


Reading selected biblical proverbs in the light of corporal punishment in child upbringing

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Corporal punishment is highly prevalent in domestic settings. A significant number of parents believe that the book of Proverbs endorses corporal punishment as an integral part of child discipline. Proponents of corporal punishment usually base their stand on Proverbs 13:24 and also on the age-old English maxim 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. Other biblical proverbs they hold firmly are Proverbs 22:15 and Proverbs 23:13–14. Because of the use of the term 'rod', some studies equally maintain that the selected texts support the physical discipline of children. In contrast, others argue that 'rod' is a metaphor for discipline, encompassing teaching, guidance and correction. Using the historical-literary method of exegesis, this article examines these texts to understand the historical and cultural context in which the proverbs were written, and to explore their varying interpretations, illuminating the value of discipline in the well-being and character formation of children and clarifying various perspectives on corporal punishment in child discipline. This study finds that positive discipline, which focuses on guidance, encouragement, positive reinforcement, verbal warnings, time-outs, explaining consequences (et cetera), promotes healthy behaviour and development in children, whereas corporal punishment is of limited effectiveness and can have unintended long-term negative effects on a child's physical, emotional and psychological well-being. Therefore, rather than relying on spanking, parents should embrace positive discipline techniques. If positive discipline methods prove abortive, parents should seek professional support to find out the underlying reasons behind a child's recalcitrant behaviour.

Contribution: The book of Proverbs unequivocally establishes that discipline is an integral part of child upbringing. The use of the term 'rod' in the related texts has led many to associate discipline with physical punishment. This study, however, suggests that parents should adopt positive discipline, which emphasises encouragement, reinforcement and effective communication, thereby fostering sustainable character development and a strong parent-child relationship.

Keywords: Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 22:15; Proverbs 23:13–14; child upbringing; corporal punishment; spanking; positive discipline.

Introduction

The English maxim 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' is one of the most enduring maxims of parenting and showcases the value of discipline in child raising. It expresses a memorable way of stating the effects of parental indifference to their children and is believed to have been derived from Proverbs 13:24 (Clifford 1999:140; Davis 2000:88). It emphasises that lack of discipline leads to unruly behaviour in a child. The maxim literally suggests that physical punishment is an invaluable tool in shaping a child's behaviour. Proverbs 13:24 unequivocally submits that withholding discipline is akin to hating one's child; parents demonstrate love for their children by disciplining them, thereby saving them from self-destruction. Other proverbs that focus on the necessity of child discipline are Proverbs 22:15 and Proverbs 23:13–14. The profuse use of the Hebrew noun, *שֶׁבֶט* (rod) in the selected texts has led many parents to acknowledge that physical punishment is an acceptable means of inculcating discipline in a child (Tate 1971:46), and as such, they have an obligation to hit an erring child. A common thought expressed in these proverbs is that the right time to instil discipline is during childhood because children are more amenable than adults. Heskett (2001:182) notes that 'Child discipline is aimed at inculcating instruction in wise behaviour; teaching children how to be wise, just, and fair'. It is necessary to instil discipline in a child so that they can develop into a wise person. Wisdom is demonstrated in one's ability to live a good life.

This study focuses on the use of physical means, such as flogging and spanking, by parents, guardians and other adult family members to inflict pain on a child in response to a child's unacceptable behaviour; this is referred to as 'domestic corporal punishment'. Physical punishment is traditionally accepted as a necessary part of raising children, an appropriate means of ensuring behavioural compliance (Durrant & Ensom 2012:1373). Parents express their displeasure over wrong behaviour, even a slight mistake or provocation, mainly through spanking. Chukwuma (2024) opines that:

Mothers were usually the first to instil discipline in a child; during breastfeeding, a suckling child who bit the nipple of his or her mother was spanked. Punishments were meted out according to one's age and the type of misdeeds. (p. 8)

Children who engage in major misconduct (telling lies, fighting, stealing, etc.) are corrected with many strokes of the cane, while minor misdeeds (not doing house chores promptly, always being reminded to greet an elder, etc.) are corrected with a lighter measure. Parents also employ other punishments such as kneeling, frog jump, closing one's eyes and facing the wall while standing up, doing extra house chores, going without food, etc. The multiple parenting method allowed parents to discipline not only their biological children but also those of their relatives, friends and neighbours (Chukwuma 2024:9).

Wegner (2005:715) and Dickson and Chiabuotu (2021:94) aver that 'Over time, the use of corporal punishment in child upbringing has been a very controversial subject'. Studies show that there is a growing concern that physical punishment has a short-term effect of eliciting immediate behavioural compliance but has long-term negative outcomes (Durrant & Ensom 2012:1373). Constructive approaches to discipline focus on encouragement, reinforcement and good communication. It influences children's healthy development and well-being and significantly strengthens the parent-child relationship. Therefore, regardless of the wide acceptance given to the spanking of children, this study advocates for the use of alternative discipline methods because physical punishment reduces the chances of having a sustainable ideal personality and also violates the dignity and rights of the child. Children should be treated with respect and care and not be subjected to any degrading and inhumane treatment (Veriava & Power 2017:335).

Given that many parents cite biblical injunctions to support their stand on physical punishment, this article employs the historical-literary method of exegesis to study the selected texts in relation to modern perspectives on child raising to discover the problems associated with hitting children and to ascertain the possibility of integrating alternative forms of discipline in child upbringing. This method of exegesis aims to understand the text's original meaning by examining its historical background, cultural practices and literary style. It seeks to grasp the author's background, the circumstances of the original audience and relevant historical events. Analysing the literary features of the text

is also vital in comprehending its true meaning and uncovering what the original author intended to communicate to their initial readers.

This study is important because globally, a significant number of parents physically punish their children to correct wrong behaviour (Dickson & Chiabuotu 2021:94; Owokoniran 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO 2021) reports that about 60% of children regularly suffer physical punishment from their parents. While it remains legal in the United States of America (some states), Canada, Australia, Nigeria, Botswana and many other countries, it is increasingly considered inhumane, harmful and ineffective (Maurer & Wallerstein 2023; Stewart-Tufescu 2023:15). Many countries, including South Africa, Zambia, Kenya, Scotland, Austria and Finland, prohibit corporal punishment of children in all settings.

Conceptual clarification: 'Corporal punishment'

Various definitions of the term 'Corporal punishment' acknowledge that it refers to any physical punishment meted out as punishment for misconduct and intended to cause physical pain to someone, with the most common examples given as hitting, kicking, slapping, flogging, spanking and throwing objects (Veriava & Power 2017:333; Tikkanen 2025). Similarly, Straus and Donnelly (2017:4) define it as 'The use of physical force to cause a child to experience pain, but not injury, for correction or control of the child's behaviour'. In their definition, the authors distinguish between child discipline and child abuse; if a child sustains injury while being punished, the child has been abused and humiliated. Again, by using the expression 'to cause a child to experience pain', the authors take cognisance of other acts that are not premised on punishment, but may also cause pain, such as the act of infant circumcision, infant ear piercing and putting antiseptic on a cut. Forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions (such as standing on the balls of their feet, squatting or standing with eyes closed and arms raised) is also a form of physical punishment.

As a corrective or disciplinary mechanism, physical punishment is usually used to express displeasure over a lack of compliance with orders, for both minors and adults. For minors, it is usually used in home and school settings by parents and school administrators, respectively, whereas for adults, it is typically used in correctional centres (prisons and detention centres) and law enforcement facilities (police stations, command centres and crime labs) by prison authorities or correctional officers. In correctional centres and law enforcement facilities, physical punishments are usually carried out in public spaces to deter would-be offenders. Mutilation is used in some extreme cases, especially on high-level criminals (Edge & Allott 2025). In domestic corporal punishment, an adult deliberately hits various parts of a child's body with a hand, or with a cane, whip, paddle, belt, etc., to cause pain or discomfort, instil

fear, as well as reduce the recurrence of the undesirable behaviour. Its goal is to control or change the child's behaviour and make it consistent with the adult's expectations.

Study of the selected texts (Pr 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14)

The ancient Israelites valued children and regarded them as blessings from God (Gn 33:5; Ps 113:9, 127:3) (Exell 1978b:211). However, to truly appreciate children as gifts from God, they must be educated on the laws of God (Dt 6:6–7), well-trained and disciplined (Pr 19:18; 22:6, 15). The discipline of children included a blend of verbal correction, physical discipline and guidance from both parents and community leaders. The focus was on instilling moral values, equipping children for responsible adulthood and maintaining societal norms. Among other things, children were taught to respect their parents and the importance of following God's laws. Proverbs 10:1, 17:21, 25; 23:24 are some of the texts that illustrate the joy and grief that accompany parents who have wise and foolish children, respectively. The training of children was considered highly important in Israel because the fulfilment of parents was strongly attached to it. It was a well-accepted principle that child discipline begins at a very early age (Pr 22:6). Davis (2000:87) writes that 'It is a common view in ancient Israel that corporal punishment is a necessary part of the discipline of children'. The 'rod' was recognised as a symbol of corrective discipline, used to guide and instruct children towards developing strong moral character. The community was also involved in disciplining children, especially those who were persistently rebellious. Parents could bring such children to the elders of the town for judgement (Dt 21:18–21).

In the Old Testament, discipline is widely discussed in the context of child raising, and it refers to both the content of what is taught and a way of behaving that is based on the incorporation of the teaching (Davies 1962:846; Perdue 2000:206). The education and discipline of children were a favourite theme with Solomon, one of the authors of the book of Proverbs. These were inextricably intertwined in ancient Israelite thought, even though one or the other might be emphasised in a particular context. This interconnection is clearly expressed in Ps 94:12 (Aune 1979:638). The Hebrew term *מוֹדָר* (discipline) reflects the nuances of training, instruction, warning and firm guidance with those of reproof, correction and punishment (Lane 1979:948). Discipline is the corrective punishment that promotes positive character and ensures that children successfully pass through the various stages of life until old age (Gehman 1970:779; Perdue 2000:188).

The book of Proverbs gives parents an obligation to guide their children towards responsible behaviour by instructing and disciplining them. In the book of Proverbs, there are copious texts on the positive role of discipline in children, including Proverbs 3:12; 6:23; 5:23; 19:18, 25; 22:6; 29:15, 17. Wolf (1967:500) notes that 'These proverbs underscore the

importance that Israelite parents attached to the discipline of their children'. According to Wegner (2005):

The Hebrew term, *מוֹדָר*, commonly translated as 'discipline' in the Old Testament, has a wide range of meanings that suggest various levels of discipline, starting from 'teaching or instruction', progressing to 'exhortation or warning', and climaxing with 'discipline or chastening'. (p. 719)

One wonders why there is much emphasis on the last level in relation to child upbringing.

A cursory study of the book of Proverbs suggests that it supports the use of physical punishment in child discipline. A literal interpretation of Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13–14 suggests that corporal punishment is a necessity in child upbringing (Bar 2023). Other texts believed to promote corporal punishment in correcting unruly behaviour among children are Proverbs 19:25, 29; 26:3; 29:15. This perspective primarily focuses on physical punishment and fails to capture the broader themes of guidance, love and moral responsibility. According to Whybray (1994):

Corporal punishment was an essential element in the education of children, repeated several times in Proverbs, was firmly held not only in Israel but elsewhere in the ancient near east, and is very frequently expressed in Egyptian literature. (p. 210)

Corporal punishment, at times, accompanies instruction to reinforce the truthfulness of what is taught and to gain the attention of the child who is being instructed (Perdue 2000:206).

Notably, the Hebrew noun *שֶׁבֶט* (rod) is common in the three texts chosen for this study. *שֶׁבֶט* literally means whip, stick, staff or tool (ed. VanGemenen 1997:85) and therefore is generally regarded as a physical instrument for discipline. Fox (2009:571) notes that 'It is a rigid staff that can be used to inflict a small measure of physical pain'. Dickson and Chiabuotu (2021) opine that:

The most common understanding of *שֶׁבֶט* in the Old Testament wisdom literature is that of a rod of discipline by one in authority, as in the case of a father for remedial punishment on a son (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13, 14; 29:15). (p. 97)

From a border perspective, *שֶׁבֶט* is a metaphor for any form of correction or discipline (Waltke 2005:538) and on this premise, signifies that proper discipline, whether physical or not, is necessary for a child's growth and development. In his work, Bar (2023) submits that *שֶׁבֶט* is not intended to inflict pain and notes that every shepherd carries a rod, never to hit his flock, but to block their way against wandering to an undesired track, symbolising protection, guidance and authority rather than physical force. Likewise, parents need to set boundaries for their children to ensure that they behave properly. In the book of Proverbs, *שֶׁבֶט* rightly functions as a symbol of discipline and guidance, indicating that the preventive discipline of corrective teaching and verbal rebuke are necessary for building a wholesome child (Harris 1980:763). According to Dickson and Chiabuotu (2021:90), 'Discipline involves nurturing and motivating a child towards holistic human development'.

In the book of Proverbs, discipline is based on love, never on an intention to harm (Waltke 2005:144). Proverbs 13:24 emphasises that parents demonstrate true love for their children by disciplining them. The text is the horizontal version of Proverbs 3:11–12: ‘Just as God does, a father chastises a child whom he loves (Storms 2017)’. In Proverbs 13:24, the paradox of the action is mirrored in the love and hate contrast: beating is prompted by love, while lenience is motivated by hatred. The negligent father does not hate his child, but his laxity will have disastrous consequences and is, therefore, tantamount to hatred (Earle 1967:542; Fox 2009:570; Gundry-Volf 2009:588; Murphy 1998:98). In other words, true love shows in the willingness to consistently correct a child’s behaviour. Withholding discipline is an indication of a lack of love and indifference to the child’s future well-being. Thus, child discipline should not aim at the infliction of pain; it should focus more on achieving behavioural changes through love-centred guidance and instructions.

Childhood is the ideal stage for instilling discipline because foolishness is innate in children (Pr 22:15). Storms (2017) opines that foolishness refers to a disposition in every child that eventually manifests itself in deliberate and conscious defiance of established authority. The foolishness, according to Exell (1978a:551), consists of ‘Wrong wishes, purposes, and thoughts; pride, levity, vain murmurings, wilfulness, obstinacy, and evil tempers’. Davis (2000:89) writes that ‘Proverbs 19:18 points to the crucial element of time in unambiguous and unforgettable terms’. McKane (1970:524) and Ross (1991:1035) note that Proverbs 19:18 emphasises that the purpose of discipline is to improve a child’s character and, therefore, urges parents to discipline their children so that their lives will not be cut short, because of destructive behaviour. Exell (1978a:343), reiterates that ‘Child chastening must be done timely and persistently, when the will has not grown strong and the passions have not acquired tenacious hold upon the mind’. Children are not incorrigible; while they may exhibit difficult behaviours, they are not inherently incapable of change or improvement. If wisdom is applied in disciplining a child, the child grows to appreciate it, rather than when the child is allowed to wallow in the ignorance of foolishness.

The perspective of death emerges in Proverbs 23:13–14 as the text underlines the fundamental importance of discipline. At the beginning of verse 14, the personal pronoun *אַתָּה* (you) is used to draw the reader’s attention to the importance of the discourse: the positive result of the rod (Whybray 1994:366). The text states that proper discipline prevents children from indulging in deeds that could put their lives in jeopardy. The expression *לֹא יָמוּת* (He will not die) means that he will be saved from untimely death; because of the flogging, he will not die, not that from the flogging, he will not die (Cohen 1945:154; Waltke 2005:314; Whybray 1994:335). Timely discipline delivers from *שְׁאוֹל* (abode of the dead; the resting place of the departed) (Fuller 1975:64). In the context of the text, however, *שְׁאוֹל* is understood to imply the adversity that awaits the fool here, or perhaps more concretely, an early

and unexpected death but not at the hands of the parents (Murphy 1998:175). Proverbs 23:15–16 notes that children who accept and positively act on their parents’ teachings bring intense joy to their parents.

Corporal punishment vis-à-vis positive discipline in child upbringing

Wegner (2005:718) avers that ‘As wisdom literature, the book of Proverbs is unequivocal on the necessity of disciplining children to drive out their inherent foolishness’. Proper discipline of children through guidance and instructions is a necessity for achieving sagehood. Over the years, many parents have used Proverbs 13:24 and other related texts to justify their use of physical punishment in raising their children. Many attribute the English maxim ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ to the Bible (Heskett 2001:182) and therefore, believe they are fulfilling God’s mandate by using the ‘rod’ on their children. Consequently, many parents believe that corporal punishment is an appropriate way of raising well-behaved children. Besides being vital in addressing behavioural problems, they assume that spanking is necessary to ensure that the child grows into a wise, hardworking and independent adult. Hence, parents make their children to accept that they are being spanked on the grounds of love. Invariably, children are expected to accept the discipline imposed on them willingly and joyfully (Pr 19:20).

Beginning from infancy and continuing till teenage years, corporal punishment is part of growing up for many children in most countries of the world because at some point in their lives, all children fail to do what a parent wants or do things that the parent does not want (Straus & Donnelly 2017:3). While responding to minor or major infractions, many parents are quick to hit, kick, slap, flog, spank and even throw objects at their children, sometimes resulting in serious injury, long-term disability or death. Some go so far as to exhibit very inhumane acts such as putting some peppery substances on sensitive parts of the body (eyes or genitals), pouring hot substances (water or oil) on the body, using a hot iron on the body, locking them outdoors and even cutting off a finger or some part of the ear (The WHO 2021). Some parents stop their children from going to school to vent their anger. There are reports of children who, because of punishment, sustained serious injuries such as bruises, cuts, neuropathy and fractures, many of which required prompt medical attention. Unfortunately, some aggrieved parents hesitate to ensure that the child receives the necessary medical care (Gershoff & Font 2016:12). Repeated severe assaults can lead children to run out of their homes (Crandall, Chiu & Sheehan 2006:7; Prinz et al. 2009:1; Straus 1983:213).

While many parents believe that biblical proverbs advocate for the use of physical punishment in the upbringing of children, recent studies question its effectiveness in achieving long-term character modification in children (Yoder 2012:237; Yogman et al. 2018:1). According to Davis (2000:87), ‘This is

an instance in which modern reasoning casts serious doubt on the validity of the biblical saying'. Research comparing physical and non-physical discipline shows the former to be counterproductive and detrimental, whereas the latter proves more effective. These studies indicate a connection between physical punishment and poor developmental outcomes (Durrant & Ensom 2012:1373; Straus & Donnelly 2017) and support that physical discipline does not foster long-term compliance and moral behaviour (Regev, Gueron-Sela & Atzaba-Poria 2012:34). Many parents struggle to appreciate these findings because they contradict age-old beliefs and the upbringing they received from their parents. Bar (2023) repeats that parents who were physically punished as children are more likely to punish their children. The few who are against the spanking of children are still unable to discontinue because they are accustomed to it. Studies found that children from wealthier households are equally likely to experience violent discipline as those from poorer households. However, parents addicted to alcohol and drugs are more likely to severely punish their children than those who are not (Owokoniran 2023; WHO 2021).

Many parents often fail to acknowledge the harmful effects of corporal punishment, as many of the effects only become apparent later in life (Straus & Donnelly 2017:xix). Undoubtedly, physical punishment serves as an immediate disciplinary measure, ensuring prompt compliance with instructions. However, over time, it exacerbates behavioural issues in children, whereas positive discipline methods lead to sustainable behavioural modifications. According to Bar (2023), frequent punishment of children causes them to shift focus from understanding why certain actions are wrong to simply avoiding punishment. Consequently, they develop a deep fear of being caught or admitting fault, not because they understand the moral implications of their behaviour but because they want to escape the consequences. Children who are frequently punished grow to regard violence as a normal way to handle conflict or exert control.

Children whose parents frequently shout at and hit them often feel unloved and abused. Frequent physical punishment adversely affects a child's life into adulthood (Davis 2000:87). It negatively impacts child development and increases the risk of child aggression, delinquency, school dropouts, depression, suicide and spousal assault later in life (WHO 2021). Physical punishment is equally associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour, such as bullying (towards siblings and other children), lying, stealing, vandalism and defiance of authority (Durrant & Ensom 2012:1374; Gillogly 1981:416). Studies indicate that physical punishment can affect mental health, lead to physical injury (sometimes requiring medical attention), harm parent-child relationships (Gershoff & Font 2016:13), increase the risk of family violence in adulthood and also raise the likelihood of out-of-home placements. In his study, Forgatch (1991:291) ascertain that a reduction in negative discipline used by parents was followed by a significant decline in their children's aggression. On the other hand, children who are frequently faced with physical punishment tend to be more aggressive and disobedient than they initially are (Berlin et al.

2009:1404; Lee, Altschul & Gershoff 2013:2019). Corporal punishment predisposes a society to adopt aggressive and punitive methods for addressing social problems, such as capital punishment and prison terms for murderers and drug addicts, respectively. Straus and Donnelly (2017:xx) aver that 'Ending corporal punishment in child upbringing is one of the most important steps to preventing certain social problems and achieving a less violent world'.

Physical punishment is equally associated with cognitive or intellectual disorder, poor academic performance, lower college graduation rates, lower career success, poor physical health, mental health problems, low self-esteem, unhappiness, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, distorted sexual behaviour, higher rates of child poverty and child mortality (Ehiane 2014:165; Gershoff & Font 2016:3; MacMillan et al. 1999:805; Straus & Paschall 2009:459). In a report published in 2021, the WHO notes that children who have been recurrently physically punished tend to have changes in brain and cardiovascular function and also exhibit high hormonal reactivity to stress. If the second part of Proverbs 23:13 (if you beat them with a rod, they will not die) were to be understood literally, one can say that its meaning is not consistent with findings of recent studies:

[B]oxing on the ear can burst an eardrum; shaking can cause a concussion, whiplash, blindness, serious brain damage, or even death; spanking can injure muscles, the sciatic nerve, pelvis, coccyx (tail bone), genitals or spine; hitting a child's hands can injure bones, blood vessels, joints and ligaments; it can induce premature osteoarthritis; and a child who is hit can accidentally fall and seriously injure him or herself. (Robinson 2005:n.p.)

By implication, physical punishment has no lasting positive value in the upbringing of children.

A broader look at the book of Proverbs suggests that parents should embrace positive discipline methods, which concentrate on demonstrating love, warmth and kindness to facilitate constructive learning and build character (Storms 2017). Positive discipline focuses on teaching, guiding and encouraging children to be self-controlled and responsible through kind but firm and consistent guidance. It involves setting clear guidelines for acceptable behaviour and encouraging children to adhere (Veriava & Power 2017:334). It emphasises the importance of creating a supportive environment where children feel valued, empowered to make sound decisions and able to learn from their mistakes. It aids children in learning self-discipline without fear. Parents can help their children develop good behaviour by teaching them life skills such as responsibility, cooperation and self-discipline. Forcing children to act in a certain way by spanking denies them the opportunity to inculcate self-discipline (Gordon 2000:158). Parents have the responsibility of developing a healthy relationship with their children to ensure better emotional and physical health, a happy childhood and a psychologically stable adulthood.

In the book of Proverbs, there are many texts (Pr 1:7, 10–19; 3:27–35; 13:1; 22:24–25; 23:26–28), which support that children

should be instructed in a neutral context and not always in a corrective atmosphere (Dickson & Chiabuotu 2021:95). Instead of hitting their children, parents are to develop an attitude that aims at guiding and instructing them in an atmosphere of love and acceptance (Heskett 2001:183). Hence, parents should be pre-emptive in teaching their children certain things about life. They must start early to instruct them concerning inappropriate behaviour with age-appropriate disciplinary techniques. Parents should give examples of proper behaviour and encourage their children to follow the right path. Children are motivated to behave correctly when they observe that their parents demonstrate proper behaviour in their lives. This gives them a chance to adjust their behaviour.

Parents can equally foster a healthy relationship with their children by dedicating some time to one-on-one heartfelt discussions with each of them. Discussions should involve letting them know the benefits of proper behaviour and the dangers of bad behaviour. Children tend to behave well when they know the repercussions of improper behaviour. Wegner (2005:722) opines that 'Parents should have a wealth of knowledge gained from life's experiences that they can pass on to their children to help them know the consequences of evil behaviour'. Playing with one's children equally impacts their social, emotional and cognitive development and significantly strengthens the parent-child bond, thereby reducing the need for shouting and flogging (Yogman et al. 2018:1).

Parents should strive to focus more on the strengths of their children rather than their weaknesses. However, when they observe any bad behaviour, they should avoid pointing it out with anger or a threat, because children feel motivated to behave properly when they are gently instructed. There are higher chances of compliance with instructions given in a calm and lovely atmosphere. Again, children should always be praised and rewarded for exhibiting good behaviour and for their specific accomplishments. When they are commended for their strengths, children feel loved, valued and motivated to keep on behaving well. Many parents often emphasise what their children should avoid rather than what they should do. Parents need to set clear and achievable expectations by specifying what they require from their children and ensuring that they can meet those standards. Involving children in the rules and consequences setting process can also be beneficial. Studies indicate that these parenting techniques tend to improve children's performance in school, brain function, mental health and overall well-being and ensure positive behavioural changes (Amato & Fowler 2002:703; Whittle et al. 2014:7).

The book of Proverbs sustains that failure to apply loving but firm discipline to children may set them on a path of personal destruction and eventual death (Storms 2017). As a result, Proverbs 13:24; 19:18 should not be understood literally to imply that parents can dislike their children or consciously hope for their destruction. The texts point to the unintended consequences for an undisciplined child. Waltke (2005:144) opines that 'The parents' hope in disciplining their children

is to impart eternal life, the opposite of death, and failing to discipline is tantamount to participating in their death'. Parents who are concerned about the future well-being of their children demonstrate diligence in teaching them the right way of life. It can be challenging for parents to manage recalcitrant children, but spanking does not yield sustainable results and often causes more harm than good in the long run. When handling younger children, punishments can be non-physical, such as limiting playtime, limiting access to the television and withdrawing certain privileges for a while.

If positive discipline methods prove abortive, especially in dealing with a persistently rebellious child, parents should seek professional support from a mental health specialist, such as a child psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist or school counsellor, to determine the underlying factors responsible for a child's defiant behaviour and to ascertain the right approach to assist the child's behavioural development. Parents should note that disrespectful behaviour is a common part of teenage development (The Australian Parenting Website 2025). The temperamental disposition of a child may make them more prone to resistance. Children might display rebelliousness to assert their desire for independence, communicate when they feel ignored or unseen or indicate a need for connection and belonging. Furthermore, resistance can be a learned response to previous experiences where children felt dismissed or misunderstood. Some children might be incapable of understanding the moral undertone of their actions or of making a connection between their behaviour and the disciplinary consequences that follow (Robinson 2005). Dickson and Chiabuotu (2021:102) note that 'Instruction, persuasion, heartfelt discussion, timely and insightful counselling should be carried out in an atmosphere of love and mutual relationship'. Importantly, positive parenting should be performed in a way that the purpose is achieved; children must be aware of why they are being disciplined, because discipline is meant to instruct.

Recommendations

Drawing on the discussions and findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- Given that corporal punishment in child raising has detrimental outcomes, more governments should implement and enforce laws to prohibit the physical punishment of children in domestic settings. This would go a long way in restraining many parents who believe that the spanking of children is effective in achieving behavioural modification.
- Some parents are deeply ignorant of the appropriate and acceptable ways of child raising. Therefore, governmental, non-governmental and faith-based organisations should provide skill-building programmes aimed at clarifying the responsibilities of parents in their caregiving roles for them to have better relationships with their children, develop positive attitudes towards their upbringing and embrace non-violent discipline methods.

- Health and educational professionals should be engaged to educate parents on the impact of punitive discipline on child development and the cognitive ability of children.
- Parents should endeavour to pay close attention to their children's behaviour so that they can communicate expectations and consequences early and clearly.

Conclusion

In ancient Israelite culture, discipline was an essential part of household life, especially in the education of children. The concept of discipline was also related to the formation of character. Children were disciplined by their parents for them to have acceptable behaviour and thus, experience the kind of life approved by God. Through discipline, children had an awareness of the demands upon them and the importance of obedience. Hence, the need for discipline in the training of children is a common theme in the book of Proverbs because it was needful for children to outgrow their foolishness and wilfulness.

Although many parents believe that corporal punishment is invaluable in instilling the proper character in children, this study, however, submits that frequent spanking of children is a manifestation of harsh and negative parenting. Parents should adopt positive parenting and other constructive approaches that rely on unambiguous and age-appropriate expectations and consequences for the healthy development of their children. Again, because of the adverse effects of physical punishment on neurological, cognitive, emotional, social and physical development of children, parents should endeavour to apply wisdom in managing undesired behaviour in their children.

Professional support from child development experts should be sought in situations where non-punitive discipline seems not to yield the desired results in correcting a willfully disobedient child. This would help in ascertaining the proper pattern to employ in instilling discipline in the child. As exhibiting positive discipline methods in child upbringing has more benefits, both for the child and society, as much as possible, parents should avoid hitting their children because bringing up a well-behaved child without spanking is realistic. Conclusively, 'Sparing the rod' of positive discipline usually enables family life to proceed harmoniously, but the aftermath is usually full of various anxieties.

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Author's contributions

O.G.C. is the sole author of this article.

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