

Three in five young Australians suffer corporal punishment, almost doubling their risk of mental health disorders

Australian-first research into the prevalence of childhood maltreatment has found 61 per cent of Australians aged 16-24 have experienced corporal punishment on more than three occasions.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study's preliminary results also show those subjected to such punishment at the hands of their parents and caregivers are up to twice as likely to develop anxiety and depression.

"The relationship between corporal punishment and mental health disorders is strong," Australian Catholic University's Institute for Child Protection Studies director Professor Daryl Higgins said.

"Corporal punishment has negative effects on mental health and part of the reason is because corporal punishment tends to go alongside experiences of child abuse and neglect."

The research, to be presented by Professor Higgins today at the Australian Institute of Family Studies conference in Melbourne, found of those who had experienced corporal punishment, females were 1.8 times more likely to have a major depressive disorder in their lifetime, and 2.1 times more likely to experience generalised anxiety.

Males were 1.7 and 1.6 times more likely to develop depression and anxiety respectively.

"If you want to reduce population level anxiety for women and men, don't hit them as children," Professor Higgins said.

"There is a very real connection between corporal punishment and current and lifelong experience of mental ill health."

The nation-wide study of 8,500 Australians is examining the prevalence of the five types of child maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence.

Professor Higgins said the study provided population level data for the first time, requiring a population level strategy to address the issue.

He said the study also showed support for corporal punishment as a form of discipline for children dropped from 37.9% among the 65+ age group to 14.8% for those aged 16-24.

"Attitudes are shifting and it's time to support parents taking non-violent approaches to discipline and to address our legal structures that at the moment don't offer children the protection from assaults that every other Australian gets," he said.

"The quality of parenting really matters. Parents and caregivers need to be using positive parenting techniques rather than outmoded forms of discipline that cause harm and are associated with other forms of abuse."

Other key findings from the 16-24-year-old participants to be presented by ACMS Chief Investigators Professor Ben Mathews, of Queensland University of Technology, and QIMR Berghofer's Professor James Scott include:

- 30.5% experienced non-suicidal self-injury, with strong associations to childhood experiences of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- Females and males who experienced childhood sexual abuse were 5.9 and 3.7 times more likely respectively to report self-harm.
- Females and males exposed to domestic violence in childhood were 2.4 and 1.9 times more likely respectively to develop depression, and 2.2 and 2.4 times more likely respectively to experience anxiety.

The full results of the National Health and Medical Research Council-funded study, being conducted by researchers from ACU, Queensland University of Technology, The University of Queensland, Queensland Centre Mental Health Research, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Curtin University, and international universities The University of New Hampshire, The University of Edinburgh, and University of Greenwich, are expected early next year.

Professor Higgins is available today for comment before 10.30am, and between 1pm and 3pm, and 5pm-6pm.

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