling why more children did not name negative outcomes resulting from physical punishment, such as learning to hit others. This is discussed in more detail, along with other effectiveness findings.

The children in this study also were asked whether, if the police said that parents can/cannot spank their children any more, their assessment of physical punishment’s morality would change. For both transgression types, most of the children’s assessments did not change, indicating that, in general, they believe that the justness of physical punishment is a moral issue.

*Findings across age groups.* It was expected that younger children would judge physical punishment as fairer and as more just than older children for both moral and prudential transgressions. This hypothesis was not supported. Although the age difference was statistically significant, it was in the direction opposite to the one expected; older children tended to view physical punishment as fairer than younger children for both types of transgressions. Older children also were more likely to view

physical punishment as “right” in both situations. Across transgressions, only one-quarter of younger children, but one-half of older children, considered it to be “right”. Moreover, younger children were more likely to maintain their answers when challenged by the question of whether the police could change its morality; at least three-quarters of the younger children maintained their answers, while about half of the older children did so. Together, these findings suggest that younger children are more likely than older children to view physical punishment as unfair, morally wrong, and as a moral absolute.

This finding supports those of Dobbs et al. (2006) who found that children are more likely to consider physical punishment to be acceptable and appropriate as they become older. Such findings may have important implications for understanding the intergenerational transmission of physical punishment. It might be the case that children initially recognize the inherent contradiction in being hit as punishment while being taught that hitting is wrong. This situation would be expected to produce cognitive dissonance, particularly because both messages are being sent by the parent, who is the child’s primary moral guide. Over time, the child might begin to resolve this dissonance by placing parental hitting into a different category from children’s hitting and coming to view the former as acceptable, while learning that the latter is unacceptable. Research findings are consistent in demonstrating that individuals who experienced physical punishment as children are more likely to approve of it than those who did not experience it – a finding which, to some extent, defies logic (e.g., Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999). The present findings, together with those of Dobbs et al. (2006), suggest that this approval evolves over time as a means of resolving cognitive conflict.

*Children's Beliefs about Physical Punishment's Effectiveness and Necessity*

*Findings for the total sample.* It was expected that most of the children in the sample would assess physical punishment as ineffective. On the contrary, most believed that physical punishment would be effective in teaching children not to perform each type of transgression, although they thought it would be less effective in the case of the moral transgression. When asked what else they thought the children in the scenarios would learn from the punishment, about half simply repeated what they thought physical punishment would teach the child, as per the previous question. However, as predicted, most of the children believed that physical punishment is less effective than other methods; virtually none of the children in the sample believed that physical punishment is the most effective way to teach children in either type of situation. Furthermore, very few thought that it was necessary. Therefore, children believe that, although physical punishment might induce compliance, it is neither the best nor a necessary method of doing so.

Most of the children in the sample suggested that inductive methods would be the most effective in teaching children not to run into the street or hit their peers. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies demonstrating that children tend to suggest reasoning and talking with the child as the best way to teach a child (Carlson, 1991; Sorbring et al., 2005). Dobbs et al. (2006) found, in fact, that the majority of children in their sample said, "physical punishment was the worst thing parents could do" (p. 151). Similarly, in the present study, only 2 responses out of 60 suggested that physical punishment was the best way to teach a child.

*Findings across age groups.* It was expected that younger children would evaluate physical punishment as more effective than older children. On the basis of cognitive-developmental theory, it was predicted that, with age, children would become increasingly able to understand that people for whom they have positive feelings can act in ways that have negative effects. Therefore, it was expected that, compared with younger children, older children would evaluate physical punishment as less effective and would be more likely to identify its negative secondary effects. Due to their broader range of experience, it was also predicted that older children would be more likely to consider physical punishment to be unnecessary and that they would suggest a wider range of disciplinary responses to transgressions that are more effective than physical punishment.

Older children evaluated physical punishment as less effective in the case of the moral transgressions, and did provide a wider range of disciplinary responses to transgressions, but the rest of these hypotheses were not supported. Children's beliefs about physical punishment's effectiveness did not vary by age for the prudential transgression, nor did their ability to identify its negative secondary effects. Almost all of the children in this sample believed that physical punishment would be effective in the situations described. This finding is surprising, given the results of previous studies using both hypothetical vignettes and actual experience demonstrating that children view physical punishment as ineffective. The difference in findings could stem from the questioning method. Previous researchers have asked children about physical punishment's effectiveness in general, whereas in the present study, physical punishment's effectiveness in specific situations was in question. The fact that few

children in this study identified negative secondary effects, such as learning that hitting is acceptable, might reflect the way in which the question was asked. Perhaps if the children had been asked specifically about what might be learned “besides not to hit/run in the street”, more negative secondary effects would have been identified.

Children in both age groups were equally likely to consider physical punishment to be unnecessary and to believe that inductive disciplinary methods are the most effective. Earlier research also has shown that children tend to favour inductive disciplinary methods (Barnett et al., 1996; Willow & Hyder, 1998). The present findings converged with those of Willow and Hyder (1998) who also found that older children suggest a wider variety of alternatives to physical punishment.

#### *Children’s Beliefs about the Emotions Generated by Physical Punishment*

*Findings for the total sample.* It was predicted that children would believe that physical punishment would generate primarily negative emotions in both the mother and the child. This hypothesis was supported; virtually all children thought both mother and child would experience negative affect following physical punishment, such as sadness, anger, embarrassment, or guilt. This finding is consistent with those of past research demonstrating that children think that spanking hurts and is upsetting (Dobbs et al., 2006; Willow & Hyder, 1998). These findings are important in light of their consistency across methodologies. Previous research has primarily used qualitative focus groups emphasizing children’s personal experiences to investigate their perceptions of affect following physical punishment. It appears that children are keenly aware of feelings arising from physical punishment, even when concentrating on hypothetical situations.

Several studies have demonstrated that physical punishment predicts poorer parent-child relationships (Gershoff, 2002). The children in this sample might be providing an explanation for this finding; the sadness, anger and embarrassment that they view as a consequence of physical punishment might contribute to an erosion of trust and security within the parent-child relationship. Further, these children's responses might help to explain the finding that physical punishment predicts lower levels of moral internalization; while the child might comply, it could be to avoid further embarrassment or negative interactions with their parents, rather than because they have internalized the prosocial reasons for complying.

*Findings across age groups.* It was predicted that younger children would identify more physical and fewer emotional responses to physical punishment than older children and that older children would be more likely than younger children to identify negative maternal emotions. Neither of these hypotheses was supported. Younger children were as likely to identify emotional responses to physical punishment as older children. This finding is inconsistent with those of Willow and Hyder (1998). This difference might be due to a difference in methodology. Willow and Hyder (1998) asked children what it feels like to be smacked, thereby encouraging them to think about their own experiences. This question might have triggered memory of physical sensations of real pain that they had experienced. In the present study, however, children were specifically asked to think about hypothetical scenarios. This method might have provided enough distance from the children's own experiences for them to cognitively bypass the physical sensations and focus on the affect.

Virtually all children in both age groups identified negative maternal emotions. While in contrast to what was predicted, the finding is consistent with those of Willow and Hyder (1998) who found that children identified a wide range of negative parental emotions and actions following physical punishment. It is curious why children were quite able to identify emotions internal to the mother, but were not able to speculate on what her internal motives might be. Perhaps because identifying emotions only requires a child to think about things they have seen, whereas “why” questions require one to think about internal thought processes, this made it a more difficult task for children. Alternatively, children may have assumed the mother was feeling the same way the child was, and responded similarly due to egocentrism.

#### *Practice and Policy Implications*

These findings have important implications for parent education. As children appear to know, physical punishment can induce immediate compliance (see Gershoff, 2002), but it is a relatively ineffective method of teaching the child in the long term (Durrant, Ensom, and Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth, 2004). The negative developmental outcomes associated with physical punishment (Gershoff, 2002) might be partially attributable to children’s evaluations of the parent’s behaviour as morally wrong. Children who are feeling unjustly treated while knowing that discussion of their transgressions would help them to learn, could be expected to feel resentment and hostility, which, in turn, could fuel the increased aggression that has consistently been identified as a correlate of physical punishment. If the child being punished considers the punishment to be unnecessary and morally wrong, its effectiveness is likely to be diminished over time.

This information could be very helpful to parents who are either struggling to eliminate their use of physical punishment or who are difficult to engage in discussions of its risks. Perhaps by learning what children themselves think about it and how those thoughts might undermine their disciplinary goals, these parents might be more receptive to learning new approaches to discipline. The inclusion of information on children's views of physical punishment in parent education programs could, therefore, increase their effectiveness.

The Government of Manitoba has recently introduced the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P: Sanders, 1999) across the province. This program aims, among other things, to spread the idea that parents can promote confidence and competence in their children by choosing alternatives to physical punishment. The Government of Canada delivers the Nobody's Perfect program (Health Canada, 2003) nationally to parents identified as at-risk for maltreating their children. This program also contains a no-hitting message. The effectiveness of both of these programs could be enhanced by including information about children's negative views of physical punishment, the potential impact of their thoughts and feelings on the parent-child relationship, and their ideas about more effective teaching methods. Encouraging parents to empathize with their children in this way could be an important component of programs aimed at preventing parental violence against children.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The findings of this study raised several interesting theoretical issues. For example, it is debatable whether the children's responses were valid reflections of their objective thoughts. While this might indeed be the case, it might also be true that when

asked to evaluate parental behaviour, children may feel threatened by responding in ways that criticize their parents, and therefore respond in ways that indicate their acceptability of their parents' actions. Attachment theory might predict that children's emotional bonds with their parents contribute to a tendency to view their parent's actions in a positive light. To illustrate, most of the children in this study viewed physical punishment as fair. Perhaps this view reflects a need to protect their attachments.

The present findings raise interesting questions for cognitive developmental theory. This theory would predict that, as children age, their thoughts will become more complex based on their increasingly differentiated schemas. This theoretical idea was not strongly supported by the present findings. While the weak evidence for developmental change found in this study might be attributable to a narrow gap between ages, it also is possible that children's perceptions of physical punishment are relatively stable. If the latter is the case, children's physical punishment schemas might present a challenge to cognitive developmental theory.

#### *Limitations of the Present Study*

A number of limitations impact the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the present study, rendering it a preliminary look into the cognitive, affective, and moral processing of children regarding physical punishment. First, the sample was small and the sampling procedures were biased. This limitation stemmed from the difficulty I experienced in recruiting participants. I had attempted to obtain a sample representative of a range of socio-economic backgrounds. However, no parents responded to my recruitment attempts in lower income neighbourhoods, so the research population was expanded to include more middle- and upper-income neighbourhoods. Further, due to

the difficulty I experienced in recruiting children through day cares, I initiated a snowball sampling procedure. Once the snowball sampling was begun, the sample became primarily white and middle class. The sampling method, then, limits the generalizability of the findings, as well as the statistical power of the analyses to detect significant effects.

Second, the use of hypothetical vignettes may have compromised the study's ecological validity. That is, children's responses to imagined situations might not have captured their responses to the actual experience of being physically punished. The decision to use vignettes was made for ethical reasons. This method permitted the exploration of children's perspectives without requiring them to reveal their personal experiences. In this way, the ethical dilemma posed by asking children to discuss their experiences in the face of mandatory reporting laws was minimized.

Third, because parents were required to consent to their children's participation, the study may have been subject to consent selection bias; parents who spank their children may not have given consent out of concern about disapproval - or even of reporting - of their practices. To minimize consent bias, the consent letter did not specify that "spanking" was the focus of the study. Rather, it informed parents that the purpose of the study was to explore children's perspectives on parent-child interaction and their understanding of parents' responses to children's misbehaviour. However, it may be the case that parents who were insecure about their parenting practices were less likely to consent to participation in a study about parenting.

Fourth, parents' responses to the control measure (PRCM) may have been subject to social desirability effects. To minimize this problem, the entire PRCM scale was administered to parents in order to embed the physical punishment question, making it

less salient. In addition, the PRCM physical punishment question was altered so that it was suggestive of more “minor” forms of physical punishment. Further, parents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and encouraged to answer the questions truthfully. However, it is still possible that some parents underreported their use of spanking.

Fifth, because I was not blind to the purpose or hypotheses of the study, interviewer bias might have been introduced. The methodology was designed to minimize such bias; children interacted primarily with a neutral puppet that drew children’s attention away from me, minimizing the possibility that they would detect nonverbal cues conveying my attitudes or expectations. However, it is possible that I unknowingly conveyed my thoughts to the children through my vocal intonations.

Sixth, response bias may have had an impact on the findings. In other words, some aspects of the interview situation might have compromised the validity of children’s responses, such as response bias, order effects, and the nature of the questions asked. Although the children were told that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, they might have provided the responses that they thought I wanted to hear. In terms of order effects, it is possible that, after answering the questions about the moral transgression scenario, children got into response sets and provided similar answers to the questions about the prudential transgression scenario. Alternating the order of presentation of the scenarios would have controlled for this. In some instances, questions may not have been sensitive or direct enough to solicit a broad range of responses. For example, with regard to physical punishment’s secondary effects, a more suitable question may have been “what else might Billy learn, *besides not to hit?*” This question

may have solicited a broader range of secondary effects, and some that stretched into the long term. Also, the two-part question on the justness of physical punishment may have been too complex for some of the children in the sample to fully understand. It might be the case that the younger children did not comprehend the concept of an action being hypothetically against the law.

Finally, there is a possibility that children's responses may have been driven by their desire to avoid being spanked. That is, they might have expressed negative thoughts and feelings about spanking as an expression of their wish to avoid punishment. The limited research available, however, indicates that children actually accept punishment and even recommend it in some cases. For example, a group of Australian children suggested that parents make them clean their rooms, restrict access to video games, put away their favourite toys, make them fix the problem or pay for it, or otherwise administer negative consequences when they misbehave (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1994). (They also recommended non-punitive responses, such as giving them the opportunity to apologize and make up for what they have done.) Therefore, it is unlikely that the expression of negative responses to physical punishment would be driven by self-interest. Moreover, the interviewer emphasized to children the confidentiality of their responses.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

This study has provided a glimpse into children's thoughts about physical punishment, raising a number of interesting issues, both conceptual and methodological, that could be addressed in future research.

*Conceptual Issues*

The present study was based on a conceptual model of children's inner logic that comprised five components. This model was found to be useful for understanding children's views of physical punishment, but a number of questions remain unanswered. For example, the present findings raised interesting questions about children's own theories of learning. Although they believed that physical punishment would induce compliance, they also believed that it is neither a necessary component of teaching children nor the best method of doing so. It would be useful to know more about children's theories of how they learn, and what they learn from various parental responses, particularly over the long term.

Research on intergenerational transmission would suggest that children are most likely to use the disciplinary methods used by their parents, even if those methods are harsh (Bower-Russa, Knutson, & Winebarger, 2001). Why do children internalize, rather than reject, the administration of pain as a legitimate discipline method? The present findings suggest that children view physical punishment as more just as they get older. Long-term research is needed to examine whether children's perceptions of the legitimacy of physical punishment do indeed change over time and to explain why this change might occur. Further, children in the present study located the motives for parents' use of physical punishment within the child. Therefore, they might have limited understanding of the parental reasoning, stresses, or problem-solving abilities that influence parental responses to their behaviour. This difficulty in understanding what leads parents to strike children could be an important contributing factor to the legitimization of this response in children's minds. If they take responsibility for their

parents' aggression, they may increasingly come to "identify with the aggressor" and internalize, over time, the notion that hitting children is acceptable (Dobbs et al., 2006). Research on these questions could suggest important avenues for interrupting the intergenerational transmission of physical punishment.

The last step of the inner logic model, the child's behavioural response to the punishment, was not investigated in the present study. Doing so would require observational research to examine how children actually respond to physical punishment, whether by complying, transgressing further, or acting out – and how their behavioural responses relate to their cognitive and affective interpretations of the event. Further, children's cognitive and affective appraisals of physical punishment were investigated separately, rather than in interaction, in this study. Our understanding of children's thinking in disciplinary situations would be enhanced through an examination of the *interactions* among the components of the inner logic model. For example, perhaps children's interpretations of child affect are related to their assessment of physical punishment's fairness. Or maybe their appraisals of parental motives are related to physical punishment's effectiveness.

Finally, the finding that children consider physical punishment to be morally wrong raises questions about their perceptions of their rights. We know little about children's thinking about their own rights – how they define a right, when they think it is justifiable to violate a right, and so on. The present findings regarding children's views of the fairness versus the justness of physical punishment suggest that their thinking in this area is complex and merits further study.

*Methodological Issues*

The primary limitation of the present study was the sample size. In future studies, it will be important for researchers to anticipate the difficulties inherent in recruiting children as research participants and offer compensation to families for their participation. It is also recommended that data be collected during the school months (September to June), as families were less likely to participate in this study during July and August.

Studies involving interviews with children should take place in environments that are private, quiet and free of distractions. In the present study, day care regulations required that the interviews take place in a location where other children were present, potentially compromising the privacy of the interview and increasing the distractions present. In future studies of this kind, a private, quiet environment should be ensured.

The measures used in the present study could be improved. For example, the affect interpretations measures used tended to result in responses such as “good” or “bad”, particularly among the younger children. Pictures of facial expressions depicting a range of emotions might be useful in this situation. In addition, the psychometric properties of the scale used for the seriousness question have not been assessed. Evaluation of these properties would strengthen the present study’s findings. Finally, the two-part justness question could be refined to make it easier for young children to comprehend.

*Conclusion*

This study has contributed to the fledgling body of research on the perspectives of those most likely to experience physical punishment – children. It has addressed a

critical gap in the literature (Gershoff, 2002) which, to date, has focused almost exclusively on parents' perspectives or has been based on retrospective methods. The findings indicate that children understand what several decades of research have shown – that although physical punishment might induce compliance, it is unnecessary and less effective than teaching children through induction, even for transgressions that they consider to be very serious. They also recognize its negative emotional effects and consider it to be a violation of moral standards. These findings contribute to our understanding of children's inner logic and have potential to help us understand the intergenerational transmission of physical punishment. They also have implications for improving the effectiveness of violence prevention programs. Perhaps, by understanding the inner logic of the child, parents will be increasingly able to formulate effective problem-solving strategies, and policies and programs will increasingly acknowledge children's own perspectives on their learning.

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UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Appendix A: Letter for Day Care Directors

Faculty of Human Ecology  
Family Social Sciences

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-8344  
Fax: (204) 474-7592

**Children's Perspectives on Parental Discipline Project**

Dear Director:

**What do children think is the best way to teach them how to behave?**

Currently, this is a question without an answer. But I hope to find an answer that could help us to develop more effective parent education programs and reduce parent-child conflict. I am writing to ask for your help.

I am a Master's student in Family Social Sciences at the University of Manitoba. For my thesis research, I aim to understand how children think about discipline. I am exploring children's beliefs about why children misbehave, what they think parents' goals are when they punish them, how children feel and what they learn when they are punished, whether they think that spanking works, and how they think children learn best.

In this study, children will *not* be asked about their actual experiences of discipline. With the help of my puppet, "Splodge," children will be asked to provide their thoughts about hypothetical scenarios involving imaginary children. Splodge is an alien from another planet who wants to learn about life on Earth. He will tell the children about some situations that he has seen in which parents punished their children. He will then ask the children a series of questions that will explore their thoughts about these situations.

This research project is being supervised by three faculty members at the University of Manitoba – Dr. Joan Durrant and Dr. Douglas Brownridge (Department of Family Social Sciences) and Dr. Grant Reid (Faculty of Social Work). The project has received the approval of the University of Manitoba Joint Faculty Ethics Review Board.

I am writing to request your permission to send information letters to the parents of children attending your centre who are aged 3 to 5 and 8 to 10. The procedure is designed to present minimal disturbance to your centre's activities. First, I will bring envelopes to your centre that I will place in children's mail slots. In each envelope will be a parent information letter and consent form (copies are enclosed) and an envelope for returning the completed consent form to the centre. I will pick up the return envelopes and call the parents who have consented to having their children participate. I will answer their questions and arrange to interview their children individually at the centre at a time when it is most convenient for everyone involved.

When I meet with each child, I will explain the study in developmentally appropriate language and ask for the child's consent. With those who consent, I will carry out the interview, which will take 30 minutes at most. All interviews will be audio-taped to ensure that children's responses are recorded accurately.

Following the interview, parents will be asked to complete a brief (5-minute) questionnaire about their usual disciplinary methods. This questionnaire can be filled out by parents when they pick their children up from the centre or it may be taken home and returned to the centre, where I will pick it up. All procedures will protect the privacy of the children and parents involved.

In the event that the findings of this study are published, the anonymity of your centre and the children's and parents' identities will be preserved at all times. When the project is completed, I will send you a summary of the findings. I would be happy to meet with you and your staff to discuss the findings, if you wish.

I will call you within the next week to discuss the project and seek your consent for the centre's participation. If you have any questions about this project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me, my advisor, Dr. Joan Durrant, ([durrant@cc.umanitoba.ca](mailto:durrant@cc.umanitoba.ca); 474-8060), or the University of Manitoba Human Ethics Secretariat ([margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca); 474-7122).

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Nadine Sigvaldason, B.H.Ec, M.Sc. Candidate  
[umsigva1@cc.umanitoba.ca](mailto:umsigva1@cc.umanitoba.ca)  
474-8344

## Appendix B: Letter for Parents and Guardians



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Human Ecology  
Family Social Sciences

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-8344  
Fax: (204) 474-7592

Dear Parent or Guardian:

*"Why doesn't my child listen to me?"*

***"I wish I could read her mind."***

***"Maybe a spanking would work."***

All parents have thoughts like these. Sometimes it seems like children and parents are on different wavelengths and only a mind-reader could figure out what to do. Surprisingly, even psychologists don't know very much about how children think in difficult disciplinary situations. If we knew more about children's thinking, we could be much more helpful to parents as they face the challenges of childrearing.

I am a Master's student at the University of Manitoba. I am carrying out a research project on children's perspectives on discipline. I am talking with children to find out what they think in these situations. Why do they think children misbehave? What do they think parents are trying to accomplish when they punish them? Do they think that spanking works?

The findings of this project will be helpful to parents, who we know are always trying to understand their children better. The findings also will be helpful to professionals who want to find the best ways to support parents and families.

I am contacting families with children aged 3 to 5 and 8 to 10 to see if they are interested in participating in this project.

When families consent to participate, I will arrange an interview with the child at (name) day care centre. The Director has given permission for the interviews to take place there. In the interview, I will ***not*** ask children about their actual experiences of discipline. Instead, with the help of a puppet, I will describe hypothetical situations to them and ask them what they think about the children's and parents' actions in those situations. If a child begins to talk about personal experiences of physical punishment, I will conclude the interview to further minimize the risk of distress. The interview will take 30 minutes, at most, and will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you, your child, and the centre's staff. The interview will be audio-taped to ensure that your child's responses are recorded accurately.

Following the interview, I will ask you to complete a brief (5 minute) questionnaire about how you usually handle disciplinary challenges. You can fill out this questionnaire when you pick up your child at the centre, or I can send it home with you to complete. In either case, your answers will be kept completely private.

This research project is being supervised by three faculty members at the University of Manitoba – Dr. Joan Durrant and Dr. Douglas Brownridge (Department of Family Social Sciences) and Dr. Grant Reid (Faculty of Social Work). The project has received the approval of the University of Manitoba Joint Faculty Ethics Review Board.

If you decide not to have your child participate – or if you consent to participate but later decide to withdraw from the project – this will not have any negative consequences for you or your child. If you do participate, any information that you and your child provide will be kept strictly confidential. It will not be shared with the day care staff or anyone else. The only exception is due to the law that states that if, in the course of research, it becomes known that a child is being abused, I am legally required to tell someone who can help. If the findings are published, neither you nor the centre will be identified in any way.

If you are interested in having your child participate, please sign the enclosed consent form, seal it in the envelope provided, and place it in the secure box labelled “Research Study” that I have left near the front door of the centre. When I retrieve your consent form from the box, I will contact you to answer your questions and arrange a time to interview your child. I will be the only person with access to this box.

When the study is complete, I will be sending a summary of the findings to your child’s day care for you to read. There will also be extra copies if you want one to take home. If you have any questions about this project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me, my advisor Dr. Joan Durrant ([durrant@cc.umanitoba.ca](mailto:durrant@cc.umanitoba.ca); 474-8060), or the University of Manitoba Human Ethics Secretariat ([Margaret\\_bowman@umanitoba.ca](mailto:Margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca); 474-7122).

Sincerely,

Nadine Sigvaldason, B.H.Ec., M.Sc. Candidate  
[umsigva1@cc.umanitoba.ca](mailto:umsigva1@cc.umanitoba.ca)  
474-8344

## Appendix C:

## Consent Form for Parents and Guardians

I have read the information letter concerning this project and understand what it is about. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My child's participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw my child from the project at any time without any disadvantage to my child.
3. I understand that the research data on my child (audio-tapes and transcript) will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed and that all personal information (names and consent forms) will be destroyed at the end of the study.
4. I understand that my child will be asked the following questions: What is a spank? Why do parents spank and what do children learn from it? Is it right or wrong? What can parents do instead of spanking?
5. I understand that Nadine is legally obligated to notify the appropriate authorities should my child disclose information that indicates that my child may be being abused.
6. I understand that my child will not be interviewed without my child's consent.
7. I understand that only Nadine Sigvaldason and her supervisor, Dr. Joan Durrant, will have access to the information my child provides.
8. I understand that the results of the project may be published but my anonymity and my child's anonymity will be protected. I can read or pick up a summary of the findings, once the study is completed, at my child's day care.
9. I understand that I can contact Nadine (474-8344) should I need to discuss any issues that arise from this project for myself or my child. Questions or concerns can also be directed to the Human Ethics Secretariat at the University of MB (474-7122).

(Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) \_\_\_\_\_

Child's date of birth     /    /          Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
day month year

Day time phone numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Joint Faculty Ethics Review Board at the University of Manitoba. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

**APPENDIX D****Study Description and Assent Form for Children*****Script***

Hi \_\_\_\_\_. My name is Nadine. And this is Splodge. We're at your day care today to talk with some of the children here. Splodge is actually an alien from the planet Azote and he's very interested in learning what children on our planet think about things. He's **especially** interested in learning what children think at times when they break the rules.

You are one of the children we would like to talk to, but you don't have to talk with us if you don't want to. Even though I'm a grown-up, you can say no. Even if the **other** children want to talk with us and you **don't** want to, that's ok too. And even if we start talking and you want to stop, that's ok too.

We're interested in what **you** think, so there are no right or wrong answers to Splodge's questions. I will put the tape on so that we can remember what you've said. But at anytime you can tell me to turn it off and I will. After I go home, I will type up the words on the tape. But whatever you tell me will only be seen by me and my teacher (Joan). I won't talk to anyone else about the things you say today. I'm going to write a report on what I learn, but I won't use your name so people who read my report won't know that they are your words. So you can feel comfortable in telling me what you really think about things.

Your parents have said it's ok for us to talk today but we won't talk unless you **also** say it's ok. You can ask me any questions you like before you decide.

If you have any worries after our talk you can come and talk to me. I will keep everything private but if I think that you might not be safe I have to tell some other adults who can help me make you safe.

## **Assent Form**

Nadine has told me that:

- ❖ if I don't want to talk to her and Splodge today, that's ok.
- ❖ we will be talking about what kids think at times when they break the rules.
- ❖ there are no right or wrong answers and if I don't want to answer some of the questions that's ok.
- ❖ anytime I want to stop talking that's OK and she will turn the tape off.
- ❖ she is doing this for school work.
- ❖ she will write a report about her conversations with children, but she won't use my name in her report.
- ❖ the only people who will see or hear my words are Nadine and her teacher, Joan. The tape and the copy of my words from the tape will be kept private.
- ❖ if I have any worries about our talk I can talk with her.

Is it OK for me to talk to you today?

Is it okay for me to use the tape today?  
(Consent tape recorded)

## Appendix E Interview Protocol for Boys

### ***Part 1: Rapport Building***

Invite the child to colour with me and get to know each other (favourite activities, holidays, etc) in the interview setting. This will last approximately 10 minutes.

### ***Part 2: Introduction to Splodge***

Hi there (*child's name*). I am very glad you want to talk to me today. My name is Splodge and I'm an alien from the Planet Azote. This is my first visit to earth and it's a very interesting place. But so much of it is new to me. I have many questions about things I've seen and heard. Can I ask you some of my questions?

### ***Part 3: Training Questions***

#### ***a. Positive Item***

I've heard children talking about ice cream. What is that?  
 Why do children eat it?  
 Is it good or bad to eat ice cream?  
 How good/bad is it?  
 How do children feel when they eat it?

#### ***b. Negative Item***

I've also heard children talking about sickness. What is that?  
 Why do children get sick?  
 Is it good or bad to get sick?  
 How good/bad is it?  
 How do children feel when they get sick?

### ***Part 4: Screening Question***

Another thing I've heard children talking about is spanking. What is that?

- If child cannot answer correctly, ask:
  - I've also heard about trees. What is a tree?
  - Another word I've heard is "car." What is a car?
  - And how about this one – what is a skateboard?

Proceed to conclusion
- If child can answer correctly, proceed with research questions.

## *Part 5: Research Questions*

### **a. Moral Transgression**

I saw something happen the other day that I would like to understand. I was playing with two boys, Billy and Michael. We were at Billy's house and Billy's Mom was there too. We were colouring, and they both wanted the only red crayon. Michael grabbed it and then Billy hit him. Then Billy's Mom spanked him.

I want to understand what happened.

#### **Cognitive Appraisal**

- Why did Billy's mom spank him?
- Why did Billy hit Michael?

#### **Moral Assessment**

- Is it good or bad for a one child to hit another child?
  - How good/bad is it? (rating scale)

Was it fair for Billy's Mom to spank him?

- Do you think that spanking is right or wrong?
  - *If child says "right" ask:*
    - Imagine that the police said that parents couldn't spank their children for hitting any more. If that happened, would that make spanking wrong in that situation?
  - *If child says "wrong" ask:*
    - "Imagine that the police say that all parents should spank their children for hitting. If that happened, would that make spanking right in that situation?"

#### **Effectiveness Evaluation**

- Do you think spanking will work in teaching Billy not to hit other children?
- What else do you think Billy will learn from being spanked?
- What is the best way for Billy's Mom to teach him not to hit?
- I'll tell you something interesting about Planet Azote. Parents on Azote don't spank their children.
  - Do you think our children can still learn to not hit?

**Affect Interpretation**

- How do you think Billy felt after being spanked?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Billy felt inside?
- How do you think Billy's Mom felt after she spanked him?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Billy's Mom felt inside?

**b. Prudential Transgression**

I saw something else happen the other day that I would like to understand. I was outside playing ball with some of my new friends. One of them is named Zach. When Zach kicked the ball, it rolled onto the street. He ran out into the street to catch it. His Mom saw him run into the street and she spanked him.

I want to understand what happened.

**Cognitive Appraisal**

- Why did Zach's Mom spank him?
- Why did Zach run out into the street?

**Moral Assessment**

- Is it good or bad for a child to run out into the street?
  - How good/bad is it? (rating scale)
- Was it fair for Zach's mom to spank him?
- Do you think that spanking is right or wrong?
  - *If child says "right" ask:*
    - Imagine that the police said that parents couldn't spank their children for hitting any more. If that happened, would that make spanking wrong in that situation?
  - *If child says "wrong" ask:*
    - "Imagine that the police say that all parents should spank their children for hitting. If that happened, would that make spanking right in that situation?"

**Effectiveness Evaluation**

- Do you think spanking will work in teaching Zach not to run into the street?
- What else do you think Zach will learn from being spanked?
- What is the best way for Zach's Mom to teach him not to run into the street?
- Remember how I told you that parents on Azote don't spank their children?
  - Do you think our children can still learn to not run into the street?

**Affect Interpretation**

- How do you think Zach felt after being spanked?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Zach felt inside?
- How do you think Zach's Mom felt after she spanked him?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Zach's Mom felt inside?

***Part 6: Conclusion***

Thank you very much for teaching me about things on planet Earth. You have been very helpful. Do you have any ideas about what I should take from Earth back to my planet? Do you have any messages for the children on Planet Azote?

## Appendix F Interview Protocol for Girls

### ***Part 1: Rapport Building***

Invite the child to colour with me and get to know each other (favourite activities, holidays, etc) in the interview setting. This will last approximately 10 minutes.

### ***Part 2: Introduction to Splodge***

Hi there (*child's name*). I am very glad you want to talk to me today. My name is Splodge and I'm an alien from the Planet Azote. This is my first visit to earth and it's a very interesting place. But so much of it is new to me. I have many questions about things I've seen and heard. Can I ask you some of my questions?

### ***Part 3: Training Questions***

#### ***a. Positive Item***

I've heard children talking about ice cream. What is that?  
 Why do children eat it?  
 Is it good or bad to eat ice cream?  
 How good/bad is it?  
 How do children feel when they eat it?

#### ***b. Negative Item***

I've also heard children talking about sickness. What is that?  
 Why do children get sick?  
 Is it good or bad to get sick?  
 How good/bad is it?  
 How do children feel when they get sick?

### ***Part 4: Screening Question***

Another thing I've heard children talking about is spanking. What is that?

- If child cannot answer correctly, ask:
  - I've also heard about trees. What is a tree?
  - Another word I've heard is "car." What is a car?
  - And how about this one – what is a skateboard?

Proceed to conclusion
- If child can answer correctly, proceed with research questions.

## ***Part 5: Research Questions***

### **a. Moral Transgression**

I saw something happen the other day that I would like to understand. I was playing with two girls, Wendy and Megan. We were at Wendy's house and Wendy's Mom was there too. We were colouring, and they both wanted the only red crayon. Megan grabbed it and then Wendy hit her. Then Wendy's Mom spanked her.

I want to understand what happened.

#### **Cognitive Appraisal**

- Why did Wendy's mom spank her?
- Why did Wendy hit Megan?

#### **Moral Assessment**

- Is it good or bad for a one child to hit another child?
  - How good/bad is it? (rating scale)
- Was it fair for Wendy's Mom to spank her?
- Do you think that spanking is right or wrong?
  - *If child says "right" ask:*
    - Imagine that the police said that parents couldn't spank their children for hitting any more. If that happened, would that make spanking wrong in that situation?
  - *If child says "wrong" ask:*
    - "Imagine that the police say that all parents should spank their children for hitting. If that happened, would that make spanking right in that situation?"

#### **Effectiveness Evaluation**

- Do you think spanking will work in teaching Wendy not to hit other children?
- What else do you think Wendy will learn from being spanked?
- What is the best way for Wendy's Mom to teach her not to hit?
- I'll tell you something interesting about Planet Azote. Parents on Azote don't spank their children.
  - Do you think our children can still learn to not hit?

**Affect Interpretation**

- How do you think Wendy felt after being spanked?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Wendy felt inside?
- How do you think Wendy's Mom felt after she spanked her?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Wendy's Mom felt inside?

**b. Prudential Transgression**

I saw something else happen the other day that I would like to understand. I was outside playing ball with some of my new friends. One of them is named Susie. When Susie kicked the ball, it rolled onto the street. She ran out into the street to catch it. Her Mom saw her run into the street and she spanked her.

I want to understand what happened.

**Cognitive Appraisal**

- Why did Susie's Mom spank her?
- Why did Susie run out into the street?

**Moral Assessment**

- Is it good or bad for a child to run out into the street?
  - How good/bad is it? (rating scale)
- Was it fair for Susie's mom to spank her?
- Do you think that spanking is right or wrong?
  - *If child says "right" ask:*
    - Imagine that the police said that parents couldn't spank their children for hitting any more. If that happened, would that make spanking wrong in that situation?
  - *If child says "wrong" ask:*
    - "Imagine that the police say that all parents should spank their children for hitting. If that happened, would that make spanking right in that situation?"

**Effectiveness Evaluation**

- Do you think spanking will work in teaching Susie not to run into the street?
- What else do you think Susie will learn from being spanked?
- What is the best way for Susie's Mom to teach her not to run into the street?
- Remember how I told you that parents on Azote don't spank their children?
  - Do you think our children can still learn to not run into the street?

**Affect Interpretation**

- How do you think Susie felt after being spanked?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Susie felt inside?
- How do you think Susie's Mom felt after she spanked her?
  - *If child gives a physical feeling, ask:*
    - How do you think Susie's Mom felt inside?

***Part 6: Conclusion***

Thank you very much for teaching me about things on planet Earth. You have been very helpful. Do you have any ideas about what I should take from Earth back to my planet? Do you have any messages for the children on Planet Azote?

### Appendix G Parental Responses to Child Misbehaviour

With this short survey, I am interested in learning about children's experience of different techniques that mothers and fathers use in reaction to common child misbehaviours. Please indicate how frequently you and/or your partner use each of the following responses in an average week.

Number of times used as a response in an average week

	Never	Less than once	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9 or more times
Give an order or tell the child to do something without discussing why (e.g., "Because I said so")	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Reason (such as explain about rules or consequences of child's behaviour)	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Divert to acceptable activity.	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Negotiate with your child	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Threaten your child with withdrawing privileges or physical punishment	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Use time-out, social or Physical isolation (e.g. send child to room)	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Physically punish (e.g. spank or slap)	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Ignore or give no reaction to child's misbehaviour	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Withdrawal of privileges (e.g. child is not allowed to watch television)	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Yell in anger at the child	A	B	C	D	E	F	G



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

## Faculty of Human Ecology Family Social Sciences

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
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Dear Parent,

Earlier this year, you and your child participated in my study on how children think about discipline. I wanted to learn how children think they learn best; what they think works in serious situations, and whether they think that children learn from being spanked.

I interviewed 30 children between the ages of 3 and 10. I used a puppet who was described as being from another planet and wanting to learn about life on Earth. The puppet asked a number of questions about hypothetical situations in which children had broken the rules.

The children were **not** asked about what happens in your family. They were only asked for their thoughts about hypothetical situations.

From the children's answers, I learned that:

- ◆ Even very young children know that dangerous and harmful behaviour is very serious and that parents discipline their children in these situations because they want to teach them.
- ◆ Regardless of their age, children think that the best way for parents to teach them – even in very serious situations - is through explaining.
- ◆ Children think that talking about the reasons for rules and about hurt feelings is a very good way to teach them.
- ◆ Children are aware that spanking can work, but they think that it is not necessary, that it is unfair and that there are many better ways to teach them important things.
- ◆ Children think that spanking leads to feelings of sadness, anger and embarrassment in the child, and they recognize that the parent feels badly too.

Very few studies have investigated children's views of discipline. I hope that my findings will be useful to professionals who work with families. Sometimes understanding the child's perspective can help parents think of new approaches to discipline.

I thank you and your child for your participation. I greatly appreciate your time and your interest.

Sincerely,

Nadine Sigvaldason; M.Sc. Candidate