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Factors Associated With the Use of Violent Child Discipline Methods in Uganda: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Few studies have been conducted in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa on child discipline practices or methods compared to developed countries. This study aimed to identify factors associated with the use of violent child discipline methods in Uganda. The study utilized a complementary log-log regression model and analysed secondary data from the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey. Knowledge of law prohibiting child abuse, belief in whether a child needs to be physically punished, region, age of household head (50-59 years, 60-69 years & 70+ years), age of a child, education level of household head (higher), marital status of household head (widowed), and household size were significantly associated with ones likelihood of using a violent child discipline method. There is a need for interventions to boost access to and completion of higher education and create support structures in communities to help widowed parents cope with the loss of partners and readjust to changes in their lives. There is a need by the government to not only sensitize people about the negative effects of VCD methods but also ensure existing laws prohibiting VCD methods are enforced by the relevant authorities.

Introduction

Globally, in 2015, an estimated 1.7 billion children experienced some form of interpersonal violence of whom 1.3 billion had experienced corporal punishment at home (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). Violent child discipline (VCD) or corporal punishment refers to any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light as defined by The Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2010). VCD or corporal punishment may be either physical or psychological in nature (UNICEF, 2010). VCD involves using physical means to control children including shaking the child and hitting or slapping the child on the face, head, or ears among others (UBOS & ICF, 2018; UNICEF, 2010). Violent psychological discipline includes shouting, yelling, or screaming at the child and calling the child dumb, lazy, or a similar term among others (UBOS & ICF, 2018). Violent disciplinary approaches against children have been associated with trauma, child depression and behavioural problems, post-traumatic stress, eating disorders, and poor academic achievement among other negative outcomes (Elizabeth T. Gershoff, 2017; Guedes,

Bott, Garcia-Moreno, & Colombini, 2016; Lester, Lawrence, & Ward, 2017). There have been numerous efforts by the government of Uganda to address the high prevalence of VCD. Uganda as a country ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 (UHRC, 2017). Furthermore, The Children Act enacted in 1996 consolidated laws related to child care and protection, and the Children Act Amendment of 2016 expanded children's rights to include protection "against all forms of violence including sexual abuse and exploitation, child sacrifice, child labour, child marriage, child trafficking, institutional abuse, female genital mutilation, and any other form of physical or emotional abuse" (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2017). However, in Uganda, 85% of children aged 1 to 14 years have experienced a VCD method (UBOS & ICF, 2018). These included acts of psychological aggression (shouting, yelling, or screaming at the child, etc.), and physical punishment (shaking, hitting or slapping the child on the face, head, or ears, etc.). Countrywide, the proportion of children who had experienced psychological aggression, physical punishment and severe physical punishment stood at 73.9%, 67.7% and 16.2% respectively (UBOS & ICF, 2018). Unfortunately, only a small proportion of these acts are reported, investigated and perpetrators held accountable by the relevant authorities (Walakira & Ddumba, 2012). This could be attributed to the fact that most perpetrators are those closely associated with children such as parents and other caregivers. Secondly, this could be attributed to the societal and cultural acceptance of some of the VCD methods as normal even with the existence of laws and penalties that discourage their use (Walakira & Ddumba, 2012). A number of studies have been conducted to ascertain the determinants of VCD practices with the majority of the studies being conducted in developed countries compared to developing countries. A study in Vietnam reported a significant association between exposure to violent forms of discipline and a child's sex and age, primary caregiver's educational level, presence of parents in the household, and attitude toward corporal punishment (Cappa & Dam, 2014). Another reported a higher risk of suffering severe verbal and physical aggression in younger children (Hunter, Jain, Sadowski, & Sanhueza, 2000). Other significant risk factors included maternal depression, maternal education, and spouse abuse of the mother (Hunter et al., 2000). Few studies have been conducted in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa on CD practices or methods compared to developed countries. This has resulted in limited information on; disciplinary methods used by parents and reasons for using the specific methods; consequences of VCD methods to children both in the long and short term; risk factors for VCD methods and other aspects of CD. This in turn has made the development and implementation of policies and interventions to curb VCD, especially in homes given that the few studies in developing countries have focused on violent disciplinary methods in schools (Masath, Hermenau, Nkuba, & Hecker, 2020; Moyo, Khewu, & Bayaga, 2014; Ssenyonga, Hermenau, Nkuba, & Hecker, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to identify isk factors associated with VCD practices in households in Uganda.

Objectives

The main objective of this study was to identify the factors associated with the use of violent child discipline methods in Uganda.

Methods

Data source

The data used in this study was from the 2016 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS). The sample was selected in two stages after stratification at the regional level. Firstly, 697 enumeration areas (EAs) were selected from the 2014 Uganda National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) comprising 162 EAs in urban areas and 535 in rural areas (UBOS & ICF, 2018). In the second stage of sampling, households were selected. A listing of households was compiled in each of the 696 accessible selected EAs (UBOS & ICF, 2018).

Every EA that was selected and had more than 300 households was segmented and one segment was selected for the survey with probability proportional to segment size and it's within these that household listing was conducted (UBOS & ICF, 2018). Therefore, a 2016 UDHS cluster was either an EA or a segment of an EA. In total, a representative sample of 20,880 households (30 per EA or EA segment) was randomly selected (UBOS & ICF, 2018). The sample EAs were selected independently from each stratum using probability proportional to size. This study specifically considered only households selected for the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) module on Child Discipline (UBOS & ICF, 2018). The module asked questions about one de jure child selected randomly from all children aged 1 to 14 years in a given household. Therefore the final sample size considered for this study was 14,418 households.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using STATA Version 14.2 in three stages. Firstly, a descriptive summary of all plausible independent variables and the CD method was done using frequencies and percentages. Secondly, using Pearson's chi-square test, the association between the CD method and the plausible independent variables was tested. Independent variables that turned out significant ($p \leq 0.05$) at this level were considered for further analysis. Finally, given that the dependent variable, CD method was binary i.e. either a child was disciplined using a non-violent or violent method, the plausible models include the logistic regression model (logit), the probit regression model (probit) and the complementary log-log regression model (cloglog). The Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) was used to determine the model which fitted the data best. The model with the lowest AIC was considered the best-fit model and its results were reported

Results

Data source

Results in Table 1 show that most respondents used a violent disciplinary method (83.7%) and knew there was a law against child abuse (86.6%). More than half (51.8%) of the respondents believed that a child needs to be physically punished. The Eastern region (27.6%) had the highest proportion of households interviewed whereas the Central region (20.3%) had the lowest proportion. The majority of households were situated in rural areas (80.3%) and had household heads that were married (78.1%). The highest proportion of households were male -headed (68.1%), had household heads aged 30-39 years (29.9%), were in the poorest wealth index group, had household heads with primary education (54.6%) and had four household members (19.1%). The highest proportion of children considered for the child discipline module were aged 1-3 years (27.3%) and were female (50.1%).

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents and their households

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Child discipline method		
Non-violent	2,357	16.4
Violent	12,061	83.7
Know the law prohibiting child abuse		
No	1,934	13.4
Yes	12,484	86.6
Beliefs		
No	6,952	48.2
Yes	7,466	51.8

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents and their households

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Region		
Central	2,919	20.3
Eastern	3,984	27.6
Northern	3,636	25.2
Western	3,879	26.9
Residence		
Rural	11,577	80.3
Urban	2,841	19.7
Age of household head		
<30 years	2,679	18.6
30-39 years	4,315	29.9
40-49 years	3,213	22.3
50-59 years	2,008	13.9
60-69 years	1,302	9.03
70+ years	901	6.25
Sex of household head		
Male	9,819	68.1
Female	4,599	31.9
Marital status of household head		
Never married	244	1.7
Married	11,258	78.1
Widowed	1,619	11.2
Divorced	1,297	9.0
Age of child		
1-3 years	3,938	27.3
4-6 years	3,313	23.0
7-9 years	2,800	19.4
10-12 years	2,716	18.8
13+ years	1,651	11.5
Sex of child		
Female	7,223	50.1
Male	7,195	49.9
Household Wealth index		
Poorest	3,515	24.4
Poorer	3,053	21.2

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Middle	2,790	19.4
Richer	2,618	18.2
Richest	2,442	16.9
Education level		
No education	2,599	18.0
Primary	7,865	54.6
Secondary	2,692	18.7
Higher	1,262	8.8
Household size		
1-3 members	2,708	18.8
4 members	2,755	19.1
5 members	2,626	18.2
6 members	2,097	14.5
7-8 members	2,699	18.7
9+ members	1,533	10.6

Table 2 presents the results of the association between the CD method and plausible independent variables. Apart from the sex of the household head and the sex of a child, the rest of the variables had a significant association with the CD method used. Respondents who knew that there was a law against child abuse (84.2%) and those who believed that a child needs to be physically punished (90%) had the highest proportion that used VCD methods. VCD methods were highest in the Western (87.9%) and Eastern (87.6%) regions as well as rural areas (84.4%). Use of VCD methods was highest among households whose head was aged 30-39 years (85.2%), female (84.4%), married (84.1%) and with primary level education (85.1%). Still, households in the middle wealth index group (86%) and those with 9 and above members (87.6%) also had the highest proportion using VCD methods. Children who were aged 4-6 years (88.4%) and males (84.2%) had the highest proportion experiencing VCD methods.

Table 2: Relationship between child discipline method and associated factors

Variable	Child discipline method			
	Non-violent	Violent	n	p-value
Know the law prohibiting child abuse				
No	19.5	80.5	1,934	0.000
Yes	15.9	84.2	12,484	
Beliefs				
No	23.2	76.8	6,952	0.000
Yes	10.0	90.0	7,466	

Table 2: Relationship between child discipline method and associated factors

Variable	Child discipline method			
	Non-violent	Violent	n	p-value
Region				
Central	22.9	77.1	2,919	0.000
Eastern	12.4	87.6	3,984	
Northern	20.0	80.0	3,636	
Western	12.1	87.9	3,879	
Residence				
Rural	15.7	84.4	11,577	0.000
Urban	19.2	80.8	2,841	
Age of household head				
<30 years	17.5	82.5	2,679	0.000
30-39 years	14.8	85.2	4,315	
40-49 years	15.3	84.7	3,213	
50-59 years	17.0	83.0	2,008	
60-69 years	18.1	81.9	1,302	
70+ years	20.1	79.9	901	
Sex of household head				
Male	16.7	83.3	9,819	0.092
Female	15.6	84.4	4,599	
Marital status				
Never married	25.4	74.6	244	0.000
Married	15.9	84.1	11,258	
Widowed	17.2	82.8	1,619	
Divorced	17.4	82.7	1,297	
Age of child				
1-3 years	19.4	80.6	3,938	0.000
4-6 years	11.6	88.4	3,313	
7-9 years	14.6	85.4	2,800	
10-12 years	15.9	84.1	2,716	
13+ years	22.3	77.7	1,651	
Sex of child				
Female	16.9	83.1	7,223	0.070
Male	15.8	84.2	7,195	
Wealth index				
Poorest	17.1	82.9	3,515	0.000

Variable	Child discipline method			
	Non-violent	Violent	n	p-value
Middle	14.0	86.0	2,790	
Richer	15.0	85.0	2,618	
Richest	20.8	79.2	2,442	
Education level				
No education	16.5	83.5	2,599	0.000
Primary	14.9	85.1	7,865	
Secondary	16.8	83.2	2,692	
Higher	24.3	75.8	1,262	
Household size				
1-3 members	21.4	78.6	2,708	0.000
4 members	16.6	83.4	2,755	
5 members	15.4	84.6	2,626	
6 members	14.4	85.7	2,097	
7-8 members	15.7	84.3	2,699	
9+ members	12.4	87.6	1,533	

Table 3 provides a summary of the results of the AIC for the three plausible models i.e. the logistic regression model (logit), the probit regression model (probit) and the complementary log-log regression model (cloglog). Since the cloglog had the lowest AIC (12122.1), it fitted the data better than the rest.

Table 3: Comparison of plausible models

Model	Obs	ll(null)	ll(model)	df	AIC	BIC
logistic	14,418	-6421.6	-6033.6	31	12129.1	12364.0
cloglog	14,418	-6421.6	-6030.0	31	12122.1	12356.9
probit	14,418	-6421.6	-6031.4	31	12124.8	12359.7

Table 4 provides a summary of the results from the complementary log-log regression model of the CD method on the selected plausible independent variables. The residence and wealth index had no significant effect ($p>0.05$) on the CD method used. Respondents who knew that there was a law prohibiting child abuse were more likely to use a VCD method compared to those who didn't know of any law against child abuse. Similarly, the likelihood of using a VCD method was higher for respondents who believed that a child needs to be physically punished. Concerning region, respondents from the Eastern and Western regions were more likely to use a VCD method compared to those from the Central region. On the contrary, respondents from the Northern region were less likely to use a VCD method compared to those from the Central region. Households whose head was aged 50-59 years, 60-69 years and at least 70 years were less likely to use a violent child disciplinary method compared to households whose head was less than 30 years old. Households with a child aged 4-6 years, 7-9 years and 10-12 years were more likely to use a VCD method compared to households with a child aged 1-3 years. On the contrary, households with a child aged 13 years and above were less likely to use a VCD method

compared to households with a child aged 1-3 years. Households whose heads had attained higher education were less likely to use a VCD method compared to households whose heads had no formal education. Households whose head was widowed were more likely to use a VCD method compared to households whose head was never married. For households with 4 members, the likelihood of using a VCD method was higher compared to households with 1-3 members. The likelihood of using a VCD method was also significantly higher for other household size categories as well in comparison to households with 1-3 members.

Table 4: Multivariate analysis of factors associated with the CD method used.

Variables	exp(b)	95% CI	
Know the law prohibiting child abuse			
No (ref)	1.00		
Yes	1.07**	1.01	1.14
Beliefs			
No (ref)	1.00		
Yes	1.50**	1.43	1.57
Region			
Central (ref)	1.00		
Eastern	1.13**	1.05	1.21
Northern	0.92**	0.86	1.00
Western	1.10**	1.03	1.18
Residence			
Rural (ref)	1.00		
Urban	1.01	0.94	1.07
Age of household head			
<30 years (ref)	1.00		
30-39 years	1.02	0.96	1.09
40-49 years	0.97	0.90	1.05
50-59 years	0.91**	0.84	0.99
60-69 years	0.87**	0.79	0.95
70+ years	0.82**	0.73	0.91
Age of child			
1-3 years (ref)	1.00		
4-6 years	1.29**	1.21	1.37
7-9 years	1.16**	1.09	1.24
10-12 years	1.12**	1.05	1.20
13+ years	0.92**	0.85	1.00
Wealth index			
Poorest (ref)	1.00		

Variables	exp(b)	95% CI	
Middle	1.04	0.97	1.12
Richer	1.06	0.99	1.14
Richest	1.00	0.91	1.09
Education level of household head			
No education (ref)	1.00		
Primary	0.99	0.93	1.05
Secondary	0.95	0.88	1.03
Higher	0.77**	0.70	0.85
Marital status of household head			
Never married (ref)	1.00		
Married	1.16	0.98	1.37
Widowed	1.21**	1.01	1.45
Divorced	1.14	0.96	1.37
Household size			
1-3 members (ref)	1.00		
4 members	1.12**	1.05	1.20
5 members	1.15**	1.07	1.23
6 members	1.20**	1.12	1.30
7-8 members	1.14**	1.06	1.23
9+ members	1.30**	1.19	1.42

***p ≤ 0.05, (ref.) – reference category, exp(b) – exponentiated coefficients*

Discussion

The study sought to identify factors associated with the use of VCD methods among households in Uganda. The significance of knowledge of law prohibiting child abuse could be attributed to the influence of information on the choices or decisions one makes. The increased likelihood of using a VCD among respondents who knew that there was a law prohibiting child abuse is contrary to what would ideally be expected. This could be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, the existing laws prohibiting VCD methods have not been adequately implemented or enforced and failed to clearly provide alternative discipline methods hence the continued reliance on VCD methods regardless of having knowledge of laws prohibiting VCD (Ssenyonga et al., 2018). Still, the UDHS survey tool only captured information about the respondent's knowledge of a law that prohibits child abuse but never had questions to probe further into which laws one knew specifically concerning child abuse. A study in Liberia found that 83 percent of caregivers knew laws about the care and safety of children although only 23 percent were able to name two or more of the laws (Ruiz-Casares, 2011). This has serious implications since the likelihood of a parent or caregiver having a positive change in attitude or practice regarding child discipline is going to be low if they don't have clear and detailed information or are unable to recall knowledge they have been exposed to concerning child discipline. The increased likelihood of using VCD methods by respondents who believed that a child needs to be physically punished was consistent with findings by several studies (Afifi et al., 2022; Assem & Khalifa, 2017; Chen, Pan, & Wang,

2021; Taylor et al., 2016). This could be attributed to their belief that the VCD methods they use are normal, required and expected in order to raise children (Afifi et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2016). The significance of regional differences is consistent with findings by some studies (Amoah, Nortey, & Alhassan, 2020; Desta et al., 2022; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2021). This could be attributed to the variations in the types of interventions and their intensity by the government and other stakeholders across the regions of the country to tackle violence against children. Still, this could be attributed to the various regions of Uganda being occupied by different ethnic groups that have varying traditions and customs which may affect their knowledge, attitude and use of VCD methods. The significance of age of the household head and the age of the child is consistent with findings by (Amoah et al., 2020; Cappa & Khan, 2011). Another study found that the effects of violent discipline were higher for older children (5 to 14 years) compared to those of younger ages (Gao, Mi, Wang, Zou, & Zhou, 2021; Hunter et al., 2000). This could be attributed to parents' perception that children require harsher disciplinary methods as they grow older (Mohammed & Samak, 2017). Studies have found that the age of the household head had a significant effect on the likelihood of using a physical discipline method (Amoah et al., 2020) with younger parents using physical punishment more frequently compared to older parents (Hreish, 2011). The reduced likelihood of using VCD methods with an increase in the age of the household head could be attributed to older household heads being more experienced with regard to the most appropriate parenting methods as well as how to cope with various stressors and demands that come with parenting (Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, 2002; Hreish, 2011). The lower likelihood of using VCD methods by household heads with higher education is consistent with findings by some studies (Cappa & Dam, 2014). Low parental education has been reported by several studies as a risk factor for the use of VCD methods (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Hunter et al., 2000; Murphy et al., 2018) with other studies reporting a lower support for physical punishment in general the higher a parent's education level (Berger, 2005; Hreish, 2011; Khoury-Kassabri, 2010). This can be attributed to the influence of formal education knowledge, practices and attitudes students are exposed to while in educational institutions (UNICEF, 2010). Still, given that education institutions emphasize the use of language and verbal interaction to communicate, this lays a foundation for the parenting approach one will use in the future with one opting to use non-violent language as opposed to using physical disciplinary or psychologically aggressive methods (UNICEF, 2010; Uribe, LeVine, & LeVine, 1993). A study also reported that parents with tertiary education are more likely to use authoritative or permissible parenting styles and to comprehend the effectiveness of counselling or instruction through interaction (Mitchell, 2008; Mohammed & Samak, 2017). The increased likelihood of using VCD methods among widowed household heads can be attributed to several reasons including grief and depression from the loss of one's partner while dealing with more child-care duties, adjustment to different parenting roles, and reduction in financial resources (Hagan et al., 2012; Yopp et al., 2019). The significance of household size is consistent with findings by (Gao et al., 2021) who reported higher odds of VCD with household crowding. This could be attributed to the effect of household crowding or large household sizes on the increased likelihood of mental health issues such as depression, psychological distress, alcohol abuse, and anxiety (Riva, Larsen, & Bjerregaard, 2014; Wang & Liu, 2022; WHO, 2018) which in turn stimulates the use of VCD methods (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Gao et al., 2021). Still, the crowding may result in aggression in adults which increases the risk of victimizing children (Gao et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The factors found to be significantly associated with the CD method used included knowledge of the law prohibiting child abuse, belief in whether a child needs to be physically punished, region, age of household head (50-59 years, 60-69 years & 70+ years), age of child, education level of household head (higher), marital status of household head (widowed),

and household size. Given that there are regional variations in the use of VCD methods, interventions by the government and other stakeholders to reduce the prevalence of VCD methods should be tailored specifically to the different regions to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. There is a need for the government and other key stakeholders to come up with interventions to boost access to and completion of higher education due to its direct and indirect benefits on how parents discipline their children. There is also a need to create support structures in communities to help widowed parents cope with the loss of partners and help them readjust to changes in their lives such as shifting from co-parenting to single-parenting among others. This will help them cope with stress, depression and other mental health issues that could negatively impact how they relate with and parent their children or dependents. There is also a need to educate people about the negative effects of large households and implement other interventions aimed at regulating household crowding such as the promotion and provision of family planning services among others. There is a need for the government to not only sensitize people about the negative effects of VCD methods but also ensure existing laws prohibiting VCD methods are enforced by the relevant authorities.

Declaration

Ethics approval: The study used secondary data. A formal request was placed through The DHS Program website to allow access to and download the data.

Consent for publication: Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials: The dataset used for this study is publicly available upon formal request from the DHS program website. https://dhsprogram.com/data/dataset/Uganda_Standard-DHS_2016.cfm?flag=0

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Author's contributions: DAC formulated the topic, analysed the data and drafted the manuscript.

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