

# Physical and psychological punishment against children and educational practices in Portugal

UMAR, 2019

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Project title: **Children Help movement Against Physical Threatening and Emotional Repression**  
Project number: JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/CORP/9176

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## INTRODUCTION

The following study was implemented in the development of the project CHAPTER - Children Help movement Against Physical Threatening and Emotional Repression. This international Project was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program: Daphne call - Action grants to support transnational projects on the elimination of corporal punishment for children - JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/CORP, funded by the European Commission.

In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), article 19 (Protection from all forms of violence) it can be read that "Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them". The World Health Organization (WHO) sustains that "child abuse and neglect is a public health issue requiring deeper understanding of the underlying process" (1999: 9).

General Direction of Health of Portugal (Direção Geral da Saúde) argues that "Abuse in children and young people refers to any non-accidental action or omission perpetrated by parents, caregivers or others, that threatens the victim's safety, dignity and biopsychosocial and affective development" (DGS; 2011, 7). Ill-treatment of children and youth can be presented in 5 ways: 1) neglect; 2) physical maltreatment; 3) sexual abuse; 4) psychological / emotional maltreatment; 5) Munchausen's syndrome by proxy (DGS, 2011).

Magalhães (2004: 33) defines ill-treatment as "any form of physical and/or emotional non-accidental and inadequate treatment caused, by dysfunctions and/or deficiencies in relationships between children or young people and older people, in a context of relationship of responsibility, trust and/or power. [...] By the repeated manner in which they usually occur, they deprive the minor of their rights and freedoms by affecting their health, development (physical, psychological and social) and/or dignity, in a concrete or potential way".



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APAV (2011: 11) add that "any non-accidental action or omission perpetrated by parents, caregivers or others (e.g., institutions charged with the care of children or young people) threatens safety, dignity and the biopsychosocial and emotional and affective development of the victim". There are other possible definitions, but it is important to highlight some of the most important points, such as their physical and emotional dimensions, their perpetrator (person responsible for the child), their nature (non-accidental and inadequate, not necessarily repeated) and its consequences (impacts emotional, relational, physical and cognitive development). The definition of this concept is important because it adds the more general aspects of what are forms of abuse and allows professionals to have a starting point in their intervention.

In Portuguese culture, corporal punishment is largely ignored as form of violence against children. Physical punishment against children and youth have a serious negative impact on their personality, social relationships and their connection with school. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that "The repercussions of child abuse are felt through increased violence in the home and at school, decreased school performance, a subsequent loss of work productivity and increased mental health disorders" (1999: 8).

Literature on this subject points out that violence is extremely harmful for the development of the child/youth, because they will grow up in a culture of violence and they will not properly develop their personal and learning skills. Moreover, growing up in a violent environment of any form will teach the child or teen to naturalize and legitimize it. And while it is not possible to establish certain causality between early exposure to violence and becoming a perpetrator later in life, we can say the likelihood of it happening increases dramatically (Oliveira, 2015). School life will also be impacted since this problem will be reflected in the lack of ability to establish healthy relationships with others and with oneself, and also in school performance (Magalhães, Canotilho, Brazil, 2007: 45-46). Exposure to interparental violence may also lead to increased child neglect because, after the conflict, parents are less likely to meet their basic needs (Sani, 2003: 100) and "Child abuse affects not only children, but also women and other family members and can ruin or contaminate communities, damaging complex social and familial relations and interactions" (WHO, 1999: 9).



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With that said, it is also important to present some data about domestic violence, children and youth violence in Europe and specially Portugal.

At European Level, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights conducted a survey with a special focus on Childhood experiences of violence (FRA, 2014). From this report it is possible to conclude that 35% of the women who participated in the survey had experienced at least one of the forms of violence questioned before they were 15 years old. Prevalence of violence against young women in Europe is of 27% for physical violence, 12% for sexual violence and 10% for psychological violence. Regarding the Portuguese situation, the same report mentions rates of 24% for physical violence (the most reported one) and 3% for sexual violence. Importantly is also to note that 16% of women surveyed mentioned that violence was frequent and happened more than once in their childhood.

In Portugal Domestic Violence is a public crime since 2000, which means that any person that has the knowledge of the situation has the duty to report it to the police. This is specially truth for domestic violence against children. Domestic violence against children is criminalized under the article number 152 of the Penal Code and the 152 a).

The Law on Promotion and Protection of Children and Youth improved the protection of child rights. As a result, the Commissions for the Protection of Children and Youth at Risk followed 69,967 children and youngsters, of whom 54.5% (38 155) are male and 45,5% (31 812) are female, in 2017. This, 6 257 (40.8%), are neglect and 1 915 (40.8%) are exposure to domestic violence.

The national statistics report from Portugal is the RASI - Annual Report on Internal Security (RASI, 2017). According to this report, the percentage of domestic violence reported against children in 2017 was of 15,1%. This includes victims that were under 16 (12,1%) and victims between 16 and 24 years old (9,5%).

According to APAV (2017), from the overall support on domestic violence, 12,5% of the victims were the children. The same factsheet mentions that in the year 2016, 7,5% of the victims of domestic violence were under 18 years old.

Having in consideration these data from previous studies, the present study aimed to understand further the educational practices that takes place in Portugal and how are these



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understood by young people and adults. The following section will feature the methodology used in this study, that is to say it will present its objectives, method and ethical concern

## METHOD

The Portuguese feminist NGO UMAR - Association of Women, Alternative and Response - has more than a decade of experience in primary prevention of violence and Human Rights promotion in schools. The idea for this study stemmed from this experience and the need to understand how parents perceive punishment and distinguish between non-violent and violent disciplining, particularly corporal punishment.

This study aims to analyse the prevalence of children, youth (future parents) and parents' beliefs on corporal punishment. For this purpose, a national survey was conducted and it included schools from eight Portuguese districts, so as to have a bigger picture on the national views on victimization by corporal punishment.

Having said that, the method used for this survey was the questionnaire, that is one of the best ways to obtain a broad view of the social reality about a specific issue. In addition to this, questionnaires are also appropriate for the participants' age, as well as easy, straightforward and quick to fill.

Ethic and deontological considerations were a concern in this study because it involved children, adolescents and was about personal and sensitive topics. Given that this was a national study, authorizations from the Ministry of Education and Portuguese Data Protection Authority were obtained. Parents and legal representatives of children also received a written explanation of the research and gave their informed consents to the participation of children and adolescents. Data was collected anonymously, without disclosing schools, classes, or students' names, to guarantee confidentiality, given that



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students were filling the questionnaire in the class. Age and sex were the only sociodemographic questions included in the questionnaire. Information was collected directly from the students by trained researchers of the organization. Confidentiality was ensured to the schools participating in the survey through the commitment of non-disclosure of participating schools or classes.

## INSTRUMENT

In this survey two types of instruments were created: a questionnaire for children and youth and a questionnaire for parents.

The first questionnaire, for children and youth, “*Maltreatment and educational practices*”, had 14 questions, written in comprehensible and clear language, and suited for the cognitive and socioemotional level of its participants. It was also quick and easy to fill, taking no longer than 10-15 minutes, on average, for the students to complete it in class. Each of the 14 questions are analyzed regarding victimization (if that behavior ever occurred to him/her) and beliefs (if the participant perceives that behavior as children mistreatment or not). The last question allowed the participants to describe a situation in which he/she was punished by his/her parents.

The second questionnaire, for parents, “*Concessions on educational practices with children*”, had 23 items in Likert Scale. In it, a 5 point scale offers a range of answer options, from one extreme opinion to another, in which 1 is “totally disagree”, 2 is “disagree”, 3 is “neither agree nor disagree”, 4 is “agree” and 5 is “totally agree”.

## SAMPLE



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The quantitative instrument for children and youth was distributed in the academic year of 2018/2019 and results were published in 2019. The total sample was of 610 participants between 9 and 18 years old (average: 13.97; SD=2.84). All surveyed schools were distributed throughout the country and in classes UMAR had not previously worked or intervened in. Most participants were girls: 54% (n=330); and 45% (n=274) of participants were male.

The parents questionnaire was distributed in 2018 and 2019. The total sample was of 590 participants aged between 18 and 77 (mean: 44,14; SD=11.99), from different districts and different cities. This instrument had a sample of 73% (n=430) women, 24% (n=139) of masculine participants and 3% (n=21) nonrespondents.

## METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaires was descriptive and inferential using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Software (SPSS). In the two quantitative instruments, every question was considered a dependent variable, except for age and sex, (two independent variables).

The children and youth's questionnaire was divided into 2 dimensions: a) regarding victimization and b) regarding their belief/recognition of such behavior as mistreatment or not.

For the adults' instrument, a Likert Scale was created with the purpose of gathering the participants' opinions, by specifying their level of agreement with each of the 23 items presented.

Results will have one comparison level between victimization and the acceptance of violence.

## RESULTS



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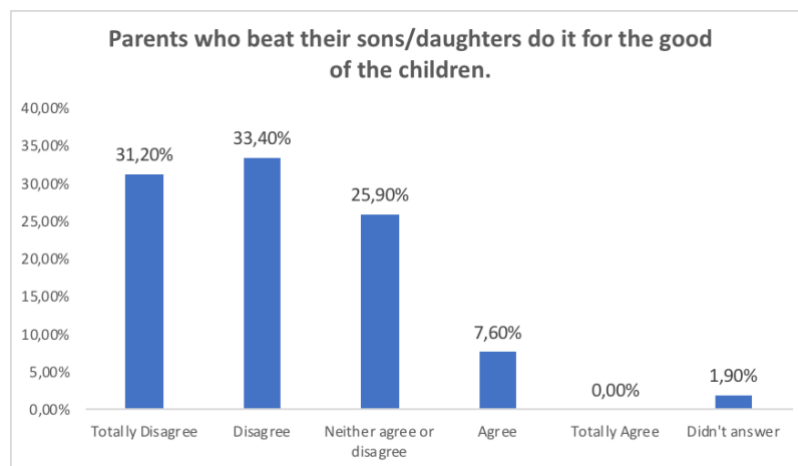
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Firstly, there will be a presentation of the overall view of the quantitative findings and, then, a more detailed discussion will follow about the specific results regarding the corporal and psychological punishment in Portugal.

## STUDY WITH PARENTS

Almost 65% of respondents disagreed that parents who beat their children do so because they believe that this is best for their children. This same issue raised an "indecision" for 25.90% of the participants, who said that, in this case, they do not agree nor disagree.



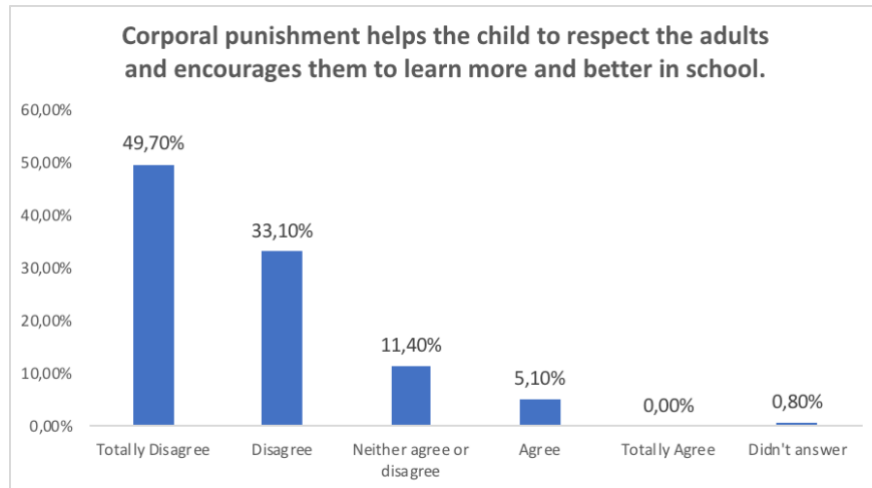
Most respondents either disagreed or totally disagreed with corporal punishment increasing children's respect for adults as well as improving their school performance.



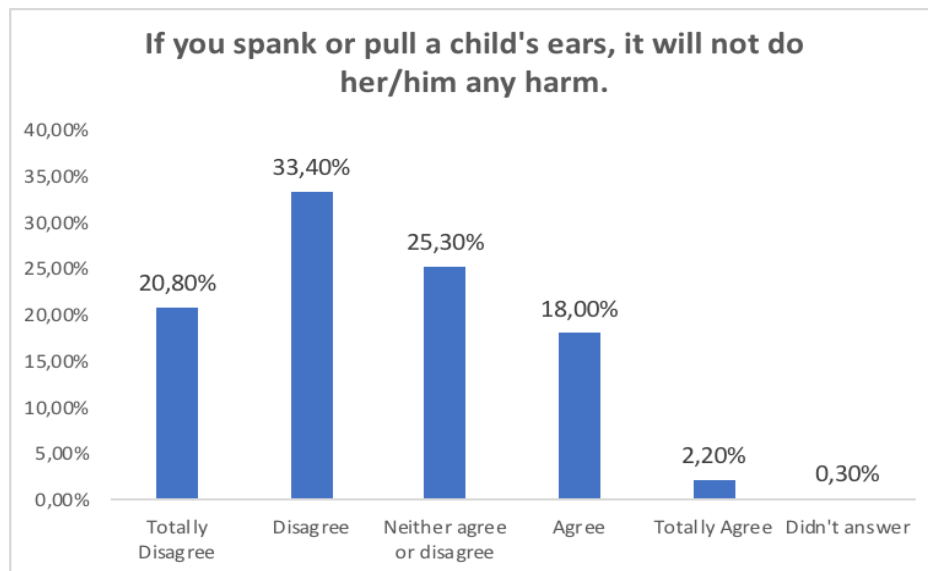
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Although 18% of the respondents agreed that spanking or pulling a child's ears will not cause her/him any harm, more than 54% of participants disagreed or totally disagreed with this statement.



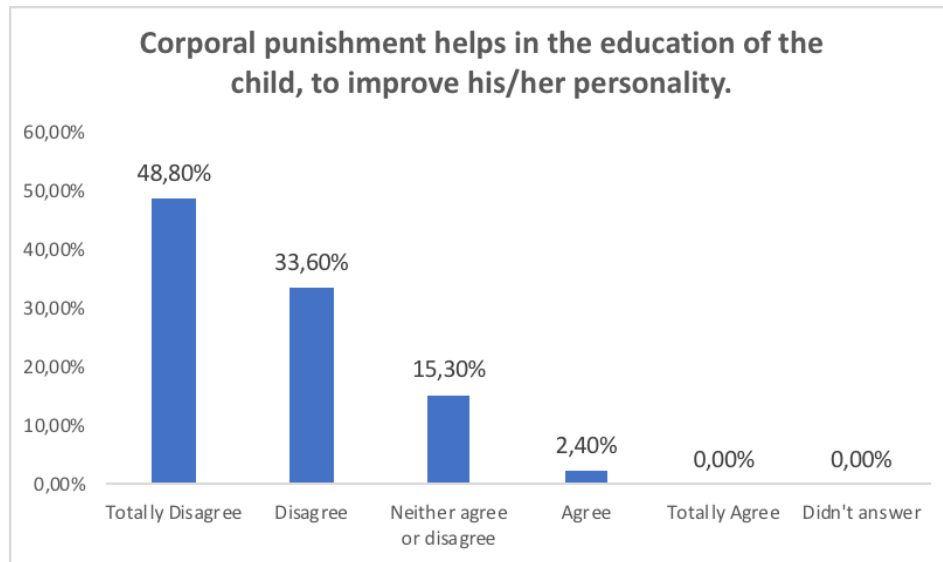
The idea that corporal punishment helps in the education of the children and improves his/her personality is no longer defended by most Portuguese fathers and mothers in this study. Almost half of the participants (48,8%) totally disagreed with this topic, but there were still 2,40% that agreed with it.



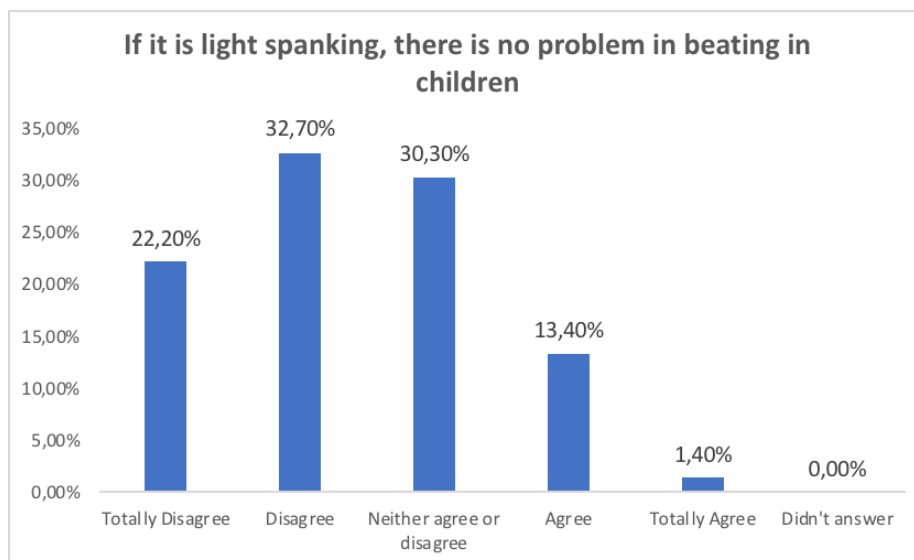
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When asked if they thought that a "light spanking" is acceptable, 13,40% of the parents agreed that it is not a problem, whereas 30,30% neither agreed nor disagree. Nonetheless, the higher percentage of participants, 32,70%, considered beating a child an unacceptable punishment.

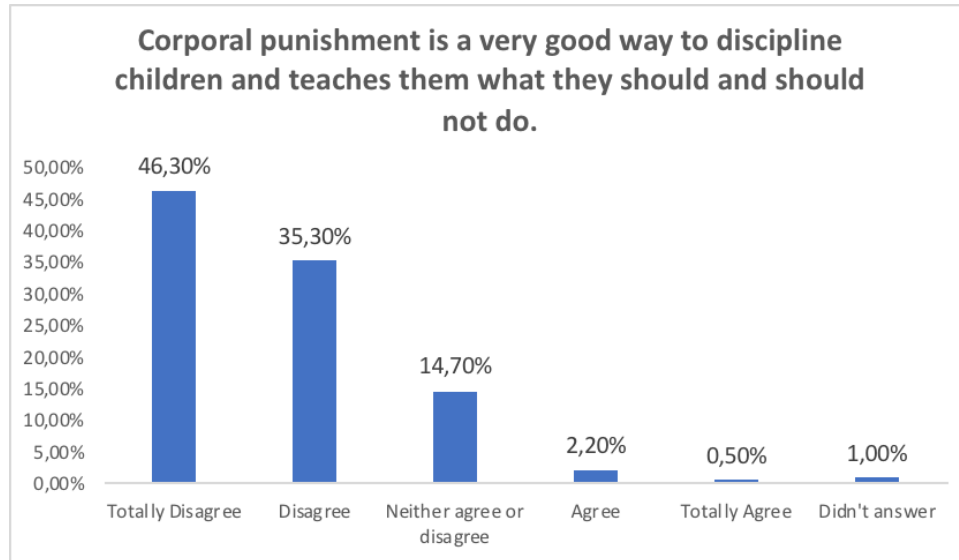


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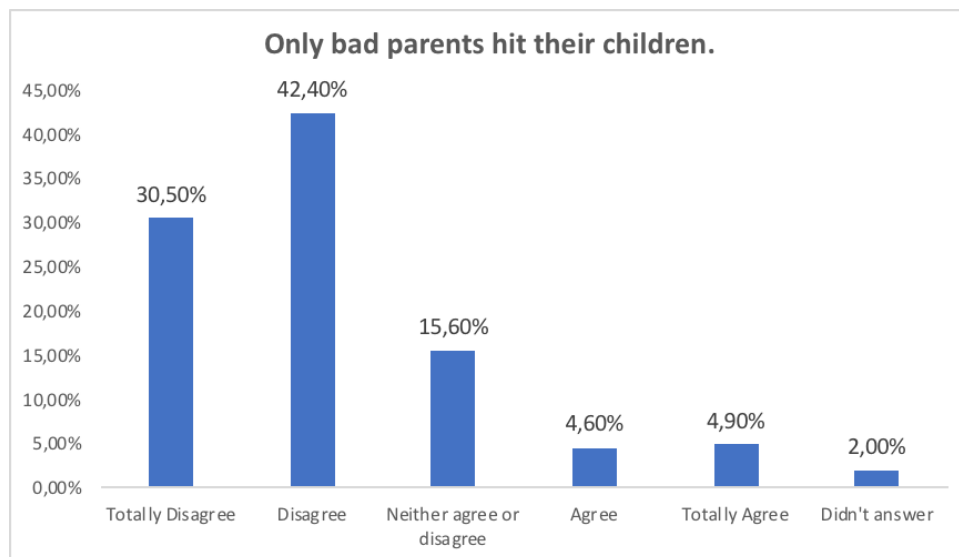
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Over 80% of respondents agreed that physical/corporal punishment is not the best strategy to educate children and young people. Despite these results, 14,70% were undecided, almost 3% agreed with it and 1% did not reply.



The idea that only "bad parents" hit their children was not true for almost 73% of respondents.

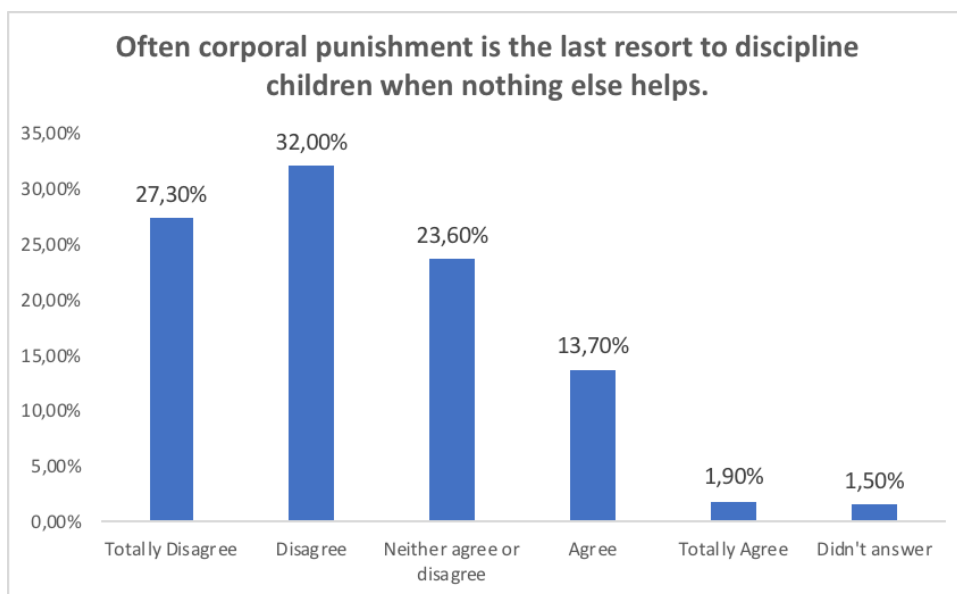


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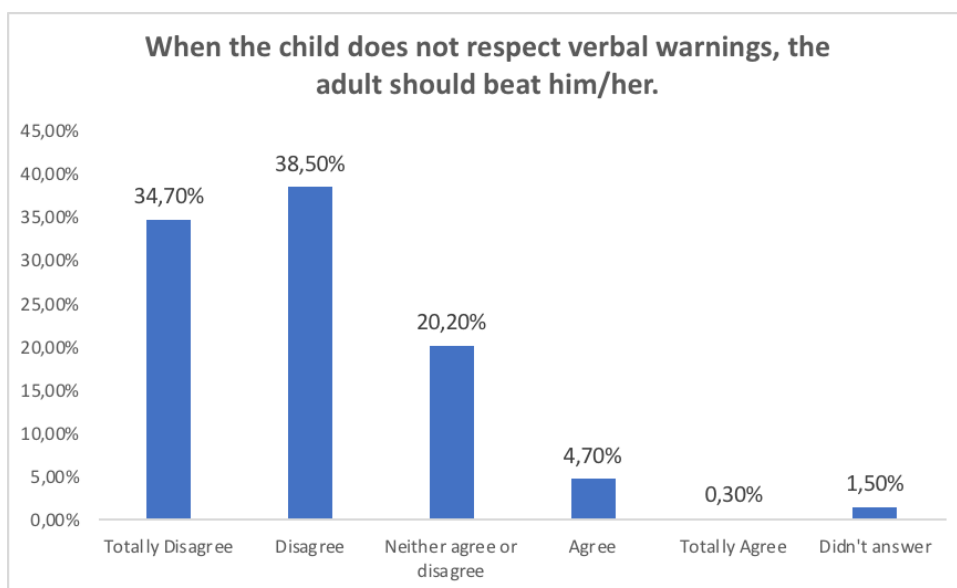
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The majority of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that corporal punishment should be used as a last resort to discipline children, followed by those who neither agreed nor disagreed (23,60%)



Almost 75% disagreed or totally disagreed that when the child does not respect verbal warnings, the adult should beat him/her.

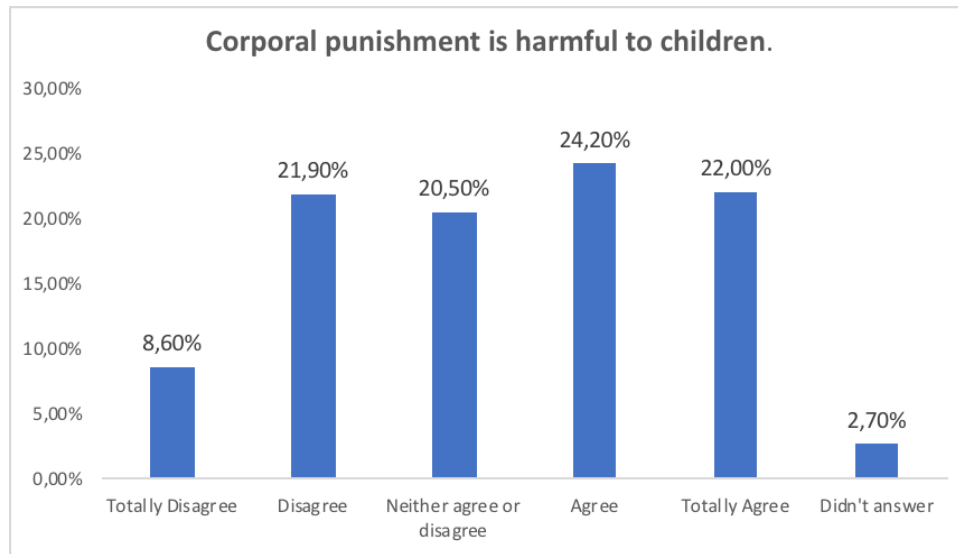


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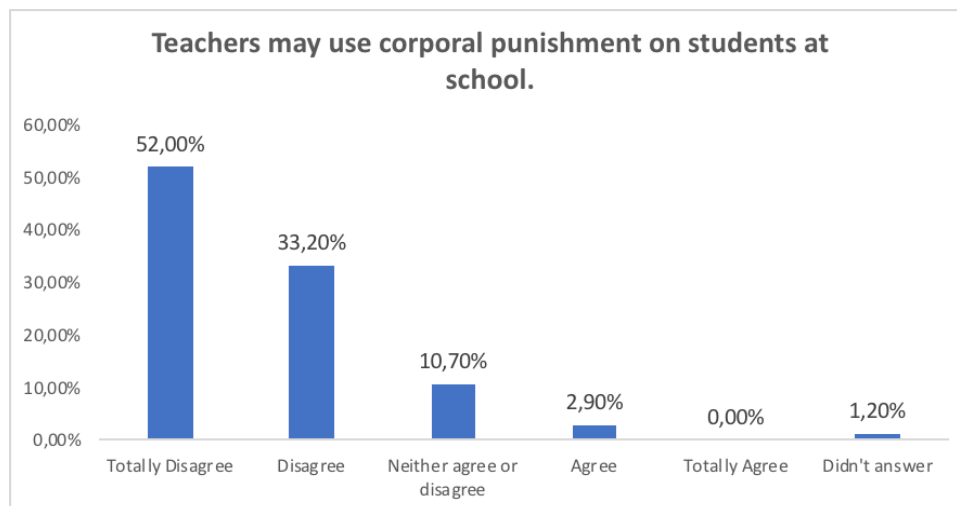
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For 46,20% of participants, corporal punishment is considered harmful to children. On the other hand, 30,60% disagree / totally disagree with such a statement.



For 85,20% of respondents the corporal punishment should not be used by teachers in schools.

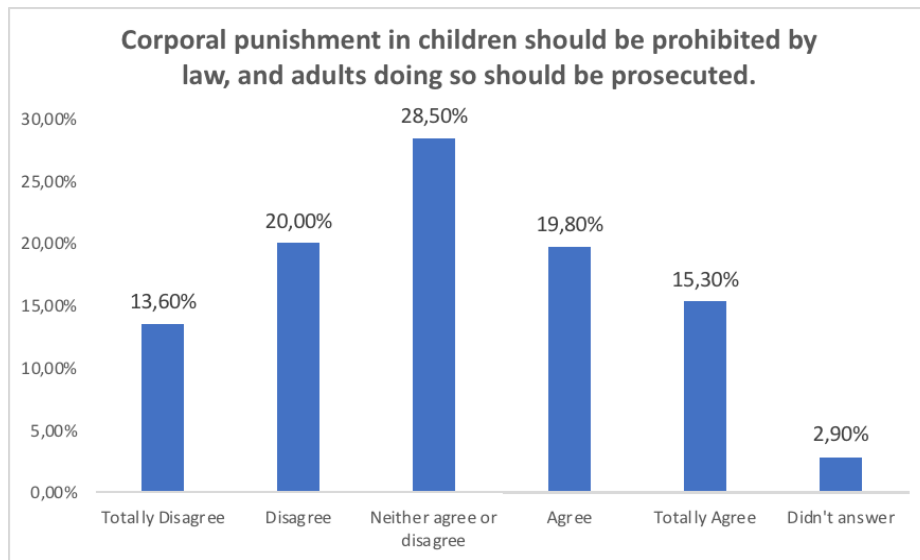


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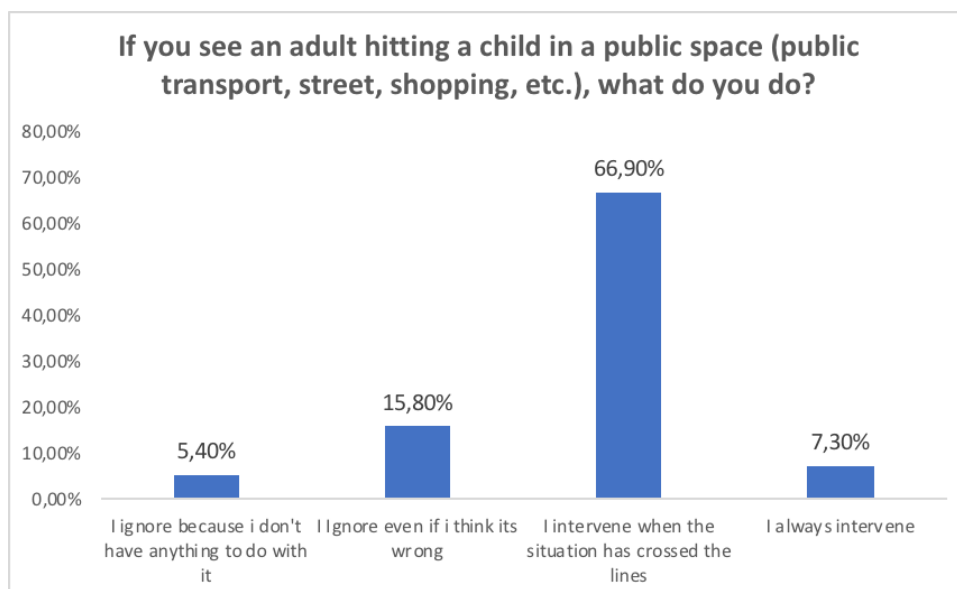
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Opinions were greatly divided on the issue of the legal prohibition of the corporal punishment of children, whereas more than 28% of the respondents said they do not agree nor disagree with such statement. It is important to highlight that regarding this quantitative results, the percentage of respondents who chose the option "do not agree nor disagree" is high in every questions. This result may suggest how much the issue of child maltreatment is still a complex and poorly debated issue.



Regarding intervention, when asked if they saw an adult hitting a child in a public space, 66,90% of the respondents said that they would only intervene if they considered that the situation was going beyond the limits. Almost 16% said that they ignore even if they thought it was wrong and 5,40% just ignore it because they believe that they “do not have anything to do with”.





## STUDY CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Young people's perception about mistreatment and child abuse were also analysed and questioned through a questionnaire. In the paragraphs below a short description of the main practices in Portugal and its' legitimation.

### Youth conceptions about mistreatment and other forms of educational practice

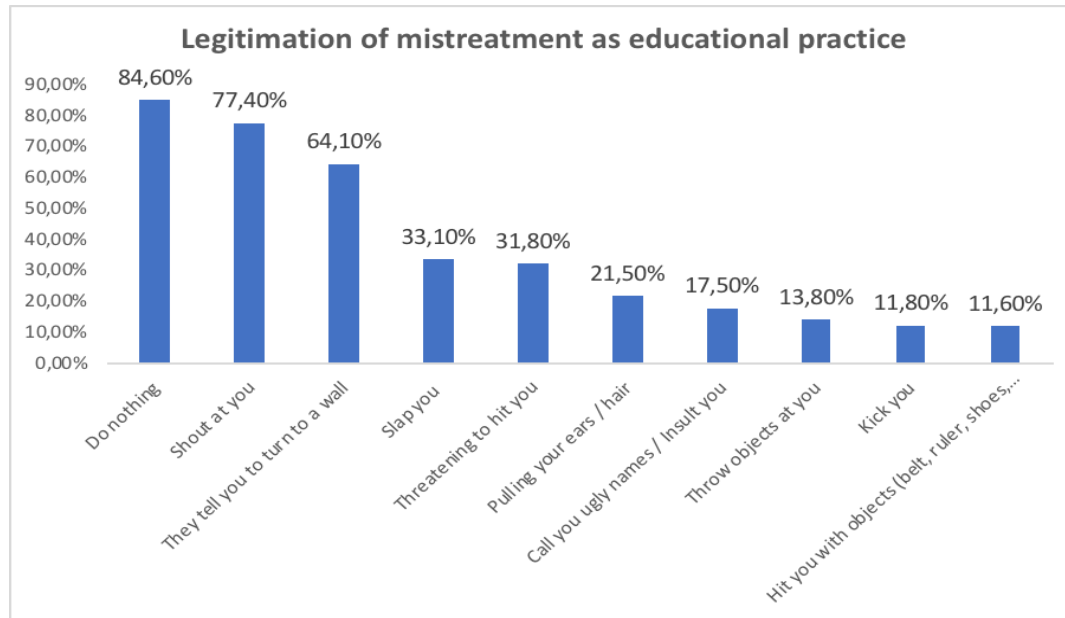
Several educational practices in Portugal were analysed. Some of them are recognized by the students as mistreatment others are considered as educational practices that are positive for their education. From the questions addressed in this questionnaire, it can be concluded that around 85% of student do not consider that if their parents "do nothing" when they behave bad, is mistreatment. This is an important conclusion because "doing nothing", despite not being a physical mistreatment, also means that parents are not doing anything to educate youth and to explain them those behaviours are not the most appropriate ones. Regarding specifically mistreatment, the form of violence more commonly accepted by young people are the shouts. Shouting is not considered as mistreatment by 77% of Portuguese young people. Turning children against the wall was also not considered as mistreatment by 64% of young people that participated in these questionnaire. Finally, it is important to note that the form of violence that is most commonly recognized as violence is the beating with objects namely belts, shoes or sweeper. Still a part of 11,6% of young people does not consider it as a form of violence.



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## Educational practices/violent behaviours experienced by children and young people in Portugal

Some important reflections emerge from the questions about the disciplinary or educational practices most commonly experienced by children and young people. According to the respondents, calmly speaking to them and explaining why the behaviour is not acceptable is the most common way for parents to discipline children and young people in Portugal, followed by taking away something they liked (experienced by 53,10%). However, some violent measures were also pointed out by young people: 43,20% of them reported being yelled at by their parents when they do something wrong; 19,80% say they have already suffered threats of physical punishment; 19% have been slapped; 7,9% were insulted; and 2,5% were even hit with objects.

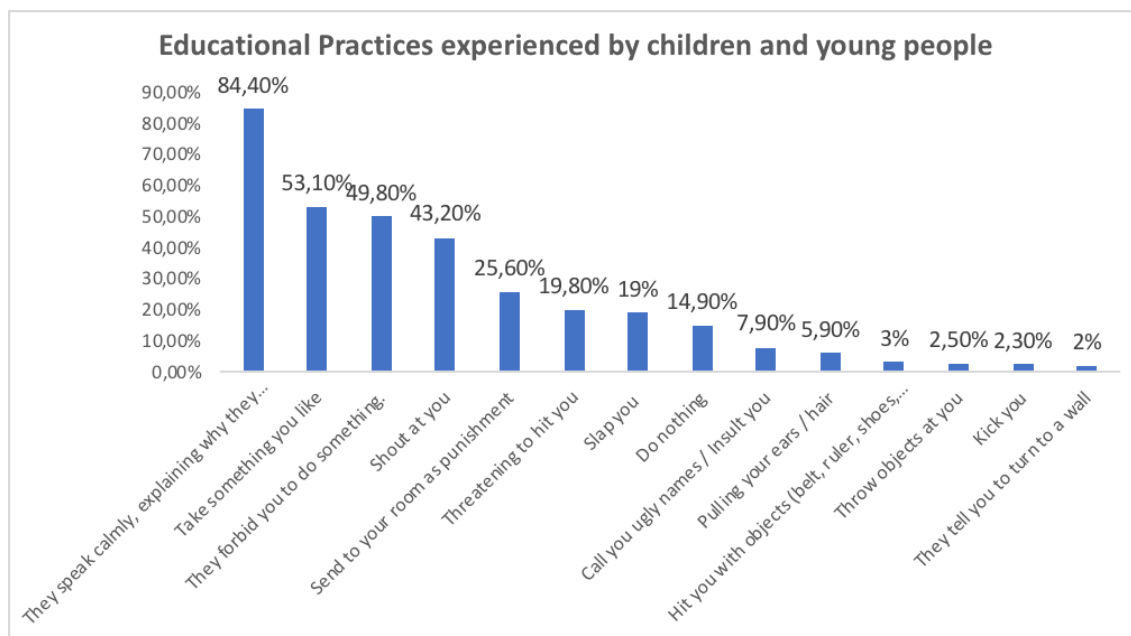
The following chart illustrates all the behaviors covered in the questionnaire, as well as the respective prevalence (%) in the sample.



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## Gender differences in Educational practices and violent behaviours experienced by children and young people in Portugal

Generally, in almost all the behaviours considered in this questionnaire, both groups of boys and girls reported having experienced similar percentages of experience in those behaviours questioned. There are a few differences that deserve to be stood out. The first and the greater difference between boys and girls is regarding insults and naming children with names that are not nice: 11,2% of the girls reported that this happened to them before and 4% of the boys. As it can be seen, insults are much more frequent among the girls, while apparently other forms of behaviours are more common for boys, such as hitting (5,1% prevalence in the boys and 1,2% in the girls), quicking (3,6% prevalence in the boys and 1,2% in the girls) and through objects (3,3% prevalence in the boys and 1,8% in the girls). The behaviours that are most commonly used with girls were to be sent to the room as punishment (29,4% for prevalence in the girls and 21,5% for the boys), slapping (20,3% with girls and 17,9% for boys) and finally, shouting (that was reported by 43,6% of girls and 42,7% of boys). All the other behaviours either were similar to boys and girls or they were more prevalent between the boys group.



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## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Some important reflections emerge from the analysis of the quantitative results presented in this report. Firstly, the issue of physical and psychological punishment against children/young people still raises many doubts, in particular as to the limit of what is acceptable as an educational practice by parents and what is not. In the adults questionnaire, a striking aspect of the responses are the high percentages of "I do not agree nor disagree" which, in some cases, reached the as high as the 28% mark. Although adults mostly do not agree that corporal punishment is the best route to education, the reality is that at least 20% of children answered that they have experienced physical punishment by their parents.

With this study the team realized that physical and psychological mistreatment are still present in the surveyed Portuguese families. It is also understood that many fathers and mothers are still indifferent to the consequences of physical and psychological corporal punishment.

Primary prevention plays a key role in preventing physical and psychological mistreatment against children, since systematic sessions are developed based on the project methodology and allow the participants to reflect from their experiences and realities about violence. The prevention of corporal punishment and promotion of children's rights is a responsibility of the entire community.

Portuguese culture must shift to accommodate the idea of what it is to educate a child and develop healthy educational practices.

This study is relevant to understand the physical and psychological punishment against children, since there are not many representative studies of this problem in Portugal. The innovative aspect of this study resides on the assembling of children and parents' conceptions about corporal and psychological punishments and on other educational practices.



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Co-funded by  
the European  
Union

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the **Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme** of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of its author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

Project title: Children Help movement Against Physical Threatening and Emotional Repression  
Project number: JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/CORP/9176