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# POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

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“If you talk to him calmly, he will be able to tell you everything and he won't fear you”

- Lessons learned on positive discipline

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The Oxford Dictionary's definition of discipline is "the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience."

In this definition, the responsibility for and the control of the individual's behavior lies within an external control that imparts and promotes an agreed set of behaviors. In the case of children, Gordon (1981) proposes that this kind of discipline indicates the presence of a controller, who places himself or herself in a position of dominance and hopes that the child will be compliant, submissive, controllable, nonresistant and above all, obedient. He goes on to unpack the concept by saying that in this context, disciplining children requires some form of power derived from administering rewards and punishment.

One of the most commonly used mode of discipline is physical punishment and is defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior", with the most frequent forms being spanking, slapping, roughly shoving the child and hitting with objects such as belts (Straus, 1991, 1994). According to Gordon (1981), physical punishment - which is often severe - is used by nine out of ten parents, on children of all ages, and is most common at home and school. The preference for physical punishment stems out of the fact that it is not only a normative form of discipline but also the belief that it is a highly effective and necessary to impart discipline in children to grow and learn well (Archambault, 2009; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996).

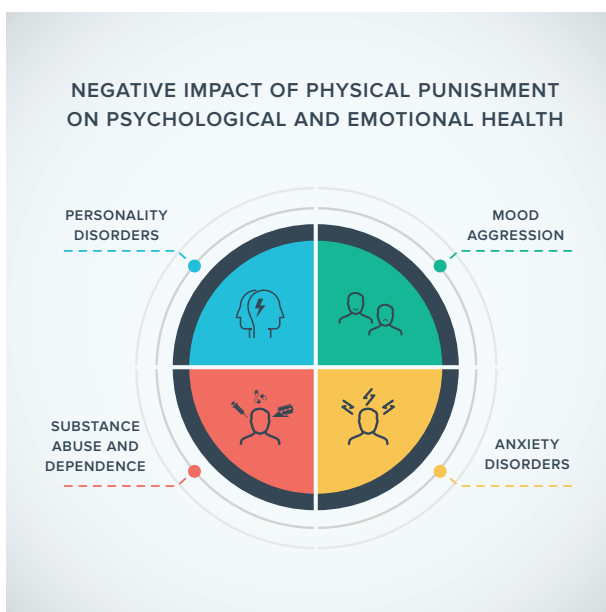
In Kenya, corporal punishment has had a long history, dating back to the colonial era, and is commonplace in many institutions including the home, school and even the judicial system where sentences could include infliction of several strokes of the cane (Ocobock, 2012). This is also true for many other cultures around the world where pain is associated with punishment (Archambault, 2009; Last, 2000) or where

discipline is almost synonymous to spanking (Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, & Pettinari, 1999). The fact that physical punishment also has a biblical connotation - Proverbs 13:24- "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." - makes the practice even more acceptable among many parents and adults in authority, with the understanding that if you do not punish the child then you do not love them. In spite of the commonplace nature of this form of punishment, it is not necessarily



legitimate. In fact, physical punishment is considered a contravention of basic human rights. In particular, it breaches Article 19 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which protects children from "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation". In addition to the pain and injury caused by physical punishment, the not so apparent effects are manifested in the negative psychological and emotional health. For instance, a study of the association of physical punishment and mental disorders from a nationally representative sample in the US found that physical punishment is associated with

mood aggression disorders, anxiety disorders, substance abuse and dependence, and personality disorders (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Sim & Ong, 2005). A meta-analysis by Gershoff (2002) also found strong evidence in the association between parental physical punishment and children's aggression, aggressive tendencies in adulthood, delinquent and antisocial behavior, impaired parent-child relationships and adolescent depression. Research has also shown that one of the unintended consequences of physical punishment in children is the association of love with violence since parents and caregivers are usually the first to hit the child (Straus, 1980).



Interestingly, a study on the effect of corporal punishment by Grogan-Kaylor (2004) found that there was no linear association between corporal punishment and antisocial behavior indicating that the earlier doesn't necessarily deter misbehavior. For discipline to be effective, Honig and Wittmer (1991) recommend the need to build a trusting and loving environment where children learn self-control and self-discipline without necessarily being hurtful. The same is echoed by Campbell (1992) who describes discipline as assisting children to acquire self-control and follow a set of standards. One of the effective techniques that has been widely used is positive discipline and it refers to encouraging children to develop positive behavior through non-violent approaches (physical or psychological). Additionally, it involves more of supporting the child to learn

the appropriate and desired behavior while at the same time remaining approachable, friendly, calm and respectful to them. That way, children are able learn by understanding the positive and negative consequences of their actions.

It is against this backdrop that this briefing paper highlights strategies and lessons learned in successfully implementing positive discipline by parents enrolled in the Advancing Learning Outcomes and Leadership Skills among Children in Nairobi's Informal Settlements through Community Participation (A LOT-Change) project. A LOT-Change is implemented by the African Population and Health Research Center, Miss Koch Kenya and U-Tena Youth Organization in Korogocho and Viwandani. It is an integrated community based after-school support program that seeks to improve learning outcomes among adolescents through homework support, mentoring in life skills, leadership training, financial support to assist in transition to secondary school and parental counseling. In the parental counselling sessions, parents are organized into support groups - facilitated by counselors - where they share parenting experiences and discuss solutions to problems parenting. They are also sensitized on how to better get involved in their children's lives and education



# KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF POSITIVE PARENTING STRATEGIES COVERED IN THE PARENTAL COUNSELLING SESSION

The first step in supporting parents is helping them understand themselves (self-awareness), which includes acknowledging their emotions, strengths, weaknesses and their roles in the society. The understanding behind this is that parents who understand themselves are able to successfully regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. For instance, parents are able to control their anger towards their children and as a result, become more approachable. This was corroborated by parents in the A LOT-Change project, who said that children tend to keep away from engaging with their parents if they deem them to be harsh.

It is only when parents are able to successfully recognize and manage their emotions and capabilities that they are encouraged to also

understand their children. Here, parents learn about important development phases that children undergo, and how that may influence their children's behaviors. For instance, they are sensitized on the physical and psychological changes in adolescents such as independent thought- process, experimentation, risk- taking, uninformed decision- making and peer pressure, all of which could impact their behavior. With this information, parents are thus able to support their children to successfully overcome the challenges associated with this phase rather than punishing them when they get into trouble.

"As a parent, I am not supposed to be harsh with him [the child] because if he is fearful, then he can't be open with you. If you talk to him calmly, he will be able to tell you everything and he won't fear you. You will be close. However, if you are harsh then he wouldn't open up"

- FGD, Male parents with sons in the program, Viwandani, 21072018

"After the training I was told that being harsh does not help. I have to lower my temper and only then can we discuss [issues] with her well. Initially, she would not share anything with me and she would often tell her friends that I am so harsh that even before she says anything I have attacked her..."

- FGD, Female parents with daughters in the program, Koarogoch, 24052018



*"You don't have to beat them especially when they are in adolescence. You just need to make it clear that they are not studying for you - it is for themselves and their families." (FGD, Female parents with sons in the program, Viwandani, 25052018)*

In the same breath, instead of complaining and punishing children for having 'bad' friends, parents are taught not to make unreasonable demands on the children, but rather advise them on important qualities to consider when choosing friends.

*"We have 'Gaza' (a local criminal gang) so you need to tell your child and also know who your child hangs out with. You need to sit him down and tell him to be careful of whom he spends time with..." (FGD, Female parents with sons in the program, Viwandani, 25052018)*

Another aspect covered in the counseling sessions is effective parent-child communication. The relationship between parents and their children is greatly improved when there is effective communication because children feel loved, heard and understood. Having open lines of communication also ensures that expectations are clearly communicated and consequently lived up to by children. Parents are however encouraged to also learn to be good listeners and allow their children to also contribute to discussions in a non-judgmental way.

*"I sit them down and I tell them, 'I don't want you to do this and that'. I also ask them to say what they want, or what they are thinking and if I have wronged them." (FGD, Female parents with daughters in the program, Korogocho, 24052018)*

Parents are encouraged to be honest and avoid lying to their children. This encourages children to be open and honest with their parents. In addition, feelings of mistrust may develop once they sense or realize that they are being lied to.

*"If they ask me for shoes and I don't have money, I should not tell them that I will buy for them next week. Instead, I should tell them that when I have money, I will buy them even without being asked...They need to be content*

*with what you have...By going for the trainings with my child, it has made it such that, in our house, whether we have or we don't have it's all the same." (FGD, Female parents with daughters in the program, Korogocho, 24052018)* When answering questions from their children, or when providing information on topics that

*"At times he asks me mum why it is that a man and a woman are in a relationship. I tell him that there he will get to an age when he will have a girlfriend and that they don't have to have sex; they can just be friends...I don't tell him that it is bad...If I tell him that he will keep wondering why I told him that it's bad without explaining why it is so."*

- FGD, Female parents with sons in the program, Korogocho, 24052018

they find difficult to discuss, parents are advised to always give complete explanations. The key reason is that insufficient information may result in children drawing conclusions that are not necessary true or getting wrong information from other sources. However, such discussions should not be one way. Parents are sensitized to allow their children to also ask questions, as it helps gauge how much information they have and the kind of information they are looking for.



*Parents are taught not to make unreasonable demands on children, but rather advise them on important qualities to consider when choosing friends*



# POSITIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES



# 1

## PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT SUSTAINABLE

While strategies like spanking may seem to work in correcting misbehavior, it only works in deterring children in engaging in the undesirable behavior rather than teaching them the consequences of engaging in that behavior. Unfortunately, as children get older and gain independence, physical punishment is no longer effective since parents no longer have as much control over them and children can then easily revert to the misbehavior. According to Gordon (1981), this is one of the reasons parents complain that their children seem to get naughtier with age.



# 2

## WORK ON ONE PROBLEM AT A TIME

Parents are advised to refrain from bringing up many different issues when attending to a conflict with their children. This can not only be very confusing to both parents and children, but also result in lack of a final amicable solution. Linked to this, parents are also sensitized on not dwelling in the past. Parents who constantly bring up their children's past wrongdoings are basically teaching them to hold onto bitterness. Children need to learn that when a matter is settled it remains settled.



# 3

## SOLVE PROBLEMS TOGETHER

As much as parents hold more authority over their children by virtue of being their caregivers and by virtue of their age, and experience, they are encouraged to work together with their children to find solutions that are agreeable to all parties and thus reducing conflicts. For instance, in the A LOT-Change project, parents and their children are sensitized on how to prepare a schedule of activities or timetable that covers school work, household chores and even play. This way, the child becomes more responsible, improves in their time management and planning skills.

*"...She has her own timetable and so she knows that on Monday she is studying this and on Tuesday it is the other. That timetable guides her." (FGD, Male parents with daughter in the program, Korogocho, 26052018)*



# 4

## USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Sometime during the heat of a disagreement, parents may lose their control and use abusive, disrespectful, threatening or criticizing language to their children. Parents in the A LOT-Change project are taught to appreciate that children are people too and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, since such direct attacks result in lowered self-esteem. However, whenever necessary, parents can criticize the behavior and not their children.



# 5

## ADDRESS ISSUES WHEN CALM

The message here is that parents should approach conflict situations without anger. This is because the experience for the child will be scary and unpleasant. On the other hand, if the discipline environment is peaceful, then the message received by the child may be that although the discipline is unpleasant, it is carried out in a careful manner with the child's best interests at heart (Mosby et al., 1999).

*"[One time] she came to tell me that she wants to tell me something but I should not get angry. She told me that a boy had told her that he loves her. She wanted to know how she should respond, and so she wanted an answer from me. So I first kept quite trying to see how I can answer her..." (FGD, Female parents with girls in the program, Viwandani, 25052018)*



# 6

## BE FIRM BUT FAIR



The use of positive disciplining strategies like talking to the child should not be interpreted as parents letting their guard down by encouraging bad behavior. On the contrary, parents should be vigilant to look out for indiscipline cases and be ready to impart the desirable behavior. According to parents enrolled in the A LOT-change project, although some indiscipline case sometimes call for caning, it should be done excessively to a point of maiming the child.

*"...you cannot hit your child with an iron rod...As parents, we should avoid anger that goes overboard...After disciplining the child you should talk to him and tell him that this and this is bad...You don't have to pamper the child every time calling them 'daddy', at times you have to discipline them so that they know you are the dad and give him the love of a parent." (FGD, Male parents with sons in the program, Viwandani, 21072018)*

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

One of the most referred to theories that explains the need for positive discipline is the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005) which proposes that children and adults - irrespective of cultural or ethnic differences - need love (acceptance) from their parents, caregivers or any other attachment figures. The lack of (rejection) results in detrimental effects on their behavior both in the short and long term. According to this theory, children who feel reject tend to be aggressive, dependent or defensively independent, impaired in self-esteem and have a negative worldview. For instance, because of the buildup of the negative outcomes related with rejection such as anger, mistrust, and other negative emotions, defensively independent individuals deliberately deny their need for support, encouragement, sympathy, love, and other forms of positive response. As a result they are fond of using terms like *"To hell with you! I don't need you! I don't need anybody!"* (Rohner, 2005). On the other hand, youth and adults who feel rejected have been found to be depressed and even tend to engage in drug and substance abuse.

Furthermore, a study by Grusec and Goodnow (1994) on the impact of parental discipline methods on children's internalization of values supports the acceptance-rejection theory. According to the study, children who perceive their parents' discipline strategies as irrational and unfair, are less likely to internalize the message being passed.



## CONCLUSION AND WAY FOWARD

With the increasing evidence that physical punishment results in far-reaching negative physical and psychological consequences, some of which persist to adulthood, it is important for parents and caregivers to embrace positive discipline strategies in influencing their children's behavior. However, for positive discipline to be effective it is imperative that parents and caregivers support their children to learn appropriate behavior within a warm, respectful and loving environment that doesn't exposure them to physical or psychological torment.

Taking into consideration that parents and caregivers have been shown to have little understanding of positive discipline strategies (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012), it is imperative to train and impart knowledge to parents on how they can raise their children in a warm and loving environment while at the same time promoting acceptable behavior. This is especially important considering that discipline strategies are intergenerational, with evidence indicating that people are more likely to raise their children the way they were raised by their parents (Archambault, 2009; Fry, 1993) and thus sensitizing parents on positive discipline strategies can assist break that barrier. What is therefore needed is to empower parents and caregivers with alternative positive discipline strategies for them to change their attitudes and practice against physical punishment rather than disempowering them through radical bans (Larzelere, Trumbull, Hain, Fry, & Waterston, 2000).

Since the A LOT-Change model has been proven to work on sensitizing parents to adopt positive discipline strategies, it should be implemented and tested in other settings to replicate these successes. In addition, evidence from this briefing paper is important in informing the ongoing competency based curriculum reforms in Kenya, especially on engaging parents to provide a supportive environment to ensure their children achieve their full potential (KICD, 2017). Specifically, the highlighted positive parenting strategies provide important evidence to inform the guidelines on parental empowerment and engagement that are key in implementing the competency based curriculum in Kenya. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH, 2017) positive and health relationships are built in an environment where parents are sensitive and responsive to their children. In addition, NIH postulates that children who have a strong emotional connection with their parents are able to learn ways of managing their feelings, behavior and develop self-confidence.

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