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**A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE
ON THE POLICY OF SANCTIONING
CORPORAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN
IN SERBIA: ATTITUDE INCONSISTENCY******

Abstract

The policy of introducing a prohibition on corporal punishment of children (CPC) into legal frameworks currently needs unanimous support among social actors in Serbia. This may reflect the instability and inconsistency of collective and individual attitudes toward CPC, which are in the process of changing. The subject of this research is the attitude toward CPC from the standpoint of social change theories and stages of the attitude change process. The aim was to examine the consistency of this attitude across different levels of generality and situational contexts to determine its stability. A quantitative study was conducted among 104 respondents. Data were collected through an

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online questionnaire designed for the research. The findings revealed that attitude toward CPC depends on situational context differences and the context's specificity level. For instance, while 79.8% of respondents hold a negative general attitude toward CPC, 54.8% believe that parents should legally be allowed to slap a child on the buttocks with an open hand when the child is disobedient. When presented with five different situations involving specific child misbehavior, only 1.9% to 6.7% of respondents approved of a parent's reaction involving a mild slap on the buttocks without further explanation, depending on the situation. Conversely, support for this reaction increased to between 7.7% and 31.7% if accompanied by an explanation of why the child's behaviour was inappropriate. The results of the inconsistency of attitudes toward CPC are discussed in light of the significance of the level of abstraction and situational context. The recommended approach advocates for a policy that respects the particularities of Serbian society by formulating legal provisions on CPC as precisely as possible.

Keywords: corporal punishment prohibition policy, children, upbringing, discipline, attitude change, law

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes toward corporal punishment of children (CPC) shape parental practices that directly affect a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development and thereby impact society as a whole. The current social context in Serbia reflects a complex interplay of traditional, patriarchal values, which regard CPC as an integral part of child-rearing, and contemporary values that oppose CPC, supported by empirical evidence of its harmful consequences (Fréchette and Romano 2015; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016). This indicates that our society is undergoing a nuanced shift in attitudes toward CPC on both collective and individual levels.

The lack of a clearly defined policy on CPC is evidenced by the fact that national initiatives that legally prohibit CPC have yet to be formally adopted. The UN Committee initiated a shift in attitude toward CPC on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC 2007), which defined "corporal" or "physical" punishment as any form of punishment involving the use of physical force with the intent to inflict a specific, even minimal,

degree of pain or discomfort (para. 11) and recommended that member states implement legal reforms to prohibit CPC. In February 2017, the Committee included in its recommendations for advancing child rights in Serbia a suggestion for the legal prohibition of CPC. Subsequently, in 2019, an initiative to legally ban CPC was launched. In 2020, the Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period 2020–2023 was adopted, which stated that “it is necessary to define corporal punishment of a child as a form of violence against the child” (Strategija za prevenciju i zaštitu dece od nasilja 2020). In 2021, the Draft Law on Amendments to the Family Law was presented to the public, which proposed a ban on CPC by parents and defined corporal punishment as “any use of physical force with the intent to induce fear, pain, or discomfort in a child” (Advokatska komora Vojvodine 2021, Art. 10, para. 2). To date, this Draft has not been adopted. Public discussions on this issue have shown that opposing views on CPC are present among both professionals and the general public (Vujović 2020).

A better understanding of the process of shifting attitudes toward CPC – from positive to negative – is essential for defining future policies on CPC sanctions and relevant legal regulations. People tend to alter their attitudes under the influence of social factors – media and public discourse, political rhetoric, social movements, and group dynamics (Moussaid *et al.* 2013) – particularly when they identify with specific social groups (such as a political party, religious group, or social movement). In such cases, they align their beliefs with those prevailing in the group to foster a sense of belonging (Thomas *et al.* 2022). On the other hand, the most prominent individual factors in attitude change are cognitive mechanisms, especially cognitive dissonance, social learning (through imitation of role models), motivation, and beliefs (Festinger 1957; Montgomery 1992; Fazio *et al.* 1977; Moussaid *et al.* 2013; de la Sablonniere 2017; Cancino-Montecinos *et al.* 2018; Thomas *et al.* 2022). When society collectively moves toward a change in attitude, individuals tend to align their views with those of the majority (Moussaid *et al.* 2013; de la Sablonniere 2017). Individuals adopt new beliefs, especially in situations of uncertainty (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). The process of attitude change unfolds through a nuanced, dynamic interaction of individual and social mechanisms. The attitudes of the majority can be influenced by the personal attitudes of prominent individuals or activists who lead shifts in public discourse, subsequently resulting in the adoption of new attitudes on a broader societal level (de la Sablonniere 2017; Thomas *et al.* 2022).

The Process of Collective Attitude Change

Attitudes toward CPC possess both collective and individual dimensions. As a collective attitude, it reflects and dictates how the community perceives this issue collectively, shaping the behaviour of group members (Turner 1991) and influencing how they respond to social change. Research indicates that collective attitudes evolve through specific stages that accompany the process of social change (de la Sablonniere 2017). The first stage is stability or inertia. Initially, societies often resist change. Members adhere to existing beliefs and norms due to a need for psychological and social stability, remaining unaware of, or indifferent to, the necessity for change. In the second stage, new information or social circumstances prompt a reevaluation of established norms, and people begin to experience cognitive dissonance. This tension between established beliefs and a new reality leads some individuals to question the *status quo*, with small groups slowly beginning to advocate for change (Thomas *et al.* 2022). In the third stage, a gradual shift in collective attitude occurs as more individuals align their views with new perspectives, usually due to social influence and exposure to new ideas. This change spreads slowly through social networks or movements (Moussaid *et al.* 2013; de la Sablonniere 2017). However, change can sometimes happen dramatically and quickly, often triggered by significant events such as political upheavals or rapid technological advancements. Such events disrupt social and normative structures, leading to an abrupt shift in collective attitudes, initially sparking some resistance as the changes may threaten cultural or group identities (de la Sablonniere 2017). The final stage is consolidation and institutionalisation, when a critical mass of society members adopts new attitudes, and the new norms become institutionalised within society (Centola 2018) by establishing new laws, policies, or social norms that reinforce the newly adopted attitudes. These stages may vary in duration and intensity depending on factors such as the nature of the change, the social groups involved, the role of media, and the influence of prominent individuals (della Porta and Diani 2006).

The Process of Individual Attitude Change

The attitude toward CPC also represents an individual attitude, varying from person to person (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The Stages of Change Model, or Transtheoretical Model (TTM), outlines six phases of

attitude change at the individual level (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983; Norcross and Prochaska 2002). In the first stage, precontemplation, the individual is either unaware of the need for change or actively resists it, denying the importance of the issue or resisting reconsidering their views because of the influence of social norms. In the second stage, contemplation, the individual begins to recognize that their attitude might require adjustment, weighing the pros and cons of change. Although open to new information, they have yet to commit fully to change. Next is the preparation stage, where the individual firmly decides that change is necessary, explores new perspectives, gathers information, and seeks advice from others before taking concrete action. In the fourth stage, action, the person actively works to change their attitude: they discuss the topic, question former beliefs, test new ones, expose themselves to various perspectives, and align behaviours with the new attitudes they seek to adopt. This phase is cognitively and emotionally demanding. Then comes the maintenance stage, where the person integrates the new attitude into daily life. In the final stage, a person may either achieve a lasting attitude change that becomes part of their belief system, requiring minimal effort to maintain; revert to their previous attitude, especially when confronted with opposing social pressures (de la Sablonniere 2017); or experience incomplete internalisation, where the attitude fails to fully integrate into daily life (Monin and Norton 2003).

Indicators of incomplete internalisation include low cognitive accessibility of the attitude when making decisions (Fazio 1990); emotional detachment from the attitude (Maio and Haddock 2010); hesitation to act consistently with the attitude (Fazio and Towles-Schwen 1999); sensitivity to social pressure, context, and authority figures (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004); selective application of the attitude only when socially reinforced (Petty and Krosnick 1995); lack of opportunity to practice the attitude-aligned behaviour, which would strengthen the link between attitude and action (Gollwitzer 1999); rationalisation to minimise dissonance between cognitively adopted attitudes and one's behaviour (Stone and Cooper 2001); or even open ambivalence, where the individual is aware of making both positive and negative evaluations of the attitude object (Thompson *et al.* 1995). Additionally, the attitude may be context-sensitive, particularly when situations lack cues that trigger the specific attitude, and contexts exert different levels of pressure on the individual to exhibit that attitude (Lord and Lepper 1999).

In stages of attitude change where internalisation is incomplete, an individual may adopt a generalised belief on an abstract level but struggle to apply it consistently in the concrete contexts of daily experiences. This discrepancy between abstract and concrete thinking is grounded in the stages of the cognitive process of attitude adoption. An abstract or generalised belief is initially adopted, forming a cognitive schema (Fiske and Taylor 1991). The person develops a general attitude based on social norms, cultural values, or moral reasoning (Markus and Zajonc 1985). This abstract attitude serves as a cognitive shortcut or our way to make sense of our world, but it does not necessarily account for the complexities of real life (Lord *et al.* 1984; Eyal *et al.* 2008). In the next phase, the individual attempts to apply this general belief to a specific instance. However, situations often involve complexities, intense emotions, or values that conflict with that adopted general belief. The individual then tries to rationalise why the general belief does not fully apply in that particular case (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999). In the following phase, the context is re-evaluated, and the person realizes that the abstract attitude cannot be applied universally, prompting an adjustment of their cognitive schema. A specific split between contradictory beliefs may arise, allowing the individual to support both the abstract attitude and its exception without triggering cognitive dissonance (Markus 1977; Fiske and Taylor 1991). In specific situations, emotional and contextual factors (urgency, perceived danger, stress) may lead the individual to make exceptions to the general attitude, revealing that the abstract attitude is not fully internalized for specific contexts (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Forgas 1995). Over time, through reflection or daily experience, the individual may attempt to integrate the general attitude with its contextual exceptions, either by reinforcing the general attitude to apply without exception or by modifying it to fit concrete life contexts better (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Chaiken and Trope 1999). If this integration is not achieved, the person will continue to apply one attitude on an abstract level and another in specific situations without fully resolving the tension between them (Monin and Norton 2003).

The concept of incomplete internalisation and integration of attitudes into daily life is especially significant for understanding the complexity and duration of the attitude change process toward CPC in our society. In the face of opposing views, policies on CPC sanctions and related legal initiatives will not gain unanimous support, as the institutionalisation phase matures in society only after a sufficient

number of members have stably adopted and internalised the new attitude. Evidence of a gap between the general attitude toward CPC and attitudes in specific daily situations will serve as an indicator of the insufficient internalisation of the negative attitude toward CPC in our research.

RESEARCH

Objective and Hypotheses of the Study

This study aims to identify attitudes toward CPC and assess their consistency across varying levels of generality and different situational contexts to determine whether this attitude is stable and fully formed. The specific objectives are: 1) to determine participants' attitudes toward corporal punishment of children; 2) to analyse the consistency of participants' attitudes toward CPC concerning the level of attitude specificity; 3) to analyse the consistency of participants' attitudes toward CPC across various situational contexts; and 4) to examine participants' attitudes toward the legal regulation of parenting practices and CPC sanctioning policies.

The general hypothesis assumes that there is inconsistency in expressed attitudes across different levels of generality and situational contexts. The specific hypotheses are: 1) that a statistically significant majority of the sample will hold a generally negative attitude toward CPC and that respondents will more readily accept milder forms of corporal punishment than severe or excessive forms; 2) that the percentage of negative attitudes toward CPC will vary according to the generality level of the questions (whether the attitude is generalised or related to a specific situation); 3) that the percentage of negative attitudes toward CPC will vary across different situational contexts; and 4) that the percentage of those supporting legal regulation of CPC will be lower than the percentage of respondents holding a generally negative attitude toward CPC.

Method

This research is quantitative and descriptive, focused on collecting and describing statistical data on attitudes toward corporal punishment of children.

Sample. The study sample included 104 undergraduate students from the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Political Sciences and Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation).

Instrument. Data were collected via a questionnaire designed for this study. The questionnaire consisted of five sections, four of which were used in this paper. The first section collected socio-demographic data. The second section included the CPC Attitude Scale (SFKD1), which covers attitudes toward corporal punishment of children, comprising 16 statements rated on a Likert-type scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). A high score on this scale indicates opposition to corporal punishment. The scale's reliability was high after reverse-coding statements supporting corporal punishment (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$). The third section addressed attitudes toward legal regulations on corporal punishment and included four statements with binary responses (Yes = 1, No = 2). The fourth section presented five specific scenarios of child transgressions for ages 5, 7, 9, 10, and 12. These scenarios represent everyday parenting situations: crossing the street (age 5), material damage due to disobedience (age 7), physical (age 9), and verbal aggression (age 10) toward others, and lying with severe consequences (age 12). The chosen ages reflect an expectation that the child would be aware of the wrongdoing, and these behaviours are relatively common and of comparable severity for each age. Respondents were offered 10 to 13 possible reactions for each scenario, seven involving corporal punishment. Respondents indicated agreement with each reaction by selecting "Yes", "Not sure", or "No".

Procedure. The study was conducted in 2023. Participants completed the anonymous questionnaire online via Google Forms. The survey link was distributed via email (mailing lists obtained from faculty staff) and shared on social networks in the following Facebook groups: FPN – Social Sciences 19/20; FPN – Social Sciences 20/21; FPN – Social Sciences 2021/22; FPN – Social Sciences 22/23; FASPER (Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation); and Students of Belgrade Universities – SBU.

Data Analysis. Data were processed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods with IBM SPSS 25.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment of Children on the CPC Attitude Scale (SFKD1)

The presence of statistically significant differences in respondents' attitudes across different statements was examined and confirmed using the Friedman test ($\chi^2(15, N = 104) = 245.18, p < .001$). Nearly 80% of respondents believe that corporal punishment of children directly violates children's rights and harms their development and well-being (Table 1, Statements 1 and 2), with only 10–11% of respondents disagreeing. These two statements are the most abstract on the scale. Given the intense level of agreement with these, a firmly established attitude against CPC would predict a similar level of agreement with statements tied to specific contexts of corporal punishment and consistency in responses across these contexts. However, agreement levels are notably lower for all other statements, ranging from 41–68% across different contexts (Table 1, Statements 3–16).

It is noteworthy that while 80% of respondents agree that CPC is harmful and infringes on children's rights (Table 1, Statements 1 and 2), only 62.5% believe that CPC should never be used as a parenting method (Table 1, Statement 6), 57.7% consider it wrong to physically punish a child (Table 1, Statement 16), and as many as 47.1% of respondents find it acceptable to give a mild slap on the buttocks when a child is disobedient (Table 1, Statement 5). These responses indicate a significant discrepancy from the general negative attitude toward corporal punishment. A striking indicator of inconsistency is the difference between Statements 1 and 8: while only 10.6% of respondents believe that "corporal punishment does not harm children's development and well-being", this number rises to 28.8% when the statement is slightly contextualised only with the word "fair" (Table 1, Statement 8). This example illustrates how a single word can trigger rationalization mechanisms that allow for the coexistence of conflicting attitudes. These results show significant inconsistencies in attitudes toward CPC across statements that vary in generality and contextual specificity.

Further evidence of respondents' insufficiently firm attitude toward CPC can be seen in the high prevalence of "unsure" responses (Response 3). Examining the statements with the highest levels of indecision, it is apparent that they are contextualised (rather than abstract) and involve

emotionally charged circumstances. For example, Statement 10, which refers to using CPC on one’s own child, had 14.4% of respondents unsure. Similarly, Statement 7, referring to physical punishment of adults, had 14.4% unsure; Statement 13, which mentions the term “violence”, had 16.3% unsure; and Statement 15, which addresses the state’s right to intervene in child-rearing practices (a highly emotional topic), had as many as 20.2% of respondents unsure.

Table 1. Results on the CPC Attitude Scale (SKFD1)

No.	Statement	M	SD	Agree (%) (responses 4 and 5)	(%) Unsure 3	(%) Disagree (1 and 2)
1	Corporal punishment of children directly violates children’s rights.	4,21	1,10	79,8	8,7	11,5
2	Corporal punishment harms children’s development and well-being.	4,24	1,03	79,8	9,6	10,6
3	The state should legally ban corporal punishment of children.	3,93	1,24	67,3	14,4	18,3
4	Parents have the right to physically punish their children when they feel it is necessary for proper upbringing.	2,28	1,39	26,0	10,6	63,5
5	A mild slap on the buttocks is acceptable when a child is disobedient.	3,02	1,56	47,1	11,5	41,3
6	Parents should never use corporal punishment as a child-rearing method.	3,75	1,34	62,5	14,4	23,1
7	Just as it is forbidden to punish adults physically, the same should apply to children.	4,00	1,30	68,3	14,4	17,3
8	Fair corporal punishment does not negatively impact children.	2,27	1,41	28,8	6,7	64,4

9	Corporal punishment of children contributes to building parental authority.	2,22	1,37	25,0	9,6	65,4
10	As a parent, I would apply corporal punishment to my child when I deem it necessary.	2,09	1,34	19,2	14,4	66,3
11	Corporal punishment of children is not the same as physical abuse.	3,02	1,62	46,2	9,6	44,2
12	Corporal punishment of children is justified if previous disciplinary methods have failed.	2,49	1,47	31,7	11,5	56,8
13	Corporal punishment increases the likelihood of children experiencing violence from their parents.	3,57	1,37	63,5	16,3	20,2
14	Corporal punishment of children is an effective way to curb disobedience.	1,93	1,17	13,5	13,5	73,1
15	The state has no right to interfere in how parents raise their children.	2,09	1,18	12,5	20,2	67,3
16	It is always wrong to physically punish a child.	3,51	1,42	57,7	12,5	29,8

Source: Authors

Attitudes Toward Legal Regulation of Various Forms of CPC

In the previous section of the questionnaire, it was noted that, despite a generally negative attitude toward CPC, as many as 47.1% of respondents find it acceptable to give a child a mild slap on the buttocks when they are disobedient. However, when this same question is framed within the context of legality and parental rights (Table 2), an inconsistency emerges, with an even higher percentage of respondents (54.8%) agreeing that parents should be legally permitted to slap a child on the buttocks. A significantly smaller percentage of respondents believe they should be legally allowed for other, more severe forms of CPC.

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Legal Regulation of Specific Forms of CPC

Parents should be legally allowed to...	(%)	(%)
	Yes	No
...slap a child on the buttocks with an open hand when the child is disobedient.	54,8	45,2
...slap a child on the head with an open hand when the child is disobedient.	5,8	94,2
...strike a child on the buttocks or legs with an object (e.g., slipper, wooden spoon, belt) when the child is disobedient.	12,5	87,5
...strike a child on the head with an object (e.g., slipper, wooden spoon, belt) when the child is disobedient.	2,9	97,1

Source: Authors

Responses to these statements are especially inconsistent with those on the scale (Table 1). Although a very large percentage of respondents (80%) have a negative general attitude toward CPC (Table 1, Statements 1 and 2), the percentage of those who think the state law should prohibit CPC is significantly lower (67.3%; Statement 3). Here, when the question is further specified to include the severity of corporal punishment, an even smaller percentage (45.2%) believes that mild forms of CPC, such as slapping a child on the buttocks, should be legally prohibited (Table 2).

Attitudes Toward CPC in Specific Hypothetical Situations

The responses across all situations indicate significant differences in participants' agreement with various parental reactions (Table 3).

Table 3. Significance of Differences in Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions by Situation

Situation (N=104)	χ^2	df	p
Situation 1	578,07	9	0,001
Situation 2	682,39	11	0,001
Situation 3	712,98	11	0,001
Situation 4	635,01	10	0,001
Situation 5	790,60	12	0,001

Source: Authors

Of all the parental responses offered in the first hypothetical situation: “A 5-year-old child lets go of their parent’s hand and starts to run across the street while the pedestrian light is red”, participants agree

mostly (98.0%) with parents' action of catching the child's hand firmly and explaining that the action was wrong and why it was dangerous (Table 4, Statement 2). However, 31.7% of respondents agreed with the parental response of mildly slapping the child on the buttocks once and explaining the danger of the action (Statement 5). On the other hand, nearly all respondents (90.4%–99%) disagree with any other parental reaction that involves hitting the child (regardless of mild or severe, single or multiple strikes, on the buttocks, head, or body) (Statements 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10).

Table 4. Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions in the First Hypothetical Situation

No.	Parental Reaction	Responses (%)		
		Yes	Unsure	No
1	The parent holds the child's hand and keeps walking once the light turns green without addressing the child's behaviour.	4,8	11,5	83,6
2	The parent holds the child's hand and firmly explains why the behaviour was wrong and dangerous.	98,0	1,0	1,0
3	The parent yells at the child.	24,0	23,1	52,9
4	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks without saying anything.	3,8	5,8	90,4
5	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks and explains why the behaviour is dangerous.	31,7	13,5	54,8
6	The parent mildly slaps the child on the cheek or head.	1,0	0	99,0
7	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the buttocks.	2,9	1,9	95,2
8	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the cheek or head.	1,0	0	99,0
9	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the buttocks.	1,9	1,9	96,2
10	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the body.	1,0	0	99,0

Source: Authors

Results for the second hypothetical situation: “*After the parent has repeatedly told the child not to run around the house, a 7-year-old child breaks a crystal vase*” (Table 5) indicate that out of all parental responses, respondents mostly (98.0%) agree with the parent's action of holding the child's hand and explaining firmly why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable (Statement 1). However, 32.7% of respondents

agree with the parent mildly slapping the child on the buttocks once and explaining why the behaviour was wrong (Statement 7). Again, nearly all respondents (87.5–100%) disagree with any other response involving hitting the child (Statements 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12).

Table 5. Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions in the Second Hypothetical Situation

No.	Parental Reaction	Responses (%)		
		Yes	Unsure	No
1	The parent explains to the child what was wrong and why the behaviour was undesirable.	98,1	1,0	1,0
2	The parent punishes the child by sending him to a corner.	31,73	32,7	35,6
3	The parent punishes the child by taking away his tablet/mobile phone.	50,0	18,3	31,7
4	The parent yells at the child.	16,3	26,0	57,7
5	The parent threatens to hit the child.	5,7	5,7	88,5
6	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks without saying anything.	5,7	6,7	87,5
7	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks and explains why the behavior was wrong.	32,7	13,5	53,8
8	The parent mildly slaps the child on the cheek or head.	1,0	0,0	99,0
9	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the buttocks.	1,9	2,8	95,0
10	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the cheek or head.	0,0	0,0	100,0
11	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the buttocks.	1,0	1,0	98,0
12	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the body.	0,0	0,0	100,0

Source: Authors

Results for responses to the third hypothetical situation: “A 9-year-old child hit another child at the neighborhood playground because the other child wouldn’t share the ball” (Table 6) show that out of all parental responses, respondents mostly (96.2%) believe the parent should explain to the child why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable (Statement 1). However, 22.1% of respondents agree with the parent mildly slapping the child on the buttocks once and explaining why the behaviour was wrong (Statement 8). Again, almost all respondents (91.4–100%) disagree with any other response involving hitting the child (Statements 7, 9, 10, 11, and

12). Interestingly, a somewhat smaller percentage (82.8%) disagree with the parent hitting the child in the same way the child hit the other to help the child experience the same pain and develop empathy (Statement 5).

Table 6. Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions
in the Third Hypothetical Situation

No.	Parental Reaction	Responses (%)		
		Yes	Unsure	No
1	The parent explains to the child why the behavior was wrong and undesirable.	96,2	1,9	1,9
2	The parent punishes the child by taking them home.	67,3	18,3	14,4
3	The parent punishes the child by banning playground visits for a few days.	44,2	20,2	35,6
4	The parent yells at the child.	13,5	25,0	61,5
5	The parent hits the child in the same way the child hit the other child, so the child experiences the same pain and develops empathy.	8,6	8,6	82,8
6	The parent threatens to hit the child.	4,8	4,9	92,3
7	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks without saying anything.	3,8	4,8	91,4
8	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks and explains why the behaviour was wrong.	22,1	10,6	67,3
9	The parent mildly slaps the child on the cheek or head.	1,0	0,0	99,0
10	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the buttocks.	1,0	0,0	99,0
11	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the cheek or head.	1,0	0,0	99,0
12	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the body.	0,0	0,0	100,0

Source: Authors

Results for responses to the fourth hypothetical situation: “A 10-year-old child uses vulgar language in front of older people (swearing or insulting words directed at them)” (Table 7) show that out of all parental responses, respondents mostly (99.0%) agree that the parent should explain to the child why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable (Statement 1). However, 25.0% of respondents agree with the response of the parent mildly slapping the child on the buttocks once and explaining why the behaviour was wrong (Statement 6). Again, almost all respondents (90.4–100%) disagree with any other response involving hitting the child (Statements 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11).

Table 7. Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions
in the Fourth Hypothetical Situation

No.	Parental Reaction	Responses (%)		
		Yes	Unsure	No
1	The parent explains to the child why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable.	99,0	1,0	0,0
2	The parent yells at the child.	22,1	17,3	60,6
3	The parent insults the child in the same way the child insulted others.	1,9	1,9	96,2
4	The parent threatens to hit the child.	4,8	4,8	90,4
5	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks without saying anything.	6,7	2,9	90,4
6	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks and explains why the behaviour was wrong.	25,0	8,6	66,4
7	The parent mildly slaps the child on the cheek or head.	2,0	0,0	98,0
8	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the buttocks.	2,9	1,0	96,1
9	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the cheek or head.	0,0	0,0	100,0
10	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the buttocks.	2,9	1,0	96,1
11	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the body.	0,0	0,0	100,0

Source: Authors

Results for responses to the fifth hypothetical situation: “A 12-year-old child receives a failing grade (1) on a math test and lies to his parents, claiming he got a passing grade (3). The parents later learn from the teacher that the child must take a remedial exam as this was his third failing grade” (Table 8) show that out of all parental responses, respondents mostly (100%) agree that the parent should explain to the child why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable (Statement 1). In this situation, a smaller number of respondents (7.7%) agreed with the response of the parent giving the child a mild slap on the buttocks and explaining why the behaviour was wrong (Statement 8). Nearly all respondents (97.1–100%) disagreed with any other response involving hitting the child (Statements 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13).

Table 8. Attitudes Toward Parental Reactions
in the Fifth Hypothetical Situation

No. Parental Reaction	Responses (%)	Unsure	No	
	Yes			
1	The parent explains to the child why the behaviour was wrong and undesirable.	100,0	0,0	0,0
2	The parent practices with the child to help them pass the remedial exam without reacting to their behaviour.	44,2	25,0	30,8
3	The parent yells at the child.	14,4	20,2	65,4
4	The parent punishes the child by taking away their mobile phone.	49,0	20,2	30,8
5	The parent bans the child from going out for a week.	38,5	19,2	42,3
6	The parent threatens to hit the child.	1,9	1,9	96,2
7	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks without saying anything.	1,9	1,0	97,1
8	The parent mildly slaps the child on the buttocks and explains why the behaviour was wrong.	7,7	3,8	88,5
9	The parent mildly slaps the child on the cheek or head.	1,9	0,0	98,1
10	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the buttocks.	1,9	0,0	98,1
11	The parent gives the child a hard slap on the cheek or head.	0,0	0,0	100,0
12	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the buttocks.	0,0	0,0	100,0
13	The parent gives the child several hard slaps on the body	0,0	0,0	100,0

Source: Authors

Analysis of Attitudinal Differences Toward CPC Across Five Hypothetical Situations

An analysis was conducted to examine significant differences in attitudes toward CPC in the five hypothetical situations, aiming to assess the influence of contextual factors and the type of child misbehaviour on the stability of attitudes toward CPC. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in agreement with severe forms of CPC across

the five situations, suggesting that attitudes toward severe forms of CPC are stable and resistant to context, remaining unacceptable regardless of the child’s actions.

However, the analysis showed that the number of respondents agreeing with milder forms of CPC (slapping the child on the buttocks with an accompanying explanation of why the behaviour is unacceptable) varies across situations and depends on the type of child misbehaviour (Table 9). This indicates that attitudes toward mild CPC accompanied by verbal correction are sensitive to context [$\chi^2(4, N = 104) = 96.16, p < 0.001$].

Table 9. Attitudes Toward the Parental Reaction of Mildly Slapping the Child on the Buttocks with an Explanation Across Five Hypothetical Situations

No.		Responses (%)		
		Yes	Unsure	No
1	Running across the street	31,7	13,5	54,8
2	Causing material damage due to negligence	32,7	13,5	53,8
3	Physical aggression toward others	22,1	10,6	67,3
4	Verbal aggression toward others	25,0	8,6	66,4
5	Lying with severe consequences	7,7	3,8	88,5

Source: Authors

DISCUSSION

The study confirmed all initial assumptions. The participants have a negative general attitude toward CPC (79.8%). Still, the attitude toward CPC varies depending on the level of generality of the question and different contexts. Overall, attitudes toward CPC are predominantly negative, with 79.8% of respondents expressing general opposition towards CPC and nearly unanimous rejection toward severe and excessive forms of CPC (97.1–99%). However, opposition to milder forms of CPC ranges from 53.8% to 91.4% across different specific contexts. This inconsistency also appears in views on legal regulation, with 67% supporting a legal ban on CPC – noticeably less than those expressing a general negative attitude toward it. Notably, 54% of respondents believe that parents should be legally allowed to slap a child on the buttocks with an open hand if the child is disobedient. Interestingly, when parents’ options include non-violent verbal communication with the child in five different situations, significantly fewer respondents endorsed slapping a child on the buttocks. Agreement with this mild form of CPC without explanation

ranged from 1.9% to 6.7%, while agreement increased to 7.7–32.7% if a parental explanation accompanied it.

Thus, the general hypothesis is confirmed: attitudes toward CPC are transitioning from a traditional patriarchal perspective to modern views of this disciplinary practice. The observed inconsistencies in applying these attitudes across different contexts suggest that respondents have adopted a general belief against CPC as an inappropriate method of discipline. However, cognitive integration of abstract and concrete applications of this belief and its complete internalisation has not yet occurred. Offering non-violent verbal alternatives for parents substantially aids this integration.

The findings confirm the relevance of cognitive, emotional, and social factors previously identified as sources of attitude instability across different situational circumstances (Moussaid *et al.* 2013). Data analysis revealed several instances of rationalisation mechanisms, which reduce cognitive dissonance, allowing those with a general negative attitude toward CPC to support it in certain circumstances. For instance, if the word “fair” is added to a statement about physical punishment, the percentage of those with a positive attitude toward CPC increases. Evidence of rationalisation in changing attitudes toward CPC is also seen in the analysis of the five-hypothetical child misbehaviour scenarios. Respondents uniformly opposed all forms of CPC, including mild CPC – a single slap on the buttocks. However, physical punishment becomes more acceptable when contextual elements that enable rationalisation are added (e.g., the parent explaining why the behaviour is wrong or unsafe). Responses to the third scenario, where a child displays physical aggression toward another, reveal that more respondents are willing to endorse CPC if it is rationalised by the idea that the parent wants the child to experience pain and thereby develop empathy.

Regarding emotional factors, more emotionally charged contexts lead to greater indecision among respondents, such as statements involving one’s own child, those using the word “violence” or those addressing the sensitive issue of the state’s right to intervene in child-rearing practices. The impact of emotional factors on CPC attitudes is also evident in the analysis of differences in views toward mild physical punishment across five child misbehaviour scenarios. Respondents most support CPC in emotionally charged situations, such as when a child runs into the street, endangering their safety, or when they cause material damage. This finding aligns with previous research on the influence of emotional

factors on attitude inconsistencies (Festinger 1957; Forgas 1995; Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999).

The analysis of attitudes toward mild CPC across five situations provides significant insight into the prevailing societal value system. Respondents most agree with mild CPC when the child endangers their safety or causes material damage, but are less supportive when the child is physically or verbally aggressive toward others or lies. This pattern reflects a value system common in societies facing economic challenges, where personal safety and material wealth are prioritised over the safety and well-being of others, as well as honesty.

The findings suggest that our society is in a phase of shifting collective attitude toward CPC, where small groups advocate for change (de la Sablonniere 2017), while the majority exhibit incomplete internalisation of the negative attitude and inconsistency in its application at a concrete level (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999). This phase may progress to a stage of consolidation and institutionalisation, where the negative attitude toward CPC becomes normalised and institutionalised through progressive yet culturally sensitive policies and laws (Centola 2018). According to the results of this study, this integration would be significantly supported by offering alternative non-violent verbal disciplinary practices.

A limitation of this study is the convenience sample of young people who are not parents, which somewhat reduces the generalizability of the results. Future studies could include parents of children of various ages.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a negative but inconsistent general attitude toward CPC, which remains highly sensitive to contextual factors, such as situational complexity, intense emotions, or values that may not align fully with the broadly adopted belief against CPC. Findings show that individuals with a negative general view of CPC may still support its use in certain circumstances, especially when situational factors provoke strong emotional responses or rationalisations for CPC. Confirming relevant theoretical frameworks (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983), the results suggest that the process of changing attitudes toward CPC is underway, with most respondents currently in the action phase, where attitudes are actively evolving, or in the maintenance phase, where attitudes have changed but are still being internalised and integrated into daily life. As such, these attitudes remain sensitive to situational pressures, ambiguity, emotions, and stress.

When considering legislation to prohibit CPC, it is essential to recognise that, according to theoretical models of individual and societal change, such a phase may only fully mature after the majority of society has wholly accepted, internalised, and consistently applied this new attitude across a range of real-life situations and experiences. Given the study's findings, it may be prudent to consider whether the definition of CPC as "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light" (UN CRC 2007, para. 11) might be too restrictive for the current cultural moment in our society. This is underscored by the finding that not more than two-thirds of young respondents support a legal ban on CPC, while over half believe that parents should legally be allowed to slap a child on the buttocks with an open hand if the child is disobedient.

The stabilisation of a collective shift toward a negative attitude toward CPC would be aided by legal provisions that would clearly and concretely define, in alignment with existing cultural characteristics, when corporal punishment constitutes child abuse and when it does not, specifying the forms and circumstances under which CPC would be prohibited or allowed. A bylaw providing detailed, highly practical, context-sensitive guidelines on alternative disciplinary methods would support this direction. Changes in legal regulations should be accompanied by public campaigns highlighting the harmful aspects of CPC while acknowledging the emotional and situational pressures parents face, providing them with strategies for managing the demands of disciplining a child without resorting to physical punishment. Appropriate policies could reinforce the negative attitude toward CPC, facilitate the practical application of this attitude in concrete situations, and thus increase the consistency and integration of this attitude in everyday life.

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**ПРИЛОГ РАСПРАВИ О ПОЛИТИЦИ
САНКЦИОНИСАЊА ФИЗИЧКОГ
КАЖЊАВАЊА ДЕЦЕ У СРБИЈИ:
НЕКОНЗИСТЕНТНОСТ СТАВА******

Резиме

Политика увођења забране физичког кажњавања деце (ФКД) у законске оквире за сада нема подељену подршку друштвених актера у Србији, што може бити одраз нестабилности и неконзистентности колективног и индивидуалног става према ФКД који је у процесу промене. Предмет истраживања је став према ФКД, а полазиште су теорија социјалне промене и стадијума процеса промене ставова. Циљ је испитивање његове конзистентности кроз различите степене општости и различите ситуационе контексте како би се утврдило колико је став стабилан. Сprovedено је квантитативно истраживање на 104 испитаника. Подаци су прикупљени онлајн упитником конструисаним за потребе истраживања. Налази су открили да став према ФКД зависи од ситуационог контекста и од нивоа општости. Тако се показује да, иако 79,8% испитаника има негативан општи став према ФКД, њих 54,8% сматра да би родитељима требало да буде законом дозвољено да отвореном шаком ударе дете по стражњици када је непослушно. Када је описано пет различитих ситуација конкретног престапа детета, сагласност испитаника за реакцију родитеља благим ударцем по стражњици без додатног објашњења је

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био, у зависности од ситуације од 1,9–6,7%. Са друге стране, овакву реакцију родитеља у истим ситуацијама подржава 7,7% до 31,7% испитаника уколико је праћена објашњењем зашто је понашање детета неадекватно. Резултати о неконзистентности ставова према ФКД су дискутовани у светлу значаја нивоа апстракције и контекста. Заступана је политика уважавања специфичности нашег друштва кроз што прецизније формулације законских одредби о ФКД.

Кључне речи: политика забране физичког кажњавања, деца, васпитање, дисциплиновање, промена става, закон

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