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## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

### **Understanding personal experiences of being smacked: An IPA study with young adults**

Ball, Melany

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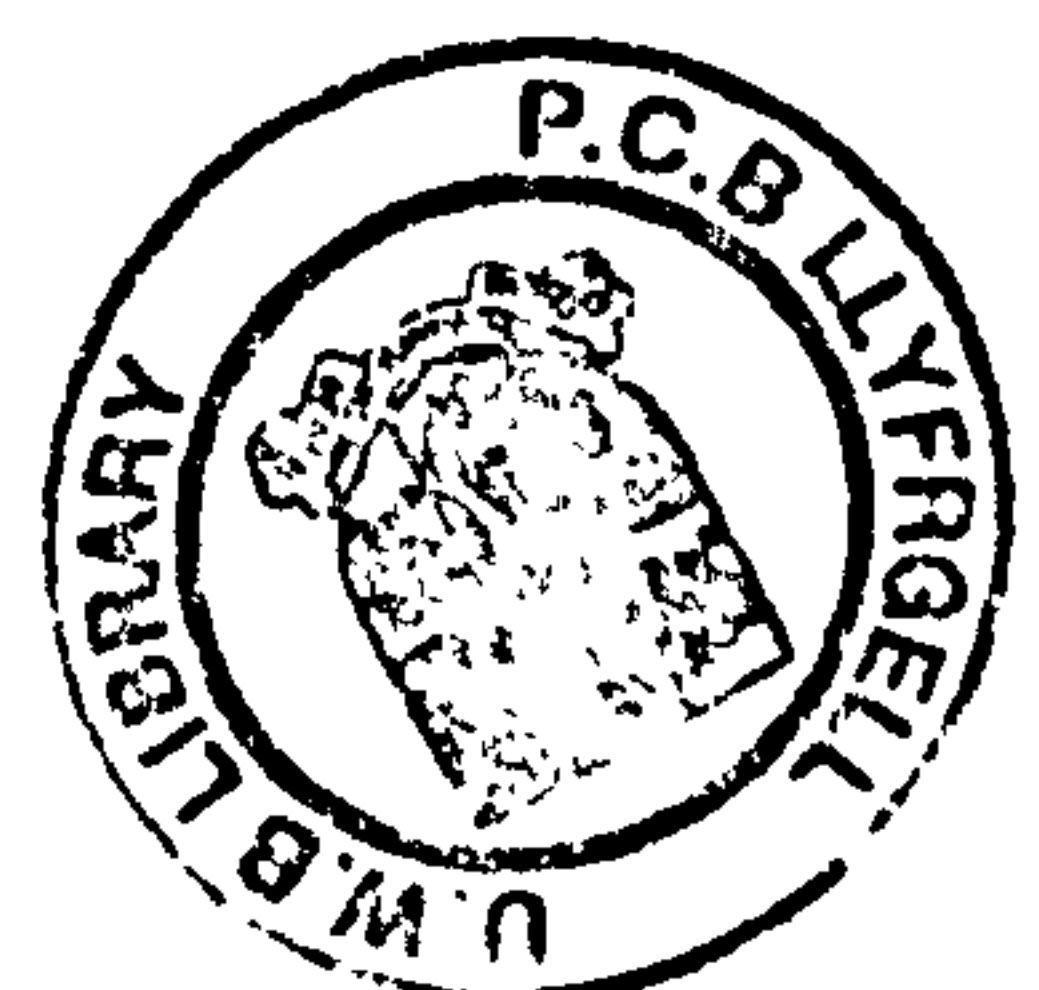
**Understanding personal experiences of being smacked: An IPA study  
with young adults**

**Melany Ball**

**North Wales Clinical Psychology Programme**

**University of Bangor**

**July 2009**



### **Abstract**

The question of whether or not to smack children has long been one of controversy and debate. Quantitative research into the effects of smacking has often been conducted within the wider remit of corporal punishment, and therefore it has been difficult to ascertain outcomes relating to smacking specifically. Furthermore there exists a multitude of methodological and conceptual complexities associated with the study of smacking, particularly within quantitative paradigms. Despite these difficulties, qualitative research into smacking has been limited and previous studies of this nature have focused on establishing a generalised reflection of experiences and opinions.

The present study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to explore young adults' experiences of being smacked during childhood. Analysis identified a number of themes including: influences on individual experience; precursors to smacking; losing and regaining control; relationships with parents; and the potential for harm. From these themes a number of key findings were noted. Individual experiences both differed and converged, and were influenced by personal predispositions, attitudes towards smacking and the participants' perceptions of smacking. Smacking was often driven by parental emotions, rather than to necessarily benefit the child. Participants described common experiences relating to feelings of loss of control, and engaged in numerous coping strategies to manage these experiences and attempt to regain control. Smacking was associated with both positive and negative outcomes in relation to child-parent relationships and long-term development. It was concluded that parents need support to substitute smacking for alternative disciplinary methods, which hold less potential for harm.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Isabel Hargreaves and Dr Jaci Huws for their support throughout this research and particularly in the latter weeks, in writing up the findings. I would also like to thank two very good friends, Miss Leanne Maxwell and Miss Gemma Merrick, for helping keep me sane in the final few weeks, for always being there, and for providing a welcome distraction!

Above all, I want to say the biggest thank you to my fellow trainees, “the nine”. I would never have survived the ups and downs of these three years without you. I am eternally grateful that it was you guys who shared this experience with me; words cannot describe how much you all mean to me. Your influences have helped me develop both as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist, and, more importantly, as me. I will always hold a bit of every one of you in my heart and in my mind. THANK YOU.

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# SECTION 1:

## ETHICS



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## **SECTION 2:**

# **PERSONAL AND PROCESS ISSUES ARISING FROM RESEARCH**

## **SECTION 2**

### **Process and personal issues arising from the conduct of the research**

During the journey of this research there were numerous obstacles to overcome, both in terms of practicalities and my own personal struggles with managing multiple demands.

As regards practical issues, the most prominent, which caused much frustration and delay, was a lack of clarity regarding expectations of the certain aspects of the research, notably the literature review. I wrote the original review in accordance with my interpretation of the Clinical Psychology manual guidelines, though months later, it was suggested by staff that the review be written differently to how I had understood. This led to much personal confusion and stress, and multiple revisions of the document, which, in turn significantly delayed my original timetable.

Nevertheless, this helped me learn to be flexible both in terms of my academic work and in terms of my organisation.

There were also some difficulties with recruitment, which required two ethics amendments in order to try different methods. This delayed recruitment until November and due to students returning home for Christmas in December and having exams in January, the window of opportunity to engage them in screenings and subsequent interviews was more limited than planned. Again this aspect of the research was delayed in relation to the initial timetable but required that I drew upon skills of flexibility and learning to work with circumstances out of my control.

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As a Trainee Clinical Psychologist, in conducting the interviews, there was always a 'pull' between building rapport with clients without veering into a therapeutic mode of working. It was often difficult to maintain the balance between directing the interview whilst maintaining participant engagement. Nevertheless, all participants reported that they enjoyed participating in the interviews and much rich data was harvested. Furthermore, upon transcribing the data it was frustrating to sometimes listen to opportunities that I had missed to ask pertinent questions or explore certain topics further. Although I accepted that this could not be rectified, I hope that it will aid me to perhaps listen more carefully to participants, should I conduct further research, or more pertinently, listen more attentively to clients, in working therapeutically.

Although I had some previous experience of working with qualitative methods, though not IPA, my prior research projects and training had focused on quantitative paradigms. It was therefore sometimes difficult to adjust focus to produce a research study of qualitative design. For example, I initially found myself writing the results in a descriptive manner, presenting quotes accompanied with a brief verbal description. It was difficult to embrace the idea that I could present my interpretations of the narratives and these would be accepted. Nevertheless, with support from my supervisors I managed to overcome this and learn how to develop and write a qualitative research paper.

Overall, this research has been one of the most difficult tasks I have ever undertaken. It has been at times, exhausting, stressful and overwhelming. It has pushed me beyond what I thought I would be capable of in terms of working under stress and working

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unsociable hours! Furthermore it has really stretched my capabilities of multi-tasking, both at a practical and mental level. Yet I believe these challenges have proved invaluable in both my personal and professional development and hope they stand me in good stead for my future career. In addition, even in the final weeks, I still felt passion for the project, and to me that was more important than anything. I remained keen to tell the stories that evolved from my research findings, the stories, which my participants kindly shared with me, and which I hope can make some small difference.

**SECTION 3:**  
**LITERATURE REVIEW**



## SECTION 3

### **Corporal Punishment and Smacking: A critical review of quantitative research and discussion of theoretical issues**

#### **Abstract**

The present review paper discusses smacking within the context of corporal punishment. Given that the literature most often cites the effects and debates about smacking within this wider remit, it was thought the most appropriate method of addressing all relevant issues. A brief background is presented, followed by the current political and legislative context of corporal punishment and smacking. A discussion ensues as regards the methodological and conceptual difficulties involved in the study of this topic area, before relevant empirical evidence is reviewed. Included will be an outline of a psychological model of corporal punishment proposed by Gershoff (2002a). Finally, additional psychological theories pertinent to child development and learning will be considered.

#### **Introduction**

The terms “corporal punishment” and “physical punishment” encompass a range of disciplinary strategies, which include smacking, but can also include methods such as shaking, pinching, hitting with a belt, washing a child’s mouth with soap, etc (Gershoff, 2002a). Corporal punishment has been defined as:

*“the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behaviour”*

(Straus, 1994)

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In the present review it will be presumed that the label of ‘corporal punishment’ will refer to the above definition unless otherwise stated.

The term “smacking” is commonly used in the UK and is synonymous with the term “spanking”, which is the label favoured in the USA (Redman & Taylor, 2006). In addition to these expressions, various studies have reported the use of alternative terms such as, “hitting”, “slapping” or “tapping” (e.g. Willow & Hyder, 1998; MacMillan et al. 1999). In the present review the term smacking will be employed and will be defined as:

*“hitting a child with an open hand on the buttocks or extremities with the intent to discipline without leaving a bruise or causing physical harm”.*

(Baumrind, Larzerele & Cowan, 2002)

When referring to other studies, however, the terms used will be those as cited by the author(s).

### **Background**

Most people would agree that becoming a parent presents one of the most significant life changes and can be immensely rewarding. Nevertheless, it can also be an extremely difficult task and parents may sometimes feel overwhelmed by the changes and demands exerted by the parenting role (Muslow et al. 2002). Such experiences are important to note, as parents are integral to a child’s development and parenting dysfunction can lead to a plethora of difficulties for the child, family and wider society (de Graaf et al. 2008).



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A key aspect of the parenting role is child behaviour management, the goals of which are likely to include both immediate compliance, in order to prevent unwanted behaviours and keep the child safe, and the promotion of longer-term socialisation. It would be expected that behaviour management strategies include a combination of both punishment and reinforcement strategies, which are likely to be wide ranging across individuals and cultures. They may be non-physical, such as the use of time out, or physical, such as smacking.

Smacking falls within the remit of corporal punishment but is generally considered to be at the milder end of the continuum (Gershoff, 2002a). As a disciplinary technique, its use is widespread, yet remains controversial. In a study funded by the Department of Health, the use of smacking was reported by over 90% of British parents (Nobes & Smith, 1997). The findings also revealed that around half of children aged between one and four were smacked at least once a week. Similarly, in the USA, 74% of parents with children under the age of 17 use smacking as a disciplinary method (Gallup, 1995), and this figure rises to 94% in parents of children under 4 (Straus & Stewart, 1999).

In the UK, there is general public support for individual parental choice to use smacking (Department of Health, 2000). Nevertheless, figures suggest that the use of smacking is falling out of favour, with a recent survey reporting that 62% of adults support smacking as a regular disciplinary method (Yankelovich, 2000). This is in contrast to 94% of people in the 1960s (Straus & Mather, 1996).

### *Political and legislative context*

A number of countries have now outlawed all forms of corporal punishment of children including, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Romania, Latvia, Hungary, Norway

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and Sweden (Children are Unbeatable Alliance, 2000). Sweden was the first country to implement this ban, in 1979 and has since benefited in relation to numerous child protection indicators (Durrant, 1999). For example, public support for corporal punishment has decreased, there have been low numbers of child deaths resulting from physical abuse, and the people in Sweden are now more likely to report assaults against children (Durrant, 1999).

In the UK, Scotland recently proposed a ban on smacking children under the age of 3, but this was later diluted to a ban on hitting a child with an object, hitting a child to the head and/or shaking a child (Scottish Government, 2003). England and Wales refuted even this ban and merely amended the existing ban of “reasonable chastisement” to state that a child can legally receive a mild smack that does not leave bruising, grazing or other visible physical evidence (House of Commons, 2004). In October 2007 the Welsh Assembly announced that it had appointed legal advisors to reconsider the proposed ban on smacking in Wales (Turner, 2007). Nevertheless, the UK Government advised that the Welsh Assembly did not hold powers to implement such a ban (House of Commons, 2008). More recently, MPs were due to revisit the issue in the House of Commons, but due to time constraints the relevant legislation was not debated (House of Commons, 2008).

Nevertheless, it could be argued that these laws do not extend far enough in the protection of children. For example, parents may be more likely to inflict physical punishment on areas unlikely to be seen, such as the child’s buttocks. Here, it is possible that physical evidence of harm may be left on the child with little likelihood of discovery.



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### **Methodological and Conceptual Issues**

Before considering the empirical data relating to corporal punishment and smacking, it is first important to consider the plethora of methodological and conceptual difficulties which plague this topic area (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003).

As has been previously noted, there exist varied definitions of smacking and corporal punishment. This presents difficulties both in terms of conception and study design.

Professionals and researchers working in child development spheres tend to view corporal punishment as being on a continuum with physical abuse, with the latter resulting when corporal punishment is applied too severely or too frequently (Vasta, 1982). There is the risk that any form of physical punishment, including smacking, can leave evidence of harm, and could be construed as physical abuse (Wolfe, 1999). It is therefore difficult to establish when exactly smacking 'becomes' abusive. Consequentially, many research papers have studied the effects of behaviours that could be considered physically abusive, within the definition of corporal punishment. In addition, it is possible that some forms of corporal punishment may inflict psychological abuse. Indeed, it is problematic to disentangle the effects of smacking from other potentially harmful parenting practices. For example, in a review of the literature, Benjet and Kazdin (2003) reported that parents who more often spank their children also play with them less, hug them less and are less likely to read to them. In addition, those parents are also more likely to report higher levels of stress, higher rates of mental illness or substance abuse, and more discordant marital relations.

Therefore, conclusions of the effects of smacking, as defined in the introduction (Baumrind, Larzerelle & Cowan 2002), are precluded. Nevertheless, their definition too holds some difficulties in interpretation. For example, what is considered to be an extremity; a foot or a

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hand, or the whole arm or leg? In addition, what is considered physical harm; it could be argued that a mild tap on a child's hand is different to numerous repeated hard smacks on the buttocks. The latter may leave red marks that last for an hour but do not bruise, is this defined as physical harm? Furthermore some children bruise more easily than others. New legislation could be criticised for affording different children differing levels of protection, dependent on the sensitivity of their skin. It is also of note that the definition makes no reference to emotional harm. Therefore, is it to be concluded that smacking is acceptable so long as it does not harm a child physically, irrespective of whether a child is harmed psychologically?

Many studies of corporal punishment and smacking are correlational in nature. This was noted by Gershoff (2002a) in a comprehensive meta-analytic review of the literature.

Therefore, inferences of causality in such studies are excluded. Additionally, many relied on self-reported retrospective accounts from parents or their children (usually adult or adolescent children) as to the frequency and context of smacking, which are subject to bias (Gershoff, 2002). Such methodological issues arise as it would clearly be unethical to conduct randomised controlled trials, investigating smacking versus other forms of discipline.

Nevertheless, the majority of research concurs that a need exists for carefully conducted longitudinal studies in order to provide clearer answers as to the effects of smacking (e.g. Gershoff, 2002; Kazdin & Benjet, 2003).

### Corporal punishment

Previous debates in this domain can be traced back for decades (Gershoff, 2002a). Larzelere (1996) noted that whilst most professionals would oppose abusive corporal punishment, the implementation of non-abusive corporal punishment remains contentious. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Kazdin and Benjet (2003) outlined three predominant positions



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related to corporal punishment, inclusive of smacking. The first being that such punishment is beneficial, as it elicits desirable consequences in terms of a child's behaviour and should therefore form part of responsible parenting. The second that corporal punishment is associated with negative outcomes for the child, both in the short and long term, and the third that the effects may be positive or negative dependent on context. As yet, research has failed to resolve this debate. Below, some of the more prominent works, which have contributed to arguments for and against corporal punishment and smacking, are discussed.

Given that there have been some extensive reviews of the effects of corporal punishment, these reviews have been discussed, as opposed to individual studies, in order to provide an overview of the relevant research within the word limits of this work.

### Results of meta-analyses

Larzelere (1996) reported a review of empirical studies that had investigated "*non-abusive or customary physical punishments*" and associated child outcomes. Of the 35 studies that met inclusion criteria, 9 reported overall beneficial outcomes, 12 found largely negative outcomes whilst the results of the remaining 14 were neutral, that is the results did not achieve statistical significance. Larzelere (1996) reported that those studies with stronger internal validity, that is, the clinical treatment studies and studies which employed sequential analysis, found predominantly beneficial outcomes. Nevertheless, how an outcome was defined as either positive or negative was unclear. In describing his methods Larzelere provided an example of a positive outcome as being improved compliance and a negative one as being lower self-esteem or increased delinquency. Although some specific outcomes were listed, any detailed information regarding the 17 retrospective studies he reviewed was excluded. Furthermore, the majority of the studies for which the outcomes were detailed, focused on short-term

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compliance as a positive outcome. One could argue whether short-term compliance is a really a 'positive outcome' as it would seem more beneficial to achieve longer-term behavioural compliance. Moreover, it is possible that other disciplinary methods such as praising desirable behaviours would derive similar compliance levels. It has long been known that undesirable behaviours can be reduced through the positive reinforcement of alternative behaviours (Skinner, 1938). Few of the studies considered any potential social or psychological impact on the child. Overall, of the reviewed studies summarised, only two considered some psychological factors. It was reported that these two studies revealed no associations between smacking and psychological well-being or self-esteem (Larzelere, 1996), though how these concepts were measured was not reported.

In addition, from the information provided in the review, it appeared that individual studies only considered limited outcomes, such as child compliance, rather than multiple outcomes. Therefore, it seems that even if that study reported a positive outcome such as compliance, it failed to measure whether there were additional negative outcomes over the longer term, such as increased aggression.

A further issue from this review was the definition of "non-abusive or customary" not being clearly defined. Rather, the study stated that it excluded broadly defined punitive methods and measures of physical punishment dominated by severity or non-spanking tactics. Indeed, the term "customary", as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2005), means "*in accordance with custom; usual*". Therefore, such a term may include punishments considered to be abusive, as different cultures would consider different punishments to be 'usual'. This highlights the aforementioned conceptual difficulties, which arise in the definition of terms. Furthermore, the article later stated that only 11 of the 35 studies excluded abusive methods



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from their measures of physical punishment. Therefore, it is unclear as to whether outcomes were associated with abusive or non-abusive physical punishment. It was noted that of those 11 studies that employed such abuse exclusions, only one reported detrimental consequences.

A further, comprehensive review of the effects of corporal punishment was undertaken by Gershoff (2002a). This consisted of a meta-analysis of 88 studies from 1938 up to the year 2000. Studies were initially selected on the basis of key words; "*corporal punishment, physical punishment and spank*". This generated over 300 papers, though approximately half were immediately excluded, as they did not include data. Of those works that reported data, to be included in the meta-analyses corporal punishment was defined as "*behaviours that do not result in significant physical injury e.g. spank, slap*". In order to eliminate abusive measures the study excluded "*behaviours that risk injury (e.g. punching, kicking, burning)*". Two coders agreed as to which studies to include/exclude on the basis of these criteria. The effects of 'non-abusive' corporal punishment were analysed on the basis of numerous constructs, which were chosen on the basis of previous evidence to suggest that they may be associated with corporal punishment. It was endeavoured to include both negative and positive outcomes and considered effects across the life span, that is, in both childhood and adulthood (Gershoff, 2002a).

Results suggested that corporal punishment was associated with a range of negative experiences and behaviours. In childhood, corporal punishment was found to be associated with decreased moral internalisation, increased aggression, increased delinquent and anti-social behaviour, decreased relationship quality between parent and child, decreased mental health and an increased risk of becoming a victim of physical abuse (Gershoff, 2002a). As regards longer-term effects, in adulthood corporal punishment was associated with increased



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aggression, increased criminal and anti-social behaviour, decreased mental health and increased likelihood of person abusing their own child or spouse (Gershoff, 2002a). The only positive outcome of corporal punishment was that it was, overall, associated with immediate compliance in children. Nevertheless, this finding was not consistent, as at an individual level, two of the five studies considering immediate compliance did not find any associations. The associations in the other studies though, were highly consistent (Gershoff, 2002a).

However, although Gershoff (2002) attempted to eliminate studies that included physical abuse, a number of studies remained in the analysis, which included punishments that could be considered, or have the potential to be, abusive, such as hitting a child with an object and pinching a child. Such an issue reiterates what was previously noted as regarding the methodological difficulties inherent within this topic area.

Furthermore, as Gershoff (2002a) noted, meta-analysis is a correlational procedure and therefore it is not possible to establish causality. It is impossible to ascertain whether corporal punishment affected outcomes in the child or if it was the child's behaviour that drove the associations. For example, it has been reported that children described as fussy or irritable by their parents were at increased risk of being spanked than children described as happy or cheerful (Day, Peterson & McCracken, 1998). In contrast, Crockenberg (1987) found that child irritability did not predict mothers' use of corporal punishment. Nevertheless, in a later paper Gershoff (2002b) argued the likelihood that the associations evident in the data are driven by parents. She exerted that parents always have a choice in their responses to their child's behaviour and noted that there would not likely be an argument regarding the direction of effect if results had illustrated that children who obey their parents are more likely to elicit corporal punishment. On the other hand, although parents have a choice, it is likely that some

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children are more difficult to parent and are therefore at increased risk of receiving corporal punishment.

### *Proposed Model of Corporal Punishment*

In an attempt to clarify some of these complexities, Gershoff (2002a) proposed a “process-context” model, which outlined pathways of how and why parental corporal punishment might cause particular consequences for the child. This model was initially described within her review paper, but following further suggestion (see Holden, 2002) was later amended (Gershoff 2002b). The revised version is discussed here.

The model hypothesises that corporal punishment affects children by shaping their emotional and cognitive processes. It purports that after an incident of corporal punishment, three stages of processing are likely to occur. The first being the child’s immediate physiological, emotional and sensory reaction followed by a secondary cognitive appraisal. Finally, it was argued that longer term cognitive processing occurs. It is proposed that these processes are influenced by multiple variables, such as observational learning, the child’s attributions, and social information processing. Once such processes have been shaped, it is suggested that children are predisposed to develop particular behaviours or engage in particular experiences. It is proposed that these pathways occur within the context of individual characteristics of the parent and child, the characteristics of the child’s behaviour, interactions between the parent and child and the socio-cultural context. The nature of corporal punishment must also be considered; for example, the frequency and severity of the punishment, whether it is impulsive or planned, and whether it occurs alongside other disciplinary methods.



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Thus, if Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973) is applied to this model, it could be hypothesised that when a child is frequently exposed to being smacked without co-occurring disciplinary methods, they may learn through observation and social information processing, that smacking can be used as a tool to control behaviours in others and the child may in turn be predisposed to display aggressive behaviours. Alternatively, a child with a fearful temperament may be more likely to experience fear when physically punished and therefore comply with the parent. However, in accordance with classical conditioning principles (Pavlov, 1927), this compliance is likely to be attributed to the external control of the corporal punishment and therefore the child might fail to internalise the disciplinary lesson underlying the punishment (Gershoff, 2002b). It should be noted that Gershoff's model was developed on the basis of research with corporal punishment, which included smacking but also additional physical punishments. No such model has been proposed for smacking alone. Nevertheless, it is likely that such processes, as postulated in Gershoff's model could also be applied to smacking. Later in this review the effects of smacking have been considered in relation to relevant psychological theory.

### Smacking

In order to study the empirical evidence relating to smacking alone, a search was conducted on the Web of Science, a database that searches a multitude of journals within the sphere of health and behavioural sciences. Two searches were conducted, the first looked for any articles with the word "*smacking*" in the title, and the second with the word "*spanking*" in the title, as 'spanking' is a more predominant term in the USA. All articles from the year 1990 onwards were scoured. Results produced very few articles that presented empirical data relating to smacking alone, and as has been noted, none proposed a psychological model of the effects of smacking. Rather, the majority of papers examined the effects of smacking

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within the context of corporal punishment, and therefore other physical disciplinary methods were included in analysis. Furthermore, there were an exhaustive number of articles outlining the academic debate of the pros and cons of smacking as a disciplinary technique. The lack of papers specific to smacking is likely to be a consequence of the previously discussed methodological and conceptual complexities inherent within this topic domain. Nevertheless, those studies which could be accessed, and which presented empirical data have been evaluated.

#### Effects in childhood

Slade & Wissow (2004) collected data regarding the frequency of spanking for an ethnically diverse sample of nearly 2000 children at the age of two. With baseline spanking frequency and other characteristics held constant, it was reported that a higher frequency of spanking before the age of two was associated with increased behavioural problems upon entry to school. Such a trend only occurred though in White non-Hispanic children. In Hispanic and Black children this association was not significant. Such results suggest that further research is warranted as regards to the cultural context of the effects of smacking. Nevertheless, it indicates that smacking may exert negative effects on child behaviour, this is despite the fact that one might expect that parents employ smacking as an aid to elicit desirable behaviour.

Cultural differences were also reported in a study by Gunnoe and Mariner (1997). They gathered data at two time points from 1112 families with children aged 4 to 11 years at baseline. Parents were surveyed as to the occurrence and frequency of spanking their child in the week prior to interview. It should be noted that the definition of spanking was not clarified for parents and was therefore subject to individual interpretation. Outcome measures included child reports of their involvement in fighting in school over the previous year and parent



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reports of the child's antisocial behaviour, examined on the basis of a subscale of the Behaviour Problems Index. Gunnoe and Mariner attempted to control for parental age, parental gender, household income, how often parents praised and/or yelled at their children, and the number of rules parents held for their children. Reported results indicated that higher baseline spanking frequency was associated with increased fighting in white children aged 8 to 11 years but decreased fighting in black children and in children aged 4 to 7 years. Nevertheless, higher rates of spanking at time one were associated with increased antisocial behaviour at time two across ages and races. It was not defined though whether the term 'fighting' referred only to physical fights, or also included verbal fights, which one might expect to be more common amongst children. Furthermore, it could be argued that children may withhold from researchers information about their involvement in fighting. Therefore the frequency of fighting may be underestimated. On the other hand though, if a child provided an underestimation of their fighting at time one, it would be expected that they repeat this at time two, therefore the overall results would reflect the same concept. The issue remains though that whilst anti-social behaviour increased with higher spanking frequency, fighting decreased in some groups. The reasons for this are unclear and the authors proposed that the effects of spanking vary across dimensions. Though this explanation fails to provide us with any further information or hypotheses. One possible explanation is that the information related to antisocial behaviour included factors such as disobedience and whether the child tells lies. Such items are a wider reflection of the child's overall behaviour, which may be more likely to be affected by spanking.

Although it might be expected that smacking is used in a controlled manner in order to modify children's behaviour, in practice, it has been found that parents' frustration or aggravation with their infant's behaviour is the most powerful predictor of spanking, even

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after controlling for other variables (Wissow, 2002). More recently, Orme and Cain (2008) interviewed 246 mothers and reported that the mother being a young age, and perceiving their child as “difficult”, were two principal predictors for the use of spanking. It should be noted though that both these studies pertained to infants (below the age of three) rather than children. Therefore the results cannot be generalised to older child populations. In addition, the Orme and Cain study only questioned mothers about their use of spanking within the prior week. Therefore, mothers who spanked their children less frequently, but still regularly, were excluded from analysis. Furthermore, the mothers in the sample were not provided with a definition of spanking and thus interpretations may have varied between participants.

### Long-term consequences

The research described so far has focused on the effects of smacking on children. Furthermore, it has tended to only consider child behaviours as outcomes. Other research though has indicated that smacking may cause a wider range of consequences across the life span. For example, MacMillan et al. (1999) surveyed a large sample of Canadian participants, who had been screened to eliminate any previous sexual or physical abuse. Results indicated that being spanked sometimes or often during childhood was significantly more likely to be associated with anxiety disorders and one or more externalising problems, such as alcohol dependence, in adulthood. Being spanked as a child was also associated with major depression during adult years, though this association was below the level of significance. Furthermore, it was discovered that these associations displayed a linear trend, that is, the more often a child was spanked, the more likely it was they would be experiencing psychological difficulties as an adult. Nevertheless, it should be noted that participants self-reported how frequently they were “slapped” or “spanked”. Therefore, not only was the study reliant on retrospective self-report measures, it is unclear how participants interpreted the



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meanings of spanking and slapping. As the researchers did not define the terms some participants may have been slapped across the face during childhood, a practice that may be considered physically or psychologically abusive. Furthermore, as the study was correlational, directions of causality could not be established. Additionally it failed to screen for emotional abuse, therefore other variables such as excessive criticism or a lack of parental warmth may have influenced the associations.

### *The role of attachment and parenting styles*

Slade and Wissow (2004) cited that spanking an infant can risk their sense of security and their attachment to caregivers. Similarly, Gershoff's model hypothesises that corporal punishment can affect the quality of the parent-child relationship. An infant's attachment to their primary caregiver plays a key role in their social development (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). Attachments can vary in their quality and can affect our later interpersonal styles, that is, how we perceive and respond to others and our environment (Bowlby, 1982). Research has established four attachment styles; secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Carlson, 1998). Children who are securely attached to their caregiver experience that caregiver as being physically and emotionally available to them and subsequently tend to have better developmental outcomes. In contrast children who form any of the other insecure attachments are at greater risk for later behavioural and emotional difficulties, particularly children with a disorganised attachment (Zilberstein, 2006). Given the importance of early childhood attachment, the effects of smacking on such bonds would benefit from further research.

In addition to early attachment, parenting styles also play a role in child development.

Research by Baumrind (1971, 1991) delineated three primary parental styles; permissive;



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authoritarian and authoritative. Parents who use authoritarian methods to rear their children tend to be controlling and demand unquestioning obedience, therefore prohibiting the child from expressing their opinions (Rudy & Grusec, 2006). Children of such parents tend to be more withdrawn, more distrustful, more defiant and lack independence (Baumrind 1971). In contrast, permissive parents set few rules for their children and infrequently use punishment, however, they were also described as displaying warmth towards their children (Baumrind, 1971). Subsequently, these children are more likely to lack independence, self-control and social responsibility (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). The optimal parental style is the authoritative pattern, in which parents place demands on their children and enforce rules but combine this with warmth and allow the child to communicate their points of view. These children then tend to grow up to be independent, autonomous and well adjusted (Baumrind, 1971).

Alternative parenting styles were proposed by Parker, Tupling and Brown (1979), on the basis of their Parental Bonding Instrument. This is a measure of a child's view of parents during the first 16 years of age, and has two primary dimensions; care (warmth and understanding) and control (over-protectiveness and intrusiveness). Parental styles were then proposed based on the interactions between care and control. High care with high control was termed 'affectionate constraint', high care/low control was thought to be 'optimal parenting', low care/high control was labelled 'affectionless control' and 'neglectful parenting' consisted of low care with low control (Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979). Children who are exposed to low care and/or high control parenting have been found to be more likely to have major depression (Rodgers, 1996) and/or high anxiety levels in adulthood (Shams & Williams, 1995). The 'affectionless control' pattern has the highest associations with psychological distress (Chambers, Power & Durham, 2004).

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Given the influence of parenting styles on child development, it might be expected that they play a role in mediating the effects of corporal punishment and smacking. For example, if children are smacked in the absence of a warm, positive parental relationship, as perhaps would occur within 'affectionless control' parenting, then it could be hypothesised that children would be at greater risk of adverse effects. On the other hand, the 'optimal parent', or authoritative parenting style may buffer against any negative effects. Some research has attempted to address these issues. A large cross-cultural American study of over 1800 children aged 6 to 14, discovered that when children were spanked frequently, they experienced an increased risk of developing depressive symptoms, after controlling for other variables including parental style (Christie-Mizell, Pryor and Grossman, 2008). Therefore, positive emotional support from parents failed to alleviate the negative effects of spanking. Nevertheless, this study did not clearly define their term "spanking". In addition, as the study only inquired about spanking frequency in the week prior, there were no data obtained as regards the effects of regular, but less frequent spanking. Furthermore, the child and adolescent depressive symptoms were established through maternal self-report. There would seem a high probability that such reports were subject to bias. A study of corporal punishment established similar results. It was reported that positive parental support significantly reduced the negative impact of corporal punishment when such punishment was delivered between three and eleven times per annum. Nevertheless, it had no effect when the children experienced corporal punishment more than once per month (Turner and Finkelhor 1996). Though it is unclear exactly which punishments are included within the remit of corporal punishment.



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In conclusion, these studies indicate that frequent smacking can negatively impact upon the child irrespective of the parent-child relationship. Nevertheless, the effects of less frequent smacking may be mediated by a positive parental style.

### **Further Relevant Psychological Theory**

Given the scarcity of empirical evidence regarding the effects of smacking combined with its common usage, it may be beneficial to consider smacking within the context of some pertinent psychological theory.

The experimental analysis of behaviour is concerned with ascertaining the functions of relationships between environmental factors and behaviours (Skinner, 1938). The practical application of behaviourism operates to elucidate why a particular behaviour is evoked or how an individual can be brought to engage in, or refrain from, a specific behaviour (Baer, Wolf & Risley, 1968). Given that the goal of discipline is likely to be to encourage the child to comply with a particular behaviour, whilst eliminating unwanted behaviours (Gershoff, 2002), it may be useful to consider the effects of smacking from a behavioural perspective.

According to operant conditioning theory, children are socialised by both pain and pleasure. That is, they will increase behaviours that bring them gratification, whilst reducing behaviours which result in punishment (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). If the child's behaviour though brings them such gratification that it outweighs any effects of the punishment, then the punishment will be ineffective in shaping behaviour. For example, if a child steals some sweets and receives a smack for doing so, the child may determine that the reward of the sweets outweighs the short lived pain of a smack and repeat the behaviour in future.

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Similarly, the theory of classical conditioning pertains that learning occurs when an association is formed between an event and a particular behaviour (Pavlov, 1927). Therefore, it would be expected that a child would learn to associate 'naughty' behaviour with the pain of a smack and therefore will refrain from the behaviour in order to avoid being smacked and feeling that pain. On the other hand though, behavioural theory also hypothesises the notion of 'habituation'. Thus if a stimulus becomes familiar it is less likely to elicit a response and therefore learning is suspended as we are able to ignore the familiar (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). Therefore, if a child is smacked frequently the intended disciplinary effects of that smack may be lost.

Furthermore, the pain of a smack may provoke side effects additional to behavioural compliance. Pain typically elicits an escape response (Azrin et al., 1965) so in order to avoid the pain of a smack children may too avoid their caregivers, the proponents of that smack. In turn, this could negatively impact upon the caregiver-child relationship.

Social Learning Theory proposes that children learn through imitating others (Bandura, 1973). Indeed, many cultures, including Western culture, encourages such imitation as a way of learning, for example encouraging children to play with toys resembling household objects. In relation to smacking though, children may learn that smacking is an appropriate way to try and elicit certain behaviours in others and therefore demonstrate increased aggression with peers. Although it was not possible to ascertain from the literature whether smacking alone does educe such consequences, numerous reviews of corporal punishment have reported that it can lead to increased aggression levels in children (e.g. Patterson, 1982; Gershoff, 2002a).



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A key element of child development is moral internalisation, which involves a child adapting values and attitudes in order to develop socially acceptable behaviour (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). A number of studies have demonstrated that rules are less effectively internalised by children when parents rely predominantly on power. Children of parents who assert their power in this way are more likely to cheat for a prize, less likely to confess to wrongdoings and less likely to feel guilt about misdeeds (Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). Therefore, smacking a child may detract from, rather than promote, moral internalisation.

In conclusion, although in accordance with behavioural principles smacking could be an effective form of behaviour management, other theory suggests that not only can it be ineffective under certain circumstances, but that it can also initiate detrimental consequences. Given that other, likely less harmful, disciplinary methods are available; one could argue that the utilisation of these strategies would be preferable to smacking.

### Summary

Although a wealth of research exists in relation to corporal punishment, less empirical data are available to establish the effects of smacking alone. Research to present has failed to concur as regards the effects of either corporal punishment or smacking, though it is generally accepted that smacking is a mild form of corporal punishment and therefore more socially acceptable. Nevertheless, the evidence available, and relevant psychological theory, would suggest that there is a strong possibility that smacking children can negatively impact on their development, their behaviours and their relationships with others. With this in mind, smacking may be better substituted for an alternative disciplinary strategy.

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## APPENDIX A:

### Submission Guidelines for Child Development

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**SECTION 4:**  
**RESEARCH PAPER**



## **SECTION 4**

### **Understanding personal experiences of being smacked: An IPA study with young adults.**

**Ball, M. F., Hargreaves, I. and Huws, J. C**

**Address for correspondence: North Wales Clinical Psychology Programme,  
School of Psychology, Bangor University, 43 College Road, Bangor, Gwynedd,  
LL57 2DG**

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### **Abstract**

Smacking is a common disciplinary method, which evokes significant controversy and debate. Quantitative studies have struggled to establish the effects of smacking due to methodological and conceptual complexities. Previous qualitative research with children and adolescents revealed that they can experience emotional distress when smacked, and believed more effective methods of discipline were available. The present study aimed to explore young adults' experiences of being smacked during childhood. Results indicated both commonalities and diversions of experiences within the sample, which were influenced by numerous factors such as individual predispositions, attitudes and perceptions of smacking. Longer-term effects were discovered to be positive for some participants but negative for others. It was concluded that although the experience of smacking is not necessarily detrimental, there exists a potential for some individuals, in combination with other factors, to experience long-term emotional harm, and therefore it may be better substituted for alternative methods.

**Keywords:** IPA; smacking; experiences; disciplinary methods

## SECTION 4

### **1. Introduction**

Smacking is a common disciplinary method with approximately 90% of British parents reporting its use (Nobes & Smith, 1997). It is often viewed as being at the mild end of a continuum, with other more severe forms of corporal punishment and physical abuse at the alternate polarity (Gershoff, 2002). Nevertheless, the question of when exactly smacking may become abusive remains contentious. Furthermore, the effects of smacking can often entangle with other poor parenting practices (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003), such that, if negative effects appear to present in the child, it is difficult to establish their specific cause. Indeed, the majority of findings relating to smacking have been derived from research into corporal punishment, which includes a multitude of physical punishments. This is further complicated by the issue that many quantitative studies of smacking have been correlational in nature, thereby preventing the clarification of cause and effect.

These methodological and conceptual complexities have made it difficult to effectively research the effects of smacking within a quantitative paradigm. Despite this, there has been relatively little qualitative research in this topic area.

#### **1.1 Previous qualitative research**

Willow and Hyder (1998) conducted “discussion” groups with 76 children aged five to seven, 74 of these children had been smacked. Children were asked a number of questions pertaining to smacking. Many children reported that smacking was physically painful and over a quarter reported that it made them feel upset. Only 13 children reported that they tried to be good after being smacked and only one said they learnt from their mistake. In contrast, 14 participants reported that they would be



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naughty, cheeky or nasty to their parents after being smacked. Almost all children thought smacking was wrong.

Save the Children Scotland (Cutting, 2001) and Children in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2000) sought to gather the views of slightly older children aged six to eighteen. Opinions were harvested through focus groups and questionnaires. Overall, children and young people did not think smacking was the most effective form of discipline and believed there were preferred alternatives. Three quarters said it was wrong for parents to smack children. Many held the opinion that children should only be smacked if they done something really bad and nearly all stated that only parents should be allowed to smack their children. Some participants related that the most appropriate method of discipline was dependent on the child, and the child's ability to know right from wrong should be accounted for. Older children in the study were more opposed to smacking than the younger children.

As regards parents' views, Brownlie (2006) held interviews and focus groups with 85 parents. They reported discomfort in inflicting pain on children and said smacking shouldn't hurt. Such a finding is noteworthy in relation to the view of children in the Willow and Hyder study (1998) that smacking does cause pain. Parents recognised the possibility of emotional harm in older children but often viewed younger children as only responsive to physical stimuli. Nevertheless, parents described feelings of guilt after smacking a child and admitted that they often felt angry and frustrated before delivering the smack. Brownlie (2006) noted that there was largely an absence of recognition of children's rights.

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Studies so far though, which have utilised focus groups and questionnaires, have only presented participants opinions, and quantified much of the narrative. They have not conducted interviews on an individual basis and reported in-depth or rich descriptions of peoples' experiences of being smacked.

Brownlie (2006) noted that understanding personal experiences of being smacked is particularly important as much discourse, particularly in relation to legislative debates, focuses on the physical aspect of smacking and ignores the potential emotional impact of shame, embarrassment and anger that children might experience.

Qualitative methods emphasise the importance of understanding individual experiences rather than trying to develop a 'one size fits all' explanation. It is still possible to observe similarities across individuals and across studies, but these are more modest than those proclaimed in quantitative research and are well grounded in data derived from the individuals (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

### **2. Reflexivity**

It should be noted that this is the reflective position of the first author who was the primary researcher and analyst. It does not reflect the positions of the other authors, who acted in a supervisory capacity. I am a female in my late twenties without children. My interest in conducting this research was generated from both professional and personal motivations.

As a child I was smacked regularly. I experienced smacking as upsetting and remember a sense of powerlessness and feelings of anger and resentment. I



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questioned the morality of smacking and felt that it was unjust and unfair. Smacking did usually elicit immediate compliance but not longer-term behavioural change.

Therefore, I found it difficult to comprehend how smacking was a beneficial form of discipline. Nevertheless, in my clinical work with children and families I began to develop an understanding of how hard it can be for parents. I undertook further behaviour management training and realised just how difficult a task parenting could be, and better understood why parents might resort to smacking.

Therefore, I approached this research with some negative personal experiences but clinical knowledge that my initial 'anti-smacking' ideal may be unrealistic. I attempted to maintain an open a mind as possible and tried to acknowledge and bracket the influence of my position on all aspects of the research. I have tried to hold in mind that it is the participants' stories that are key, and my aim was to relate those stories without influence from my own.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Qualitative Methodology**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) aims to explore and understand how individuals make sense of their world and what various experiences, events and states mean for participants (Smith, 1996). It holds theoretical roots in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Phenomenological psychology emphasises the importance of a person's perception of the world. It does not attempt to produce objective accounts (Smith, 1996). Symbolic interactionism recognises that individuals ascribe meanings to events but advocates that such meanings can only be accessed through a process of interpretation by the researcher. Therefore IPA acknowledges that researchers



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approach their studies with personal preconceived values, ideas and beliefs, which will influence their interpretation and understanding of others' experiences (Smith, 1996). Results reflect a co-construction between the participants' account and the researchers' interpretation of their data (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In an attempt to control for researcher influences, it is usual to engage in a process of self-reflection in order to explicitly state one's position in relation to the phenomenon under study and 'bracket' this position, thereby enabling a greater understanding of participants' experiences (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

### **3.2 Participants**

Participants were students attending a Higher Education establishment within the UK. They opted into participating in the study by responding to electronic notices that had been placed on the establishment's intranet, a research recruitment site, and to posters displayed on notice boards. Participants needed to be aged between 18 to 30 years and to have experience and recall of being regularly smacked (i.e. at least once a month from the age of four, for a minimum of one year). In order to try and avoid disentanglement of the effects of other abuse, an adapted version of The Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse Questionnaire (CECA-Q) (Bifulco et al. 2005) (Appendix A) was used to screen out participants who had experienced physical, sexual or overt emotional abuse or neglect during childhood. Included in this were questions relating to the circumstances of participants being smacked. All participants who completed screening earned course and printer credits, and those who completed the full interview were entered into a prize draw in order to compensate them for their time and effort. Twenty-five people expressed an interest in participation and

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completed the screening procedure. Of these 18 were unsuitable for inclusion as outlined in Table 1.

(Table 1 inserted here)

Of the seven eligible, six consented to be involved in the research. The final sample consisted of two males and four females aged 18 to 20 (please see Table 2 and note that participants were assigned pseudonyms).

(Table 2 inserted here)

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Before interview, details of the study were outlined verbally and in written form to participants; there was opportunity to answer questions if any were raised and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without detriment to their educational studies. After completing a consent form, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Attempts were made to ask open-ended rather than closed questions and questions were funnelled from the general (such as, “ describe an experience of when you were smacked”) to more specific (such as, “do you think it had any effect on you as a child?”). In order to avoid the interviews becoming too structured, and to allow participants the opportunity to share their experiences in a way meaningful to them, questions were formed around general areas of interest (Appendix B) as follows:

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- Background
- Significant experiences growing up
- Different methods of discipline
- Experiences of being smacked
  - Circumstances
  - Thoughts
  - Feelings
  - Reflections
- Effect on relationships
- General
  - Attitudes towards smacking
- Endings

### **3.4 Analysis**

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed into electronic documents.

Subsequently, each transcript was analysed in depth on an individual basis according to the procedure outlined by (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This involved repeatedly reading through the transcript using the left margin to note important aspects of what the participant was saying and the right margin to record developing themes. When all themes were identified they were written up in a separate document with supporting quotes and themes for each transcript were compared and collated if necessary, to avoid repetition, and sub-themes generated. Although each transcript was analysed individually, there was inevitably some influence of earlier analysis on subsequent scripts. Continual checks were made that themes could be traced back to transcripts,



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that is, that the write up was data driven. Emerging themes were also checked against transcripts by the third author.

The subsequent stage of analysis involved the cross checking of themes across participants. This led to the emergence of master themes with numerous sub-themes. Then ensued a further clustering process of establishing connections between themes. At this stage some initial participant themes were discarded as they were either not considered relevant enough to the research or they were not strongly grounded enough in participant data.

### **4. Findings**

In accordance with IPA guidelines, themes identified in the interviews were grouped into five master themes: Influences on individual experience; precursors to smacking; losing and regaining control; relationships with parents; and the potential for harm. For further detail see Table 3. Each theme is discussed and illustrated with verbatim extracts from the interviews. To preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used, and potentially identifying material has been changed.

Analysis generated numerous important themes. Each theme should be viewed as a continuum with experiences of some participants being more relevant to that particular theme than others.

(Table 3 inserted here)

#### **4.1 Context**

Before presenting the themes it was thought beneficial to establish the context in which participants were usually smacked, in order to optimise understanding of

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individual experiences. In addition, given the conceptual differences in the definition of smacking, participants were asked to describe what they construed as a ‘smack’. For most participants a smack was construed as being struck with an open hand on a part of the body’s extremities. For one participant though, their interpretation of smacking also included being hit with an object. The number of times participants were smacked in one instance was variable. Narratives revealed that parents tended to vary in their disciplinary patterns and all participants reported that one parent tended to predominate in enforcing discipline. For the majority of participants this was the father.

*Most of the time mum would be...if we annoyed mum she would just sort of shout and say “wait till your father gets home” and then she’ll tell dad and dad would be the one who smacked us.* (Fleur)

### 4.2 Themes

#### 4.2.1 Influences on Individual Experience

Experiences of being smacked displayed both considerable divergence and convergence. Serena had particularly negative reactions to being smacked, and her descriptions suggested she was predisposed to be sensitive to smacking. She perceived herself as a vulnerable individual who could not cope with being smacked.

*I am very physically sensitive, cos I don’t have a very high pain threshold.*

(Serena)

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In comparing herself to her brother, Serena appeared to engage in a process of 'splitting', as she perceived herself as 'all bad' and her brother as 'all good'. Such splitting appeared to influence her experience of being smacked, with the insinuation that his experience was less negative than her own.

*He might of experienced it differently because he was a lot better behaved than I was. Sunday's child is 'bonny, blyth, good and gay, and all that malarkey. I was unluckily born on a Wednesday, 'full of woe'. He definitely experienced it a lot more differently to me because I suppose he's a lot closer to my parents.* (Serena)

In contrast, other participants, such as Fleur, perceived themselves as being less sensitive, and therefore better able to manage the experience of being smacked.

*Whereas I can take being smacked and stuff like that. So it was different. I think if my sister had been smacked the amount I had she would probably resent my parents for doing it because she holds grudges quite well, she's always been very very sensitive.* (Fleur)

Indeed, all participants recognised that individual predispositions were important in people's experiences of being smacked, and many had internalised this idea into their current attitudes towards smacking.

*Different children need different sorts of discipline.* (Sasha)



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In contrast to Serena, Fleur reported largely positive experiences of being smacked. As has been noted, she perceived herself as an individual who was better able to manage being smacked, but in addition she related how her strong Christian upbringing provided a framework for her disciplinary experiences.

*...because of the Christian aspect of it as well, at Sunday school we were taught about punishment and consequences and stuff like that.* (Fleur)

Furthermore, Fleur held the belief that smacking was necessary in her upbringing and development as child. Here she discusses the reactions of some of her peers to her being smacked.

*Yeh because they were shocked, a lot of them were shocked that I got smacked because they thought I was the good kid. And I was like well there's a reason I'm the good kid!* (Fleur)

These very positive attitudes towards smacking are likely to have, in turn, encouraged more helpful experiences and reactions to being smacked. Similarly, attitudes towards effectiveness of smacking influenced reactions. Most participants viewed smacking as not only effective but also integral to discipline.

*If I could go back without my mum hitting me I don't think I would. Because I think at the end of the day you need respect and discipline.* (Sasha)

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For Fleur, other methods of discipline just were not perceived as sufficient punishment. Here she discusses the idea of being grounded.

*Because they weren't really being punished, when I was a kid I used to think that's not really a punishment that's just being told to stay inside and not go outside for a couple of days.*

(Fleur)

Nevertheless, the notion of effectiveness tended to be perceived in terms of immediate compliance and participant's reports suggested that it failed to effectively induce longer-term behavioural changes.

*Paul: That I couldn't be sure of. I guess I probably did it again. But not for a while, it would have stopped me at least for a while.*

*Researcher: Ok, how long's "a while" do you think?*

*Paul: Probably a month or so.*

(Paul)

The meaning of smacking often held more resonance with the participants than the actual smack.

*I used to get like a smack but it was always the idea of being smacked was always worse than actually being smacked I think.*

(Stuart)

It was evident across the accounts that smacking held multiple meanings for the participants and subsequently multiple influences on how participants experienced

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and reacted to being smacked. Nearly all participants made reference to the idea that smacking was perceived by both themselves and their peers as the “ultimate punishment”. Therefore to be smacked must reflect that a child had been engaged in serious misbehaviour.

*Um it seemed like, at the time, it seemed like kind of the most extreme form of punishment. Like if you were really naughty you used to get like a smack.*

(Stuart)

*I think I kind of saw it as an ultimate punishment type thing.*

(Paul)

In reality though, participants tended to be smacked for what would likely to be perceived as ‘everyday’ misdemeanours, such as having an untidy bedroom or fighting with a sibling. Such a discrepancy, between the perceived meaning of smacking versus its liberal employment, led some participants to make negative internal attributions. Serena described an incident in which she was smacked for repeatedly making a spelling mistake.

*‘I must be really, really bad to deserve this’. At the time I was smacked there was that (indecipherable) sometimes I thought I was absolutely rubbish at spelling, I should never do writing again.*

(Serena)

Moreover, she appears to have both internalised and generalised the intended lesson from smacking to an extent that this has been unhelpful to her.



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*When I spelt that person's name wrong three times I've never made a spelling mistake once. Sort of an OCD thing that I have to check every single word just to make sure they're not spelt incorrectly.* (Serena)

### 4.2.2 Precursors to smacking

Behaviour was explored both in terms of what incited the smack, and how participants reacted to the imminent threat of being smacked. Smacking tended to be incited by fairly mild misbehaviours such as answering back to parents or not tidying bedrooms. This led some participants to 'weigh up' the option of being smacked against desires to achieve their own goals. Therefore, the threat of being smacked was not necessarily a deterrent for misbehaviour.

*It's not effective long term, short term definitely but long term it just makes you think oh I'm gonna get a smack if I do this, is it worth it, yeah. So you like weigh out the positives and negatives compared to what you're doing.* (Sarah)

Indeed, Fleur, who was generally quite accepting of being smacked and viewed it quite positively, related how she often reacted with defiance if she believed she was going to be smacked. This theme was apparent in a number of narratives and reflected the way smacking could elicit further unwanted behaviour, rather than encourage desired behaviour.

*I already knew it was coming so the attitude was just a bit like, well if I'm gonna get smacked I might as well get my money's worth (laughs)!* (Fleur)

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*Researcher: Right ok, and when you knew it was coming how did you feel?*

*Paul: Um I don't know kind of like how much of this can I get away with sort of thing.*

(Paul)

The reasons for participants being smacked were often driven by parents' needs and occurred impulsively. Sarah believed her Dad reverted to smacking as a quick, easy option, whilst Serena felt that smacking was driven by parental or family stress.

*It was just easy enough for him to give a smack because it demanded less attention, less trouble to go explaining to a child.* (Sarah)

*I'm not entirely sure. I suppose family tension contributed to the smacking or lack of smacking.* (Serena)

### 4.2.3 Losing and regaining control

The sensation of pain, and feelings of losing control, were integral to participants' experiences of being smacked. This occurred in both a physical and emotional sense, and led to a sense of powerlessness, which participants found difficult to manage. There was variation in the intensity of these experiences, which appeared to be moderated by the circumstances of the smack and the participant's individual dispositions.

*But if you've just been smacked it's a short sharp pain that is shocking in itself because it just happens.* (Sarah)

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*Absolutely horrified. It's not a very nice experience being smacked by someone you should trust really. I never really expected it because it wasn't that frequent, maybe once a week or once a fortnight. So it wasn't completely regular but it was very shocking and very horrible.* (Serena)

Paul described how such loss of control and powerlessness was specific to smacking, as he felt unable to disguise the effects it had on him.

*Paul: Um I think with the other punishments I would pretend that they hadn't bothered me very much. Whereas with smacking it was more difficult to pretend that it hadn't bothered me cos it was obvious that it had annoyed me quite a lot.*

*Researcher: And how was it obvious?*

*Paul: By the fact that I'd like cry or something. Whereas like if I was just sent to my room I'd just be like "whatever".*

(Paul)

Participants also struggled with the boundaries enforced by their parents' and the inability to set their own boundaries.

*I think that because I just couldn't get away with things bothered me more than anything.* (Sasha)



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These feelings became more acute with age, as participants felt more able to monitor their own behaviour as they got older and began to question the justification of the boundaries laid down by parents.

*I used to get either upset or angry while I was being told off. And I used to get more and more angry then as I got older, about being told off.* (Stuart)

Indeed, in relation to perceptions of it being the “ultimate punishment”, when the smack was perceived as unjustified, participants’ sense of control was further decreased and subsequent distress intensified.

*And it was you know all the hiccupy can’t cough kind of distraught you know. Really upset at the fact of that and I felt really that more than anything it was totally unjustified that I’d been smacked and I didn’t even really do anything much wrong.*  
(Sarah)

In contrast, when the smack was perceived as a justified response to their misbehaviour, and participants understood the reasons for their smack, they were more accepting of the action.

*It’s just I think the thing with the smacking is it’s not as bad as if you’ve been spoken to and it’s been explained why you’ve had it, why you’ve had to be smacked, you understand a little bit more.* (Sarah)

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At times participants' experiences were invalidated, through various means. For example, Stuart attempted to protest against what he perceived to be unjustified punishment but this only led to further punishment. As a result Stuart's sense of control was further diminished.

*Generally there were times when I thought she was out of order smacking me and then...I generally ended up getting a couple of smacks because I'd generally shout back at her for smacking me then get another one.* (Stuart)

Another experience of invalidation occurred when Stuart was asked to conceal his emotional response to being upset for the purpose of social desirability. This request from Mum also reflects her recognition that smacking her child may be perceived as an undesirable behaviour.

*I'd actually been quite naughty, my mum had given me a harder smack than usual, I must have really annoyed her, and I was crying my eyes out and she said to me "stop crying" as we were going up. So I don't know whether she was embarrassed that she used to smack me or maybe felt like other people...cos I think my mum was quite bothered what other people think.* (Stuart)

Furthermore such invalidation continued into adulthood and had a more significant impact on Stuart than the smacking itself.

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*I think the main thing that annoyed me about when I was smacked as a child isn't the fact that I was smacked it's the fact that my mum always claimed she didn't. And now she even says she smacked me about twice when I was a kid.*

(Stuart)

Despite such an impact of the invalidation, even as an adult, Stuart chooses to collude with his mum in presenting this version of events as the truth and therefore maintain a veneer of a 'socially acceptable' upbringing.

*So that really does annoy me but to be honest I just kind of leave it, that one. (and say) "well I don't really remember".*

(Stuart)

In order to manage their experiences of being smacked and attempt to regain control participants developed a range of strategies. Sarah described mentally preparing herself to be smacked in order to try and minimise the shock of the experience.

*I'd automatically jump to the worst case scenario because I thought I can't be let down by what I'm thinking now, but if I thought, oh he might be having a good day and I might just get a 'look' you know, I didn't want to do that because I'd be totally shellshocked if he had actually come up and given me a good seeing to.*

(Sarah)

A common ploy was to threaten parents with Child Services, as a means to try and avoid being smacked.



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*So it was like using his threat back at him. It's like well if he can threaten me with a smack I can threaten him with like the authorities kind of thing.*

(Sarah)

Paul related how he exaggerated the effects of him being smacked as a means of attempting to induce feelings of guilt in his parents and therefore discourage them from smacking him again.

*I remember like, it never really used to hurt that much but I always used to make it sound like it really did! Like cry a lot or something, just for effect (laughs) to make them feel really really guilty for doing so.*

(Paul)

Furthermore, he even resorted to more extreme misbehaviour in order to try and regain some of the control in the relationship with his parents. Here he discusses an incident in which he locked himself in the bathroom and began to flood it. He refused to open the door until his parents promised not to smack him.

*Researcher: Ok so when you did that can you remember when you came out the bathroom did you avoid punishment?*

*Paul: I think I did but like my parents would be very off with me. Cos like once my parents had promised something, they had this very like trust thing, once they'd promised you something, they'd actually used the word 'promise' they won't go back on that. And even to this day if they tell you something, they'll like promise that they'll do it and they'll actually do it, which I think is nice. So I kinda gained control back in a way from their 'promises'.*

(Paul)

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At other times participants were less subtle in their attempts to avoid punishment and made overt attempts to escape from parents trying to smack them.

*Because in the end you could predict when it was coming, you think "run now".*

(Sarah)

*if I knew it was coming I'd be like scared because I'd be like "I know this is going to really hurt" and I'd try and run away from it or whatever*

(Sasha)

These narratives indicate that not only was smacking extremely aversive to the participants in this study but that it also elicited considerable defiance, which also links to precursors of smacking.

### 4.2.4 Relationships with parents

Participants' relationships with their parents were important in their experiences of being smacked. The majority of participants reported good parental relations, particularly with their mothers. Nevertheless, because of these good relationships being smacked could also engender a sense of insecurity and confusion.

*I think it was just like, I got very upset as well thinking that I'd annoyed my mum to the point where she'd smacked me or whatever. Er especially as she was the one I'd always go to if I was upset or whatever, so yeh I think it felt a lot like kind of...the one*

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*person who you'd go to is the one who's that angry with you, I think that made me quite upset.* (Stuart)

It also caused initial feelings of resentment towards parents, though these were usually short-lived.

*Like immediately afterwards I probably wouldn't be that nice with them. I'd kinda be a bit withdrawn from them. And I imagine that I'd think like it didn't really affect me much after a couple of hours. I think I'd forgotten by then.* (Paul)

For Serena though, the effect of smacking appeared much more destructive and ingrained, and eroded both the physical and emotional bonds with her parents.

*I think so yeah, I mean when I was little I didn't really like to be touched much, I liked to be left to do my thing. And the only physical contact really would sort of like be a hug and if the next lot of physical contact is a smack then that sort of put me off being touched by my parents.* (Serena)

In spite of some negative short-term effects most participants reported overall positive parental relationships, which extended into adulthood. Furthermore, Fleur felt that smacking, and the context in which she was smacked, had been foremost in helping form such positive relationships.



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*Because I tell my parents everything so it's...I think that's part of the whole smacking experience, standing up and telling them what I've done, to build that in.*

(Fleur)

In contrast though, there was also evidence that participants tended to minimise their experiences. Sarah described an incident in which she was smacked and particularly distressed by the smack, yet even in this short quote it is evident that she is conscious of the impression she conveys.

*...well it wasn't extreme where he'd go like as far as using anything but it would just be...you'd know about it. There was one occasion that he really did like go for it really but that was really...it wasn't too bad.*

(Sarah)

Even Serena, who talked at length about her negative experiences, at times would attempt to shift the focus onto a positive aspect of smacking.

*That combined with emotional insecurity sort of like worrying about doing something wrong the whole time then being smacked is...you know I was a very good student when I was at school, I was always very well behaved, which I suppose is another very good thing about smacking really because it taught me to be a very well mannered person and taught me to behave impeccably.*

(Serena)

These patterns of minimising their experiences of being smacked, appeared to function to protect the participants against feelings of excessive negativity about their childhood experiences and parental relationships. It may be that excessive focus on

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negative experiences of smacking resulted in an internal incongruence for participants, who generally viewed their childhood and parental relationships in a positive light. Indeed, participants appeared keen to protect the perceptions of their parents, which sometimes led to contradictions within their narratives. For example, early in the interview Serena described her parents as follows

*I wouldn't say they're abusive but just very very strict.* (Serena)

Whereas later she refers to the smacking as abusive.

*Serena: I'd say it's a bad thing because it is...well it's not a terrible form of abuse but it's still abuse all the same. I mean it didn't' like cause me to have any broken bones or permanent skin damage but it still hurt enough to make me think, 'I want to avoid that pain as much as possible'.*

*Researcher: But emotionally you feel it affected you?*

*Serena: Definitely*

(Serena)

Another reason for minimising the effects appeared to be linked to social desirability, as participants noted that they were anxious not to portray a negative image of their parents and childhood experiences.

*I mean you can't really talk to people about it when you're older cos I think you always worry that you're gonna make your parents, well in particular your mum or whoever disciplined you, I think you're worried that you're going to make them sound*

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*like a horrible person who was really mean to you when you were a kid (...) but you've got to be careful what you say about it to people which makes...it's quite a social, what's the word...taboo.* (Stuart)

### 4.2.5 The potential for harm

Again participants displayed both similarities and differences in the ways smacking affected their long-term development. For most, smacking was perceived as a neutral or positive experience.

*And I like who I am so it's, I don't think I would like myself if I had so little self-respect and I love the fact that I can say yes I've got these morals and yes I'm a Christian and yes I've got all of this. And I think a large part of that was due to the way my parents raised me, and the way my parents raised me included smacking.* (Fleur)

Whilst for Serena, the negative effects of smacking persisted into adulthood.

*I think so. I mean there are quite a few experiences in childhood that could have affected me but smacking definitely did play a massive role in how I grew up, feels I know that's definitely not the way to treat people.* (Serena)

Serena developed coping strategies of adopting a passive role in order to avoid conflict, as she had developed beliefs that physical aggression was integral to conflict.



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*Um well it's made me absolutely terrified of being hit. Like I will try to avoid arguments wherever possible at all times.* (Serena)

Nevertheless, on occasions this coping strategy was impossible to maintain and Serena would find herself becoming aggressive.

*At the same time I get very very sensitive so if someone does touch a raw nerve I will explode. But it does take a lot for them to find that raw nerve. If I do get into a confrontation with someone it does turn very nasty because I hate being confronted, I hate being argued with, which is why I'll very readily admit I'm wrong, even when I'm not, just so I don't get into an argument with people.*

(Serena)

Serena's experiences illustrate the potential for smacking, in combination with other factors, to exert long-term negative effects on development, which appear deep-rooted and probably difficult to change.

## **5. Discussion**

Results from the current study align with the general literature regarding smacking, in that participants in the current sample reported both considerable diversity and similarity in their experiences of being smacked. Even the fundamental concept of what is a smack differed according to participant, which reinforces the conceptual complexities of this topic area. Furthermore, the present study has established that numerous factors influenced participants' experiences. Such variations in experiences

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and in moderating influences have contributed to this topic area being particularly difficult to investigate within a quantitative paradigm. Furthermore, it has been posited that the effects of smacking may be moderated by what the experience means to the child, which can be influenced by numerous extraneous factors (Gunnore & Mariner, 1997).

The context in which participants were smacked was disparate. It was sometimes driven by parental motivations whilst at other times, appeared to derive from a more child-centred perspective. This in part concurs with the findings from Brownlie (2006), wherein parents reported feelings of anger and frustration before smacking their children. It was of note in the present study that it was often fathers who were the main enforcers of smacking. What was common across participants was the child behaviour that triggered the smacking, was often misbehaviour one might perceive as relatively minor, for example, being untidy or answering back parents. Such a liberal use of smacking contradicted the participants' beliefs that smacking reflected the "ultimate punishment". This led some to make negative internal attributions in order to rationalise the reasons for their smack. This finding echoes that reported in the Children in Scotland study (Scottish Executive, 2000), in which children reported beliefs that they should only be smacked if they have done something particularly bad.

The experience of being smacked differed, often in accordance with context and other variables such as the participants' predispositions and attitudes towards smacking. Nevertheless, pain upon being smacked was experienced by all individuals in the study, which supports previous qualitative research (e.g. Willow & Hyder, 1998).



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Loss of control, which included feelings of shock, upset and feelings of invalidation, was also apparent in participants' experiences. The experience of invalidation was felt particularly important to note, as it is possible that others may feel invalidated in their experiences of being smacked and invalidating experiences in childhood can be a risk factor for later psychological difficulties such as borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993). Relationships with parents were usually effected short-term as participants reported a weakened sense of security and temporary withdrawal. Importantly, over the longer-term one participant reported that smacking had contributed to a positive relationship with her parents, whilst another related that smacking had contributed to difficulties in her parental relationship. Such a finding highlights the complexity of individual differences in the experience of smacking. Some recognition of individual differences was also noted in the Children in Scotland study (2000).

Participants developed a range of coping strategies to help them manage their experiences of being smacked, the majority of which could be construed as defiant. Therefore, the effectiveness of smacking could be questioned. Nevertheless, participants tended to view smacking as an effective method of managing behaviour in the short term, though acknowledged that it had not been so effective in managing their behaviour over the longer-term. Despite this, most alluded that smacking was integral to discipline. These findings are somewhat contrasting to earlier studies, which have reported little support from children and young people for the effectiveness of smacking and a majority belief that smacking is wrong. This may be because participants in the present study were slightly older and no longer permanently residing in the family home. They may have been considering having



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children of their own sometime in the future and therefore reflecting on the issue from a potential parental standpoint as well as their own childhood position. It could also be because the current participants tended to minimise the negative effects of their experiences, and attempted to monitor the perception they conveyed of their childhood and parents. In part this seemed to stem from a need to conform to social pressures, though it may also have served a function of preventing participants from negative feelings towards their parents, which would likely be difficult to assimilate with their generally positive parental perceptions. Nevertheless, it must also be borne in mind that a range of both positive and negative experiences are likely to occur during childhood, and given that smacking may be generally perceived as negative, participants were maybe keen to retain some focus on positive aspects in order to present a holistic view.

### **5.1 Limitations**

It is important to note that the present results are not necessarily reflective of all young people's experiences of being smacked but are an interpretation of the current sample's experiences. It is possible that the phenomena described in the present sample do resonate with other people but the aim of IPA research is not to establish theory applicable to all. Indeed the participant sample itself was not necessarily reflective of the wider population of this age group, as it was a small number of participants selected from a higher education institute, who met the inclusion criteria. This was not too limiting as regards the present study, as it is beneficial to have more homogeneous samples in IPA studies (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Nevertheless, future research would benefit from the study of different populations, such as children and young people in the care system or individuals with a learning disability. Similarly,

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time constraints in the current research did not allow for triangulation, that is, gathering information from different perspectives. This is considered a good method of ensuring validity (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999) and again would likely prove beneficial in further qualitative research of this topic.

### **5.2 Conclusion**

Participants' accounts indicate both positive and negative experiences of smacking. From a practical perspective, it is often driven by parental stress and although may instil immediate compliance, can also elicit defiance. When smacking was perceived as being in accordance with the individual's actions, and was employed in a controlled manner, accompanied by an explanation, it was more effective in achieving behavioural change. Nevertheless, the experiences of being smacked could be associated with long-term negative outcomes. Therefore, despite the positive experiences reported by some participants, if smacking can, alongside other factors, be associated with emotional harm, parents need support to utilise other methods, which hold less potential for harm.

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Table 1: Reasons participants were unsuitable for inclusion

Emotional abuse/neglect	6
Physical/sexual abuse	4
Unclear memories	5
Smacked too infrequently	2
Unable to speak fluent English	1



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Table 2: Participant pseudonyms and corresponding ages

	Age
Sarah	20
Stuart	19
Fleur	18
Paul	20
Sasha	18
Serena	18

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Table 3: Summary of themes

<b>Influences on individual experience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Predispositions</li><li>• Attitudes</li><li>• The meaning of being smacked</li></ul>	<p><i>I am very physically sensitive, cos I don't have a very high pain threshold. (Serena)</i></p> <p><i>Yeh because they were shocked, a lot of them were shocked that I got smacked because they thought I was the good kid. And I was like well there's a reason I'm the good kid! (Fleur)</i></p> <p><i>I think I kind of saw it as an ultimate punishment type thing. (Paul)</i></p>
<b>Precursors to smacking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Defiance</li><li>• Parental motivations</li></ul>	<p><i>I already knew it was coming so the attitude was just a bit like, well if I'm gonna get smacked I might as well get my money's worth (laughs)! (Fleur)</i></p> <p><i>It was just easy enough for him to give a smack because it demanded less attention, less trouble to go explaining to a child. (Sarah)</i></p>
<b>Losing and regaining control</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Emotional reactions</li><li>• Boundaries</li><li>• Invalidation</li><li>• Coping</li></ul>	<p><i>But if you've just been smacked it's a short sharp pain that is shocking in itself because it just happens. (Sarah)</i></p> <p><i>I think that because I just couldn't get away with things bothered me more than anything. (Sasha)</i></p> <p><i>And it was you know all the hiccupy can't cough kind of distraught you know. Really upset at the fact of that and I felt really that more than anything it was totally unjustified that I'd been smacked and I didn't even really do anything much wrong. (Sarah)</i></p> <p><i>So it was like using his threat back at him. It's like well if he can threaten me with a smack I can threaten him with like the authorities kind of thing. (Sarah)</i></p>

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<p><b>Relationships with parents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Minimising experiences</li></ul>	<p><i>Like immediately afterwards I probably wouldn't be that nice with them. I'd kinda be a bit withdrawn from them. And I imagine that I'd think like it didn't really affect me much after a couple of hours. I think I'd forgotten by then. (Paul)</i></p> <p><i>...well it wasn't extreme where he'd go like as far as using anything but it would just be...you'd know about it. There was one occasion that he really did like go for it really but that was really...it wasn't too bad. (Sarah)</i></p>
<p><b>The potential for harm</b></p>	<p><i>Um well it's made me absolutely terrified of being hit. Like I will try to avoid arguments wherever possible at all times. (Serena)</i></p>



## **SECTION 4**

### **APPENDIX A:**

#### **Adapted CECA-Q and additional screening questions**

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APPENDIX B:  
Interview Schedule



## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

The following questions and prompts were used as a guide only:

- **Tell me a bit about yourself and your background**
  - How would you describe yourself as a person?
  - What do you like to do in your spare time?
  - What part of the world are you from?
  - Describe your family
  
- **Tell me a bit about your experiences growing up**
  - Earliest memory
  - Any events or experiences that stand out?
  - School experiences
  - Childhood relationships – tell me a bit about the people you were close to – family or friends
  
- **Can you tell me about the different ways your parent(s)/caregivers managed your behaviour whilst you were growing up?**
  - What would happen if you behaved well?
  - What would happen if you were naughty?
  - How did you feel about that method of discipline?
  - Which method of discipline did you think was best? Why?
  - Have any of these methods had a longer-term impact on you?
  -
  
- **Describe an experience of when you were smacked**
  - Under what circumstances were you usually smacked?
  - How often were you smacked?
  - What did you think about being smacked?
  - How did you feel about being smacked?
  - How do you feel now, looking back?
  - Do you think it had any effect on you as a child?
  - Do you feel those experiences have had any effect on you now, as a young adult
  - Can you tell me whether the experience of being smacked has shaped you as an adult?
  
- **Can you tell me whether being smacked affected your relationships in any way?**
  - Relationship with parents
  - Relationship with siblings
  - Relationships with friends – was it something you talked about with friends

- **General**

- How do you feel about smacking now – positive or negative?
- Would you recommend smacking as a disciplinary strategy?

- **Ending**

- What has it been like to be interviewed today?
- Is there anything else you would like to discuss or you think might be helpful for me to know?

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### APPENDIX C:

## Submission Guidelines for “Qualitative Research in Psychology”



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## SECTION 5:

# CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

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these larger studies have focused on establishing more generalised opinion about smacking. Therefore, there remains opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of children and adolescents' experiences of being smacked. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of research with different child populations such as those in care or those with a learning disability. Given that these children have additional difficulties to manage it would be important to learn more about their experiences of being smacked. Similarly there is a lack of in depth qualitative research with adults. This would be beneficial in terms of exploring longer-term effects. It would be particularly interesting to interview parents who were smacked during childhood, in order to try and understand how their experiences have contributed to their current role as a parent.

The current study revealed that participants tended to minimise their accounts of being smacked, and attempted to focus on the positive aspects of these experiences. This appeared to relate, in part, to a desire to present a 'socially acceptable' account of their parents and childhood. Nevertheless, the present study also suggested that, in minimising their experiences, participants were better able to internally assimilate their experiences and therefore maintain a more positive perception of their parents and upbringing. This proposition would benefit from further investigation.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

Findings from the current study indicate a number of important clinical implications for practice. They suggest that smacking, although sometimes beneficial for both parent and child, does hold the potential to negatively affect individuals. The way in



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which smacking affects an individual appears to be associated with numerous factors such as, personal predispositions, attitudes, beliefs and the context in which the smacking occurs.

Descriptions from participants suggested that parents tended to smack in response to their own stress rather than for the benefit of the child. Indeed, parents themselves have reported feelings of anger and frustration in the lead up to smacking their child (Brownlie, 2006). This is important in terms of working with parents of children, both in terms of validating their experiences, and in helping them develop alternative ways of managing their child behaviour that is not driven by their difficult emotions.

The findings provide further support for the implementation of child behaviour management programmes, such as the Incredible Years programme (Webster-Stratton, 2005). Furthermore, the findings suggested that it was often Fathers who took responsibility for implementing the smacking, therefore this emphasises the importance of engaging them in parenting interventions.

There was a general consensus amongst participants that the effectiveness of smacking was optimal when it was perceived as being in accordance with the level of misbehaviour, and when accompanied by an explanation. Participants in the current study tended to perceive smacking as the 'ultimate punishment' and similar views were evident in research conducted by Children in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2000). In practice however, smacking was frequently employed for what would likely be considered as 'everyday' misdemeanours, such as answering back or having an untidy bedroom. This led some participants in the current study to internalise negative

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attributions as regards the reasons behind smacking. For example, some reported that, as children, they believed that they as individuals must be bad in order to deserve being smacked. In working with parents it is important that they be made aware of the dynamics and the potential for emotional harm. Furthermore, if smacking is regularly implemented as a sanction for 'everyday', more common, misbehaviours, it leaves the parent with little room for manoeuvre if the child displays more severe misbehaviour. Again, parents who seek help or are referred for help in managing their child's behaviour, as might occur in Child Psychology Services, should be made aware of such dynamics.

One participant in the current study described a sense of invalidation associated with being smacked. This occurred both in childhood, when his mother asked him not to cry after being smacked, and also in adulthood, when his mother denied using smacking as a disciplinary technique. Although this experience was only germane to one participant, it was thought important to note due to the potential of invalidating experiences to affect longer-term outcomes (Linehan, 1993). If such an experience was significant to one individual it may be relevant to others. Despite the recollection of his experiences, as an adult the participant reported colluding with his mother to support her claims she did not smack him during childhood. This caused him considerable frustration and even feelings of anger. Nevertheless, he continued to engage in such collusion. Similarly, all participants tended to minimise the negative aspects of their childhood experiences. This appeared to be associated with social desirability factors, and a motivation to present their parents treatment of them within socially acceptable terms. It may also have been difficult for some of them to assimilate their negative experiences with their overall positive perception and

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portrayal of their childhood and parental relationships. These findings hold implications for therapeutic work both within child and adult services. Children engaged in mental health services are likely to be living with one or both parents and therefore may feel significant pressure to remain loyal to their parents and present them in a socially appropriate light. As participants in the current study were adults, it is noteworthy that they continued to protect the perception of their parents and such behaviours may well present in clients attending for therapy. Nevertheless, it must also be borne in mind that a range of both positive and negative experiences are likely to occur during childhood, and therefore clinicians must be careful not to stigmatise.



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**SECTION 6:**  
**WORD COUNTS**

## SECTION 6

### WORD COUNTS

<b>Abstract</b>	250
<b>Ethics Proposal</b>	
Excluding references and appendices	3346
<i>Including references and appendices</i>	5272
<b>Reflective Commentary</b>	597
<b>Literature Review</b>	
Excluding references and appendices	5975
<i>Including references and appendices</i>	7168
<b>Research Paper</b>	
Excluding references and appendices	6994
<i>Including references and appendices</i>	7769
<b>Contributions to theory and clinical practice</b>	
Excluding references and appendices	1187
<i>Including references and appendices</i>	1367
<b>Total</b>	
Excluding references and appendices	18, 349
<i>Including references and appendices</i>	21, 576