

## Perceptions and Practices of Nepalese Mothers in Child Discipline and Learning

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### Abstract

*Punishment practices play a central role in shaping children's early social, emotional, and behavioral development because, it is estimated that around two-thirds of children are regularly subjected to violent punishment at home, with approximately 1.2 billion experiencing corporal punishment globally. The purpose of this study is to explore mothers' perception and practices regarding the impact of punishment and reward to change the behaviors of children, and to assess the alternative strategies of punishment in discipline and learning for children. This study employed the narrative inquiry research design under the qualitative method, thirteen mothers of children attending community managed Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers were purposively selected until data saturation. Open-ended interviews were conducted at participants' homes and ECD centers. Audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, cross-checking of coding, audit trails, and reflexivity. The study discovered that mothers in the study area used punishment to control destructive activities and trigger learning, which had negative impacts, while mild or conscious punishment strategies had positive impacts on children's discipline and learning. Cell phones, chocolate, toys, love and affection can be the alternative strategies of punishment to replace traditional concept of punishment. It is concluded that, while teaching and disciplining children, traditional forms of punishment can be replaced with toys, chocolate, cell phones, love and affection as an alternative strategy of punishment.*

**Keywords:** Discipline, Learning, Perception, Punishment, Preschool-children

### Introduction

Early social, emotional, and behavioral development in children is greatly influenced by parenting styles, especially those related to discipline. physical discipline is still prevalent worldwide; according to contemporary estimates, two-thirds of children receive physical punishment on a regular basis at home, with 1.2 billion of them particularly receiving corporal punishment (UNICEF, 2024; WHO, 2025). In this context, evidence consistently links corporal punishment to negative outcomes,

including poorer socio-emotional development, increased externalizing behaviors, and heightened risks of anxiety and depression (WHO, 2024; WHO, 2025). These findings underscore the importance of interventions that promote non-violent, constructive parenting strategies as part of broader health education efforts (Center for Global Development [CFGD], 2024; WHO, 2024).

Mothers' use of corporal punishment, expressions of distress, and shouting have been found to significantly correlate with heightened child aggression and anxiety, with these effects moderated by children's perceptions of the cultural norm activeness of disciplinary practices (Gershoff et al., 2010). Harsh parental discipline is also bidirectionally associated with reduced repressive control in preschoolers, with gender-based variations observed (Xing et al., 2021). Furthermore, frequent physical punishment has been linked to poorer educational outcomes, including weakened executive function and lower classroom engagement (Wiggers & Paas, 2022).

In South Asia, violent discipline remains widespread. Cultural norms emphasizing obedience, respect, and parental authority influence how punishment is perceived as a tool for ensuring good behavior (Gershoff, 2002; Jun et al., 2023). Understanding caregivers' beliefs, beyond prevalence data is essential for developing culturally appropriate interventions that are both credible and effective. In Nepal, the Act Relating to Children (2018) prohibits corporal punishment in all settings, signaling a national shift toward non-violent disciplinary approaches ((UNICEF, 2022; Government of Nepal [GoN], 2018; UN, 2025). Nevertheless, population surveys indicate that violent discipline remains highly prevalent: the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey reported that 82% of children aged 1–14 experienced at least one form of violent discipline in the preceding month, including 63% physical punishment and 77% psychological aggression (UNICEF Nepal, 2019a, 2019b). Social norms, parental stress, and habitual practices continue to shape disciplinary strategies despite legal prohibition (CFGD, 2024; Legal Literacy Nepal, 2024; Sharma et al., 2025).

Although quantitative studies have documented prevalence (Khadka, 2021), little is known about Nepalese mother's lived opinions and decision-making regarding punishment for preschool-aged children. Current study often emphasizes on either urban or rural populations, with few researches investigating both punishment and non-violent approaches together. In the Rupandehi District of Nepal, there is limited qualitative indication on maternal views and practices associated to child punishment and its effect on children's learning. To address this, the present study employs a narrative inquiry method to explore mothers' perceptions and practices, contributing context-specific insights into child discipline. The discoveries not only enhance the universal discourse on child discipline but also provide locally applicable suggestion to inform parenting programs and child safety strategies aimed at promoting constructive discipline practices. To address this gap, the study aims to explore mothers' perception and practices regarding the impact of punishment and reward to change the behaviors of children, and to assess the alternative strategies of punishment in discipline and learning for children. This investigation is directed by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977),

which posits that a child learns behaviors through observation and reinforcement. Caregiver inspire children's behavior through punishment and prize, with positive strategies indorsing required behaviors and punitive punishment creating negative outcomes. This framework reinforces the investigation of maternal beliefs and practices in child discipline and learning.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a narrative inquiry methodology within its qualitative research background, as this approach enables an in-depth understanding of mothers' attitudes and practices concerning behavior management and child discipline (Davilla & Pearson, 1994; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Study Setting**

The study was delimited in the Rupandehi District of Nepal as the study site, which is diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This area is appropriate to investigate from various perspectives on child discipline in everyday family life (Sharma et al., 2023).

### **Participants and Sampling**

Three local government units; a sub-metropolitan city, a municipality, and a rural municipality, were purposively selected to capture urban and rural backgrounds, with data obtained across education levels and ethnicities. Mothers of preschool-aged children enrolled in community managed ECD centers were selected as the participants for this study. Thirteen mothers were selected until data saturation was achieved (Patton, 2015). As the limitation, other caregivers such as fathers, grandparents, or teachers were not given voice in this study that could have assisted in providing an end-to-end picture of child learning and discipline.

### **Data Collection**

The hiring period in 2021 ran from April 20 to May 2. Open-ended interview was taken, which enable participants to freely express their opinions while guaranteeing coverage of important themes, were used to collect the information (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview sites were either the ECD facilities or the participants' homes, providing a relaxed and familiar environment that promoted open communication. The primary topics addressed in mothers' views on the purpose and results of disciplinary measures on non-violent behavior modification techniques and punishment. To ensure uniformity, all interviews were audio recorded with consent. The transcription was carefully reviewed several times. The initial codes were created inductively using participant feedback and developing concepts (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

The codes were organized into basic, organizing, and global themes to capture the essence of maternal beliefs and experiences. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, allowing for identification of underlying patterns in mothers' beliefs about punishment and learning behavior regulation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

The dependability criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used throughout the entire investigation to ensure rigor in qualitative study. Credibility was established by a large number of transcripts reads that accurately represented mothers' voices and high levels of participant engagement. Member checking, in which transcripts were returned to participants for confirmation to minimize personal bias and increase reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Comprehensive descriptions of the study's participants, setting, and context enhanced transferability by enabling readers to evaluate how well the results translated to various contexts (Shenton, 2004). Reliability was preserved by a systematic, cross-checked coding scheme and a strict audit trail that documented every choice made during data collection and processing (Nowell et al., 2017). In order to provide confirmability, reflexivity was utilized throughout the study. The first author was aware of his positionality and biases, and all the interpretation was done with the use of direct quotes of participants to enable findings to represent the views of participants and not assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such cautious application of rigor was used throughout the participant recruitment, data gathering, transcription, coding, and theme analysis during this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to data collection, the Nepal Health Research Council's Ethical Review Board granted ethical permission for this project (ERB approval No. 2078-56/2021). All participants gave their written informed permission after being fully informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality protocols, and voluntary nature of participation. Participants were guaranteed that their answers would only be used for research, and identifying information was removed from transcripts to protect anonymity. Participants had the freedom to leave the research at any time without facing any repercussions, and interviews were held in a discreet and pleasant environment.

### **Results**

This study explored Nepalese mothers' perception and practices regarding punishment as a disciplinary strategy for preschool-aged children. The analysis revealed diverse perspectives, ranging from complete rejection of physical punishment to acceptance of minor forms of discipline as necessary tools for behavior modification. Mothers' narratives highlighted themes of beliefs about punishment, situations leading to punishment, punishment as habit versus necessity, motivation and alternative strategies, and ambivalence and regret. These themes are described below with illustrative quotations from participants.

#### **Punishment to Control Aggressive Activity and Learning Behavior**

Punishment and reinforcement both are considered equal effective forms of influence in early behavior of child. Mothers of our study differed in their fundamental stance on punishment. Some firmly rejected punishment, expressing faith in children's natural ability to improve with love, patience, and motivation. In this way, one of our participants expressed that,

*"I never punish my child. I never hit even when they are more aggressive. I believe they will be good if I do not punish them" (Mother 1).*

In contrast, another participant placed her view that punishment as an essential element of discipline, believing that without it, children would grow up undisciplined or disrespectful. She said that,

*“I punish sometimes when she doesn’t write homework and when she becomes aggressive demanding market food items. I think, we cannot control the children without punishment and shouting as well” (Mother 2).*

This contrast reflected broader parental beliefs about authority and discipline within Nepalese households. In this controversial quotation, another mother of our participant concluded that,

I am also suffered by this problem and I try to solve it through minor punishment. First of all, I try to make her calm; if not possible I shout to her. I normally do not punish. I started minor punishment along with start of her school. In the beginning, I loved too much and tried to motivate without punishment. When I failed to control her from affection and encouragement, I started minor punishment as an experiment. Yes, I thought in the beginning. Truly speaking she is not difficult child but sometime when she creates some problems, I give minor punishment (Mother 3).

From the above quotation, we can say that the use of punishment is not efficient means to change behavior of children, it may work sometimes but it seldom works well. Even though, the minor punishment may use to control aggressive activities.

### **Punishment as a Trigger in Learning**

Punishment is a learning trigger. it works through instrumental aversive learning by suppressing behaviors which lead to negative outcomes. Where the reinforcement promotes learning behavior of children. Our participants expressed that, punishment is not uniformly applied but emerged during specific circumstances such as disobedience, aggressive behavior, failure to do homework, or engaging in “dirty” or socially undesirable activities. In this way, a mother said that,

Yes, I punish/hit/shout if he plays in dirt and speaks rough. We could control without punishment too, but if we give punishment, he may be afraid to do the same next time, but he lost his interest in learning. Now he is not interested to go to school. My child wants to take revenge towards the teacher too. He did not complete his homework (Mother 4).

In this quotation, the child has a trigger symptom in learning and doing something. He is doing socially undesirable activities. Therefore, it depicts that the punishment works as a trigger in learning. To support this statement, another mother of our participant added that,

*“Sometimes if she does not obey... Mainly I hit her when she does forcefully what I say not to do. She shows her anger to do homework” (Mother 5).*

In this scenario, our study showed that mothers consistently linked punishment to moments of perceived defiance, highlighting how punishment was enacted reactively rather than proactively.

### Conscious Strategy of Punishment and Learning

For some mothers, punishment was acknowledged as a habitual response, often modeled by their own upbringing or reinforced by their spouse.

I have habits to hit the child as my husband also says. If he plays in the water and with chickens, I punish but it is light type. Yes, I think, no need to hit the child but it is my habit. Now he does not want disruptive or distracting activities. This type of punishment has created a learning environment to complete his homework (*Mother 6*).

In this quotation. The mother has indirectly declared that punishment is framed as a deliberate, corrective strategy. The light type of punishment protects the learner by preventing negative behavior and creating learning environment. Supporting this statement, another mother said that,

One day my son was doing unnecessary activities (*Chakchak*). I tried to stop such activities by sweet voice and motivation but he did not accept, so at the same time I punished him. Then he stopped. Therefore, I started punishing him sometimes lightly (*Mother 7*).

This distinction indicated that punishment was not always rationalized pedagogically but sometimes perpetuated as a learned parental behavior.

### Alternative Strategies of Punishment

Several mothers reported using alternative methods such as reasoning, motivation, or even distraction (e.g., mobile phones) before resorting to punishment. One mother of our participant portrayed that,

My daughter is obedient when I say to keep her in toilet and lock the door. There is no other punishment but I shout to her. She did not create problematic situation to give her a big punishment up to now. If I raise hand to hit, she starts to cry. If I give mobile, she agrees to do the home work too. Therefore, it is better to motivate her than of punishment. These days, the best way to control the child is giving mobile to play game (*Mother 8*).

The above quotation has suggested that the appropriate alternative of punishment might be to give different types of toys and mobile to play the games that may useful in learning and control the crying. In the same way, another mother illustrated that,

I punish my child but very rarely. He is a child; sometimes I make him afraid saying tiger came or stinging nettle (*Sisnu*) will be applied. It is not good to give punishment. I can control without punishment too but sometimes problems happen; I manage it by giving chocolate and toys then he starts to learn (*Mother 13*).

This demonstrated an ongoing negotiation between non-violent strategies and the perceived quick effectiveness of punishment. In this study, many mothers practiced minor punishment, they simultaneously expressed regret or doubt about its necessity. Another mother said by suggesting that,

*“Punishment is not the better way. I thought not to punish child but found impossible only by love and affection. Therefore, I start sometimes. I suggest others to use love and affection that helps child to learn better” (Mother 9).*

This statement suggested to use love and affection as the alternative of punishment. This reflections of mother revealed that both the limitations and potential harm of punishment, but often felt constrained by cultural expectations, immediate frustrations, or lack of alternative coping mechanisms.

### **Discussion**

Our study explored that punishment is used just for controlling strategy to change learning behavior of children. In this context, most classical exchange theories and bargaining theories argue that the actual use of punishment in exchange relations decreases rather than improves mutually beneficial exchange and fosters retribution and hostility (Molm, 1994). Regarding the punishment to control aggressive activities, a study explored that the practice of punishment is a disciplinary strategy for preschool-aged children, revealing a complex interplay of cultural, emotional, and behavioral factors (Berzenski, 2013). While some mothers rejected physical punishment entirely, others perceived minor punitive measures as necessary for behavior modification. These perspectives are influenced by broader cultural norms, parental habits, and legal frameworks in Nepal (GoN, 2018; UNICEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2018). Similarly, the dichotomy between rejecting and accepting punishment reflects a transitional parenting context. Traditional beliefs in Nepal often equate discipline with physical punishment, particularly during early childhood (Adhikari, 2016; Koirala, 2024). Recent legal reforms, such as the Children’s Act of 2018, criminalize corporal punishment in all settings, signaling a societal shift toward non-violent disciplinary approaches (GoN, 2018). Despite this, societal norms and familial traditions continue to shape maternal beliefs (Gershoff, 2002). Mothers expressed simultaneous reliance on punishment and confidence in non-violent guidance, indicating evolving perceptions of child-rearing.

In the context of punishment as trigger in learning, it is clear that punishment is primarily reactive, applied to disobedience, aggression, or failure to complete tasks. This aligns with evidence that corporal punishment is often situational rather than proactive (Jun et al., 2023; Koirala, 2024). In contrast, health education interventions emphasize positive discipline techniques that not only teach appropriate behavior but also reduce reliance on punitive measures, highlighting that long-term behavioral change is more effectively achieved through alternatives to punishment (Nelsen, 2006; Quail & Ward, 2020).

Regarding the habitual/ conscious strategies of punishment, some mothers of our study reported habitual punishment shaped by upbringing or spouses, whereas others used it deliberately as corrective strategy. This distinction highlights the role of parental self-awareness and the potential for educational interventions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Positive discipline interventions can help parents notice and transform common punitive behavior, thereby promoting healthy parent–child relationships (Meinck et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2024). With regard to alternative punishment, the mothers in our sample population tended to utilize reasoning, encouragement, or diversion (e.g., mobile phones, toys, love and affection) as an alternative to punishment. Even while the above steps demonstrate awareness of the potential voices of corporal punishment, too much dependence on short-term measures can do no better than tackle the root causes of offending behavior (Sharma et al., 2023). Positive discipline programs and health education equip parents with firm non-violent methods for controlling behavior (Nelsen, 2006; Quail & Ward, 2020; UNICEF Data, 2025). Similarly, the study's results support Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), indicating that mothers' use of positive fortification boosts desirable behaviors in children, while harsh punishment may lead to negative consequences. These outcomes highlight the role of maternal practices as behavioral models in shaping child discipline and learning for the implementation of culturally sensitive health promotion programs that guide towards non-violence practices but keeping indigenous beliefs in mind (Gershoff, 2002; UNICEF, 2018; WHO, 2024). Maternal help in discipline can promote self-efficacy, generate improved mother and child relations (Koirala, 2024; Meinck et al., 2025).

### **Strengths, Limitations and Implications**

This study delivers context specific insights into Nepalese mothers' knowledge and practices concerning children's discipline and tutoring, offering cultural and situational depth which is often absent in quantitative studies. Utilizing rich qualitative data from participants' narratives allowed exploration of mothers' perceptions and motivations, creating a comprehensive chronicle of disciplinary encounters. Focusing on preschool-aged children strengthens the study, as this is a critical stage for early behavioral development. However, a limitation is that other caregivers, such as fathers, grandparents, or teachers, were not included, which could have provided a more comprehensive view of child learning and discipline.

The discoveries have important implications for health education and child development programs in Nepal. They support the execution of culturally sensitive positive discipline interventions that reduce dependence on punishment and promote children's physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being (Gershoff, 2002; WHO, 2024). Such initiatives can empower parents to recognize habitual punitive behaviors and adopt evidence based, non-violent strategies, enhancing child development outcomes (Nelsen, 2006; Quail & Ward, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that the punishment is not efficient means to change the behavior of children. However, some mothers acknowledged that minor punishment was occasionally employed as a strategy to regulate children's aggressive behaviors and to shape their learning. Giving mobile phone, chocolate, toys, love and affection can be the alternative strategies of punishment for discipline and learning of children. In additionally, the disciplinary practices among Nepalese mothers of preschoolers in Rupandehi district are diverse and complex, existing on a spectrum from outright



rejection of punishment to reluctant acceptance of minor corrective measures. Mothers navigated between relying on affection, motivation, and non-violent strategies, and resorting to punishment shaped by cultural norms, parental habits, situational triggers, and emotional ambivalence. While traditional perception continues to influence discipline approaches, there is an increasing recognition of the value of non-violent strategies. Promoting positive discipline programs can help mothers adopt more effective and compassionate approaches, fostering healthier parent-child relationships and enhancing developmental outcomes for child discipline and learning. Additional qualitative and quantitative investigation is recommended to appraise the long-term effects of these non-violent strategies across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

### Abbreviation

ASP	Alternative Strategies of Punishment
CSPL	Conscious Strategies of Punishment and Learning
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ERB	Ethical Review Board

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### Author Contributions

**Prakash Sharma:** Conceptualization and collection of information, perform the analysis, project administration, software, validation, visualization, writing- original draft, writing- review and editing.

**Bishnu Kumar Adhikari:** Conceptualization, project administration, information validation, visualization, writing - review and editing.

**Pramila Thapa:** Project administration, information validation, visualization, writing - review and editing.

**Alisha Rijal:** Information validation, visualization, writing - review and editing.

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### Data availability:

All essential details of this study are included in the manuscript. However, upon reasonable request, the principal author can provide certain identified data fields.

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