

Acceptability of corporal punishment and use of different parenting practices across high-income countries

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Abstract

Worldwide, many children experience corporal punishment. Most research on corporal punishment has focused on parents' attitudes and use of corporal punishment; however, other relevant parenting factors and practices have rarely been examined. This study explored differences among countries with various levels of progress toward a total legal ban of corporal punishment in parents' acceptability of corporal punishment, perception of parenting as a private concern, relationship with their child and parenting practices: consistency, coercive parenting, use of smacking and positive encouragement. Parents ($N=6760$) of 2 to 12-year-old children from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom completed the International Parenting Survey, an online cross-sectional survey. One-way ANOVAs, and MANCOVAs (after controlling for parent age, gender and educational level), indicated significant country differences. Overall, there was no clear link between corporal punishment bans and positive parenting beliefs, practices and behaviours. The two countries where corporal punishment is banned showed different patterns. Parents in Germany showed less acceptability and use of smacking; however, parents in Spain reported the highest use of coercive parenting. Country differences suggest that

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beyond a legal ban, attention is needed on how to support parents to raise their children in a positive, nurturing environment.

KEYWORDS

corporal punishment, cross-cultural, international parenting survey, parenting behaviours, parents

1 | INTRODUCTION

Corporal punishment refers to “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). UNICEF (2023) estimated that globally more than two in three children had experienced physical discipline by their parents in the last month. In Canada, 25 per cent of parents have used corporal punishment with their children (Fréchette & Romano, 2015), whereas 35 per cent of parents from the United States (US) have smacked their children (Finkelhor et al., 2019). More recently, Haslam et al. (2023) reported that 53.7 per cent of parents in Australia have used corporal punishment. Although using corporal punishment is considered a violation of children's rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991), it is still a common disciplinary strategy used by parents worldwide. Furthermore, these rates are even more concerning considering that parents are likely to underreport the use of corporal punishment (Fréchette & Romano, 2015).

Corporal punishment is linked to adverse child development outcomes in the short and long term (Cuartas, 2021; Durrant & Ensom, 2017; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Meta-analyses indicate that corporal punishment is associated with several negative child outcomes, including internalising and externalising behaviours, low cognitive performance, low moral internalisation and negative parent–child relationships (Durivage et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2013; Fulu et al., 2017; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Childhood experiences of corporal punishment are linked with mental health problems, antisocial behaviour and endorsement of corporal punishment in adults (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, parents who reported that they had experienced harsh and abusive parenting as a child were more likely to smack and use anger toward their own children (Baydar et al., 2003). Thus, there is evidence of the intergenerational transmission of violence against children contributing to the normalisation of the use of corporal punishment as an acceptable discipline measure (Afifi et al., 2022; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). There is also strong evidence that corporal punishment is itself a risk factor for more severe forms of physical child abuse from parents (Fulu et al., 2017; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016) and other types of violence, such as intimate partner violence (Fulu et al., 2017; Lansford et al., 2014).

International efforts have progressed toward the prohibition of all types of corporal punishment across countries (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021). Data show that parents are 1.7 times more likely to use corporal punishment when it is still legal in their country (Durivage et al., 2015). This suggests legislative bans may have an important role to play in reducing the use of corporal punishment. However, only one-third of countries around the world have totally banned corporal punishment in all settings. Twenty years after being the first country in the world to ban all corporal punishment in all settings, Sweden was able to reduce public endorsement of corporal punishment, promote early detection of children at risk of corporal punishment and provide opportunities for early support (Durrant, 1999). These changes have been maintained over time: 92 per cent of Swedish parents have negative attitudes toward corporal punishment (Janson et al., 2012). Sweden also reports lower use of

corporal punishment compared with other European, Asian, African countries and countries from the Americas (Lansford et al., 2010).

Differences in attitudes to corporal punishment exist between countries with and without legal bans. Lansford et al. (2017) compared parents' beliefs toward corporal punishment and their use in countries with (e.g., Ukraine, Togo and Macedonia) and without (e.g., Central African Republic, Kazakhstan and Montenegro) legal prohibition of all types of corporal punishment. Results indicated that parents from countries with legal bans were significantly more likely to report a reduction in their endorsement and use of corporal punishment over time. However, not all countries with bans showed this pattern. Some countries continue to have high acceptability and use of corporal punishment despite legal bans. This suggests that how long the ban has been in place, associated public/educational campaigns, and pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours may be important. For example, Lansford et al. (2017) suggested that the recency of the corporal punishment ban may have influenced the mixed results reported across countries.

We argue that other parenting practices and beliefs may also be important because parenting happens in a social context and corporal punishment does not happen in isolation (Gershoff, 2002). Beyond the concept of being a “good” or “bad” parent, parenting is a multidimensional role as parents use a range of strategies to raise their children. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Belsky (1980) proposed that parental characteristics interact with other systems around them, for example, the family system (microsystem); work and neighbourhood (exosystem); and society's attitudes toward violence, corporal punishment and children. For example, some evidence suggests that parents who perceived that close friends and family were accepting of corporal punishment were significantly more likely to use it, indicating how societal acceptance plays an important role in normalising corporal punishment (Vanderfaellie et al., 2023).

There is some evidence regarding the connection between parenting practices and beliefs and child well-being in the context of corporal punishment research. Endorsement and use of corporal punishment have been associated with the use of other coercive parenting strategies (Lansford et al., 2014; Perron et al., 2014). Furthermore, corporal punishment has been associated with ineffective parenting. Data show parents who perceive corporal punishment as an acceptable strategy are more likely to be inconsistent in their parenting, use praise and encouragement less often, and report less involvement and a poorer relationship with their children (Barnett et al., 2010; Plessy et al., 2018). The sequelae of such ineffective parenting practices, on their own or in combination with corporal punishment are poorer child development outcomes (e.g., Dittman et al., 2011). Thus, an exploratory examination of a society's explicit commitment to end corporal punishment can be considered as one indicator of their attitudes toward children and their rights, and from an ecological perspective, understanding of parents' beliefs and parenting behaviours is likely to be central to reducing the use of corporal punishment.

1.1 | The current study

In this study, we aimed to identify differences in parents' acceptability of corporal punishment, perception of parenting as a private matter, perceived relationship with their child and parenting practices (including use of smacking) across high-income countries (i.e., Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) with varied levels of progress toward full prohibition of corporal punishment. Two countries, Germany and Spain, have fully prohibited corporal punishment in all settings, whereas the rest of the countries had progressed toward prohibition in some settings (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2023). Table 1 provides a summary of relevant information

TABLE 1 Country characteristics and progress toward full prohibition of corporal punishment.

Country	Population size (2012–2017) (Data Commons, 2023)	Prevalence of corporal punishment (Based on prevalence surveys and other survey studies completed by either parents or participants reporting experience as children)	Individualism index (Hofstede et al., 2010) ^a	Progress toward full prohibition of corporal punishment (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2023)
Australia	22.7 M–24.6 M	62.5% of adults experienced corporal punishment 3+ times before age 18. 53.7% of parents have used corporal punishment at least once. (Haslam et al., 2023)	90	Prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings, day care, schools and penal institutions
Belgium	11.1 M–11.4 M	About 70% of adult respondents have experienced corporal punishment in childhood (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2023)	72–78	Prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings, day care and schools
Canada	34.7 M–36.5 M	Under 30% of parents reported using corporal punishment (Fréchette & Romano, 2015)	73–80	Prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings, day care and schools
Germany	80.3 M–82.5 M	61.2% of respondents have experienced corporal punishment (Khachatryan et al., 2023)	67	Full prohibition since 2000
Hong Kong	7.15 M–7.39 M	54% of children have experienced corporal punishment (Against Child Abuse, 2015)	25	(China) China's commitment to prohibiting corporal punishment. Currently prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings and day care.
Spain	46.8 M–46.5 M	63% of males and 36.8% of females were physically punished at the age of 10 (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2010)	32	Full prohibition since 2007
Switzerland	7.95 M–8.42 M	0.2%–0.6% of parents reported using corporal punishment regularly (Stülz et al., 2019)	(17–18)–21	Prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings, day care, schools and penal institutions
United Kingdom	63.5 M–65.8 M	41.6% of the parents reported physically punishing their child in the past year (Radford et al., 2012)	89	Prohibited in some settings: Alternative care settings, day care, schools and penal institutions

Abbreviation: M, million.

^aHighest individualism index = 91 (Individualistic), Lowest individualistic index = 6 (Collectivistic).

regarding the countries included in this study for further context. This study will add to the literature by detailing how corporal punishment acceptability and use are related to other parenting practices and if these differ based on each country's legislation around corporal punishment.

2 | METHODS

This study used a descriptive, cross-sectional design using data from the International Parenting Survey, which collected data from parents in multiple countries (Morawska et al., 2017).

2.1 | Participants

Participants were 6760 biological, adoptive or step-parents (henceforth “parents”) who completed the International Parenting Survey between February 2012 and July 2017. These parents were from Canada ($n = 2405$, 35.6%), Germany ($n = 1392$, 20.6%), the United Kingdom ($n = 701$, 10.4%), Hong Kong ($n = 611$, 9.0%), Australia ($n = 583$, 8.6%), Belgium ($n = 550$, 8.1%), Switzerland ($n = 325$, 4.8%) and Spain ($n = 193$, 2.9%). Participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.22$, $SD = 6.27$, range of 18–70 years; $n = 5960$, 88.2% identified as female, $n = 602$, 8.9% identified as male, and $n = 198$, 2.9% did not answer the gender question) were primarily biological or adoptive mothers ($n = 6105$, 90.3%), followed by biological or adoptive fathers ($n = 605$, 8.9%), stepmothers ($n = 36$, 0.5%) and stepfathers ($n = 14$, 0.2%). They were parents of children aged 2 to 12 years ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 2.85$), with slightly more boys ($n = 3598$, 53.3%) than girls ($n = 3156$, 46.7%). Those parents with more than one child in the age range were asked to answer the survey considering their youngest child. Participants lived at home with one to eight children ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.63$) in a household with both biological/adoptive parents ($n = 5697$, 84.4%) most of the time, followed by single-parent families ($n = 640$, 9.5%) and stepfamilies ($n = 334$, 4.9%). Other demographic characteristics of the participants are reported in Table 2.

2.2 | Procedure

The International Parenting Survey was an online questionnaire designed to gather information from parents regarding their family and parenting. Morawska et al. (2017) elaborated on the process and methodology for survey development and translation/back translation when required. Within each participating country, teams of researchers and practitioners took on the responsibility of obtaining local ethics approval and enlisting parents for participation. Advertisements were disseminated through various channels, including practitioners and organisations offering family support services (e.g., mental health services, family service providers, parent training facilitators and general practitioners), Websites and newspapers. Through convenience sampling, parents with children aged 2–12 years were extended invitations to access the survey link. Upon accessing the link, parents were presented with an information sheet and provided their consent by proceeding to complete the survey. The time taken by parents to complete the survey ranged from 20 to 25 min. Gonzalez et al. (2024) provided further details about the psychometric properties of the Parenting Belief Scale.

TABLE 2 Demographic characteristics of the total sample of parents and per country.

Variables	Countries										Total sample (<i>n</i> = 6760) <i>n</i> (%)
	Australia (<i>n</i> = 583) <i>n</i> (%)	Belgium (<i>n</i> = 550) <i>n</i> (%)	Canada (<i>n</i> = 2405) <i>n</i> (%)	Germany (<i>n</i> = 1392) <i>n</i> (%)	Hong Kong (<i>n</i> = 611) <i>n</i> (%)	Spain (<i>n</i> = 193) <i>n</i> (%)	Switzerland (<i>n</i> = 325) <i>n</i> (%)	United Kingdom (<i>n</i> = 701) <i>n</i> (%)			
Gender											
Male	36 (6.2)	39 (9.5)	204 (8.6)	108 (7.8)	74 (12.1)	44 (24.6)	38 (11.8)	59 (8.5)			602 (9.2)
Female	543 (93.8)	372 (90.5)	2180 (91.4)	1273 (92.2)	536 (87.9)	135 (75.4)	285 (88.2)	636 (91.5)			5960 (90.8)
Marital status											
Married	446 (76.5)	329 (59.8)	1728 (71.9)	1059 (76.1)	585 (95.7)	135 (69.9)	251 (77.2)	503 (71.9)			5033 (74.5)
Cohabiting	60 (10.3)	184 (33.5)	338 (14.1)	173 (12.4)	2 (0.3)	23 (11.9)	39 (12.0)	116 (16.5)			938 (13.9)
Divorced/Separated	48 (8.2)	18 (3.3)	166 (6.9)	82 (5.9)	17 (2.8)	25 (13.0)	23 (7.1)	35 (5.0)			414 (6.1)
Single	28 (4.8)	17 (3.1)	159 (6.6)	64 (4.6)	5 (0.8)	9 (4.7)	11 (3.4)	41 (5.8)			334 (4.9)
Widow/er	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	13 (0.5)	8 (0.6)	2 (0.3)	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.1)			27 (0.4)
Other	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	6 (0.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	5 (0.7)			14 (0.2)
Educational level											
Completed high school or less	76 (13.1)	94 (22.8)	372 (15.5)	613 (44.4)	336 (55.0)	53 (29.3)	31 (9.6)	82 (11.8)			1657 (25.2)
Tertiary education	506 (86.8)	318 (77.2)	2027 (84.5)	768 (55.6)	275 (45.0)	128 (70.7)	291 (90.4)	614 (88.2)			4927 (74.8)
Employment											
Full-time	166 (28.5)	279 (67.7)	1351 (56.4)	306 (22.2)	289 (47.5)	121 (67.6)	61 (18.8)	261 (37.5)			2834 (43.1)
Part-time	262 (45.0)	109 (26.5)	426 (17.8)	614 (44.5)	72 (11.8)	25 (14.0)	196 (60.5)	282 (40.5)			1986 (30.2)
Not working, but looking for a job	12 (2.1)	21 (5.1)	111 (4.6)	67 (4.9)	39 (6.4)	20 (11.2)	11 (3.4)	21 (3.0)			302 (4.6)
Home-based paid work	21 (3.6)	2 (0.5)	102 (4.3)	91 (6.6)	24 (3.9)	4 (2.2)	15 (4.6)	25 (3.6)			284 (4.3)
Not working	121 (20.8)	1 (0.2)	407 (17.0)	303 (21.9)	184 (30.3)	9 (5.0)	41 (12.7)	107 (15.4)			1173 (17.8)
Essential expenses not covered											
No	455 (78.2)	370 (89.8)	1923 (80.1)	1236 (89.4)	454 (74.4)	156 (86.2)	296 (91.4)	531 (76.4)			5421 (82.3)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Variables	Countries										Total sample (<i>n</i> = 6760) <i>n</i> (%)
	Australia (<i>n</i> = 583)	Belgium (<i>n</i> = 550)	Canada (<i>n</i> = 2405)	Germany (<i>n</i> = 1392)	Hong Kong (<i>n</i> = 611)	Spain (<i>n</i> = 193)	Switzerland (<i>n</i> = 325)	United Kingdom (<i>n</i> = 701)			
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	
Yes	117 (20.1)	40 (9.7)	442 (18.4)	134 (9.7)	138 (22.6)	24 (13.3)	27 (8.3)	160 (23.0)			1082 (16.4)
Do not know	10 (1.7)	2 (0.5)	35 (1.5)	13 (0.9)	18 (3.0)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.3)	4 (0.6)			84 (1.3)
Leftover finances											
Enough that I/we can comfortably purchase most of the things we really want	202 (34.8)	261 (63.3)	877 (36.6)	615 (44.5)	243 (40.0)	70 (40.0)	171 (52.8)	239 (34.3)			2678 (40.7)
Enough that I/we can purchase only some of the things we really want	253 (43.5)	110 (26.7)	1018 (42.5)	587 (42.5)	247 (40.6)	81 (46.3)	124 (38.3)	282 (40.5)			2702 (41.1)
Not enough to purchase much of anything I/we really want	126 (21.7)	41 (10.0)	502 (20.9)	180 (13.0)	118 (19.4)	24 (13.7)	29 (9.0)	175 (25.1)			1195 (18.2)
Parent age	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)
	37.95 (5.87)	35.01 (5.06)	36.62 (6.56)	36.94 (6.40)	37.88 (5.57)	41.62 (5.35)	38.49 (5.51)	38.00 (6.49)			37.22 (6.27)

Note: *n* vary due to missing data. *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Demographics

The Family Background Questionnaire (Morawska & Sanders, 2010) gathers information from parents about parent, child and family demographic characteristics (e.g., child gender, parent employment status and household composition).

2.3.2 | Parenting as a private concern and acceptability of corporal punishment

The Parenting Belief Scale (Farruggia, 2009) asks parents regarding their viewpoints of Parenting as a Private Concern (4 items, range: 4–24) and their Acceptability of Corporal Punishment (4 items, range: 4–24). The potential responses for each item span from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (6). Elevated scores indicate more pronounced beliefs in parenting being a private affair and a greater acceptance of physical discipline, respectively. The reliability of this measurement was found to be highly satisfactory for the Parenting as a Private Concern subscale ($\alpha = .82$) and the Acceptability of Corporal Punishment subscale ($\alpha = .90$) across the entire sample.

2.3.3 | Parenting practices

This study included the 18-item Parenting scale of the Parent and Family Adjustment Scales (PAFAS; Sanders et al., 2014). This subscale assesses the degree of inconsistency in parental disciplinary approaches (Parental Consistency, 5 items, range: 0–15), the utilisation of coercive strategies when addressing their child's behaviour (Coercive Parenting, 5 items, range: 0–15), the adoption of positive parenting methods (Positive Encouragement, 3 items, range: 0–9) and the quality of the parent–child relationship (Parent–Child Relationship, 5 items, range: 0–15). Elevated scores indicate a greater presence of ineffective parenting. For this study, the internal consistency of the Parenting dimension in the complete sample was $\alpha = .70$. The internal consistency values for each subscale were as follows: Parental Inconsistency $\alpha = .51$, Coercive Parenting $\alpha = .60$, Lack of Positive Encouragement $\alpha = .60$ and Poor Parent–Child Relationship $\alpha = .80$.

2.3.4 | Smacking

A single-item from the Parenting scale of the PAFAS (Sanders et al., 2014) was used to measure parents' reported use of smacking through the question “I spank (smack) my child when they misbehave.” Responses range from “not at all” (0) to “very much” (3), where higher scores indicate greater use of smacking (range: 0–3).

2.4 | Statistical analysis

Data screening followed Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) and Schlomer et al. (2010). Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28.0.1.1. Descriptive statistics were reported for study variables. Missing value analysis including Little's test was conducted to evaluate patterns of missingness. If the test was not significant (i.e., indicating data were missing completely at random), expectation–maximisation imputation method

was used. If the test was significant, further analysis involved *t*-tests for continuous variables and chi-squared analyses for categorical variables to determine patterns of missingness following suggestions from Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) and Bennett (2001). We used one-way ANOVAs to compare differences across countries in the acceptability of corporal punishment, parenting as a private concern, parent–child relationship and parenting practices (including the use of smacking). For post hoc comparisons, we used the Turkey test if Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was not significant. If this test was significant (i.e., assumption of homogeneity was violated), we used Welch statistics and Games–Howell instead (Allen et al., 2014; Pallant, 2020). Furthermore, multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) were conducted to evaluate country differences in the parent variables of interest, after controlling for parent age (continuous variable), gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female) and educational level (1 = Completed high school or less, 2 = Tertiary education). In order to have a parsimonious set of covariates (so as not to reduce statistical power), we decided to focus on these three variables as they have been more often included in the literature as covariates (Cuartas, 2021; Gershoff, 2002; Haslam et al., 2023; Khachatryan et al., 2023). We used Wilks' Lambda test when Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was non-significant. In cases where this test was significant, we used the Pillai's Trace test as it is more robust (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Data screening

According to Little's MCAR test, data were not missing completely at random, $\chi^2(1493) = 1839.9, p < .001$. Average missingness was 2.9% (ranging from 0% for parent marital status to 34.3% for parent age). Further analyses (i.e., *t*-tests and chi-squared) indicated that missingness was predicted by variables within the dataset leading to the conclusion that data were missing at random. Therefore, the expectation–maximisation algorithm was used to impute missing values for continuous variables as it is adequate for missing at random data (Bennett, 2001).

3.2 | Between-country analyses

One-way ANOVAs using Welch statistics indicated that there were differences between the eight countries in parents' report of acceptability of corporal punishment, $F(7, 1492.15) = 336.60, p < .001$, perception of parenting as a private concern, $F(7, 1528.66) = 87.52, p < .001$ and parenting practices, that is, parental inconsistency, $F(7, 1526.98) = 60.34, p < .001$, coercive parenting, $F(7, 1507.73) = 50.03, p < .001$, smacking use, $F(7, 1497.87) = 101.96, p < .001$, lack of positive encouragement, $F(7, 1523.10) = 120.10, p < .001$ and poor parent–child relationships, $F(7, 1534.88) = 111.40, p < .001$ (Table 3), with moderately large effect sizes. Post hoc analysis using the Games–Howell test (see Supplementary Table A in Appendix S1) indicated that parents from Germany, where corporal punishment is prohibited, were significantly less likely to see parenting as a private matter and reported significantly less acceptability of corporal punishment when compared to parents from all other countries ($p < .001$). On the contrary, Spanish parents showed the highest perception of parenting as a private matter when compared to parents from other countries ($p < .001$). Additionally, their acceptability of corporal punishment was significantly greater than parents from Belgium ($p < .001$), Canada ($p = .031$), Germany ($p < .001$) and Switzerland ($p < .001$); and lower than parents from Australia ($p = .002$). Australian parents reported the highest levels of acceptability of corporal punishment ($p < .007$).

TABLE 3 One-way ANOVA of country differences for parents' reports of the Parenting Belief Scale (per Subscales) and the Parenting Scale of the Parenting and Family Adjustment Scales, PAFAS (per subscales and smacking item).

Variables	Countries										Cohen's <i>f</i>						
	Australia		Belgium		Canada		Germany		Hong Kong			Spain		Switzerland		United Kingdom	
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)		<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>F</i>
Parenting Belief Scale																	
Parenting as private concern ^a	14.94 (4.50)	15.83 (3.30)	14.31 (4.50)	12.40 (4.10)	15.44 (3.50)	17.43 (4.70)	15.40 (4.35)	14.14 (4.31)	87.52	<.001	.29						
Acceptability of corporal punishment ^b	12.14 (5.43)	7.40 (3.16)	9.40 (4.90)	5.50 (2.50)	11.10 (4.30)	10.52 (4.71)	8.30 (4.31)	9.70 (4.97)	336.60	<.001	.47						
PAFAS Parenting Scale																	
Parental inconsistency ^c	3.92 (2.30)	4.10 (1.93)	3.90 (2.23)	4.30 (2.10)	5.70 (1.94)	4.50 (2.21)	4.20 (2.04)	3.91 (2.30)	60.34	<.001	.23						
Coercive parenting ^d	3.96 (2.10)	2.98 (1.72)	3.50 (2.04)	3.98 (1.90)	4.41 (2.50)	5.80 (2.94)	4.20 (1.93)	3.40 (1.83)	50.03	<.001	.26						
Smacking (item) ^e	0.50 (0.62)	0.20 (0.40)	0.30 (0.50)	0.20 (0.42)	0.94 (0.80)	0.70 (0.74)	0.34 (0.54)	0.21 (0.43)	101.96	<.001	.43						
Lack of positive encouragement ^f	2.43 (1.60)	2.23 (1.30)	2.30 (1.50)	3.70 (1.90)	1.80 (1.63)	2.20 (1.50)	3.21 (1.80)	2.10 (1.70)	120.10	<.001	.39						
Poor parent-child relationship ^g	1.12 (1.70)	1.10 (1.30)	0.90 (1.50)	1.02 (1.60)	3.95 (2.70)	0.64 (1.10)	0.96 (1.60)	0.90 (1.44)	111.40	<.001	.53						

Note: Score range. ^a4–24. ^b4–24. ^c0–15. ^d0–15. ^e0–3. ^f0–9. ^g0–15. *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation. Cohen's *f*: *f* = .10 (small); *f* = .25 (medium); and *f* = .50 (large effect) (Cohen, 1988).

Parents from Spain, where corporal punishment is prohibited, reported a significantly better relationship with their children in comparison with parents from some countries, namely Australia ($p < .001$), Belgium ($p < .001$), Germany ($p < .001$) and Hong Kong ($p < .001$). Parents from Hong Kong had a significantly poorer relationship with their children when compared to parents from all other countries ($p < .001$).

In terms of parenting practices, parents from Canada were significantly more consistent in their parenting than parents from other countries ($p < .001$); whereas parents from Hong Kong reported significantly more inconsistency in comparison with parents from other countries ($p < .001$). Parents from Belgium reported significantly less frequent use of coercive parenting ($p < .002$) than did parents from all other countries. Instead, parents from Spain were consistently using more coercive strategies with their children in comparison with parents from other countries ($p < .001$). In terms of smacking, parents across all countries reported relatively low levels of use of smacking, that is, < 0.94 of a possible range of 0–3. Results indicated that parents from Germany reported using smacking significantly less often than parents from most countries ($p < .001$), but not different from Belgium ($p = .489$), and the United Kingdom ($p = .249$). Parents from Hong Kong were significantly more likely to use smacking when compared to parents from all other countries ($p < .001$). Regarding lack of positive encouragement, parents from Germany ($p < .001$) were encouraging their children significantly less often when compared to parents from all other countries; whereas parents from Hong Kong were significantly more likely to encourage their children in comparison with parents from other countries ($p < .028$), except for parents from the United Kingdom ($p = .057$).

A multivariable analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) using Pillai's Trace test was conducted to compare parent variables across eight countries, after controlling for parent age, gender and educational level, $F(49, 30,541) = 79.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$ (medium- to-large effect size). Thus, all eight countries differed in the parent variables of interest, following similar patterns to the ANOVA results described above in relation to parents' perception of parenting as a private concern ($p < .001$), acceptability of corporal punishment ($p < .001$), use of coercive parenting ($p < .001$) and smacking ($p < .001$), lack of positive encouragement ($p < .001$) and poor relationship with their children ($p < .001$) (Supplementary Table B in Appendix S1). However, parents' reports of parental inconsistency ($p < .001$) showed some differences between ANOVA and MANCOVA results. When comparing the estimated marginal means, parents from Hong Kong remained reporting higher levels of parental inconsistency compared with parents from other countries, whereas now Australian parents reported lower levels of parental inconsistency than those in other countries.

3.3 | Comparison of countries by progress toward full prohibition of corporal punishment

Furthermore, another MANCOVA using Pillai's Trace test evaluated potential differences in parent variables between those countries with a total prohibition of corporal punishment (i.e., Germany and Spain) and those countries who have prohibitions in some settings only (i.e., Australia, Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), controlling for parent age, gender and educational level. This analysis showed significant differences across both groups of countries, $F(7, 4363) = 175.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$ (large effect size). Table 4 shows that these two groups of countries displayed significant differences (small-to-medium effect sizes) in all parent variables, except for parental inconsistency ($p < .323$). Considering the estimated marginal means, countries where there is a full prohibition of corporal punishment showed significantly less concern about parenting as a private matter ($p < .001$), less acceptability of corporal punishment ($p < .001$), less use of smacking ($p < .001$) and a better relationship with their child ($p < .001$) when compared to

TABLE 4 Multivariable analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and one-way ANOVA results of differences between countries with total prohibition of corporal punishment and countries with prohibition in some settings for parent variables.

Countries		<i>M*</i> (SD)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial eta squared (η_p^2)
Countries with total prohibition of corporal punishment (Germany, Spain)	Countries with prohibition of corporal punishment in some settings (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, Switzerland and the United Kingdom)				
Variables	<i>M*</i> (SD)	<i>M*</i> (SD)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial eta squared (η_p^2)
Parenting Belief Scale					
Parenting as private concern ^a	13.16 (0.14)	14.79 (0.08)	103.76	<.001	.023
Acceptability of corporal punishment ^b	6.27 (0.15)	9.81 (0.08)	441.65	<.001	.09
PAFAS Parenting scale					
Parental inconsistency ^c	4.28 (0.07)	4.19 (0.04)	0.98	.323	.000
Coercive parenting ^d	4.22 (0.07)	3.63 (0.04)	55.25	<.001	.012
Smacking (item) ^e	0.24 (0.02)	0.39 (0.01)	53.29	<.001	.012
Lack of positive encouragement ^f	3.40 (0.05)	2.26 (0.03)	353.55	<.001	.08
Poor parent-child relationship ^g	0.89 (0.06)	1.43 (0.03)	55.22	<.001	.012

Note: Score range. ^a4–24. ^b4–24. ^c0–15. ^d0–15. ^e0–3. ^f0–9. ^g0–15.

$\eta_p^2 = .01$ (small); $\eta_p^2 = .06$ (medium); and $\eta_p^2 = .138$ (large effect) (Cohen, 1988; Pallant, 2020).

*Estimated marginal means.

countries with prohibition in some settings. However, a total prohibition did not translate into more positive parenting in all its aspects, as parents from countries with a total ban reported using significantly more coercive parenting ($p < .001$) and less positive parenting strategies (e.g., praise and attending to positive behaviour) ($p < .001$) when compared to parents with a ban in some settings.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore country differences in parents' acceptability and use of corporal punishment, perception of parenting as a private concern, relationship with their child and parenting practices in an international sample of high-income countries. Germany and Spain banned corporal punishment in all contexts in 2000 and 2007, respectively, whereas the other countries had prohibited corporal punishment only in some contexts, such as alternative care settings (residential, foster and kinship care), day care and early childhood education, schools and penal institutions (See Table 2). In general, there was limited evidence of a link between the prohibition of corporal punishment and the presence of favourable parenting beliefs and practices. The two nations where corporal punishment is prohibited in all settings displayed contrasting trends. Parents from Germany reported the lowest levels of acceptability of corporal punishment, use of smacking and perception of parenting as a private matter compared with other countries, yet Spain (where corporal punishment is also banned) did not replicate the low levels of acceptability and use of corporal punishment reported by parents in Germany, and parents in Spain actually reported the highest incidence of coercive parenting, but a better relationship with their child in comparison with the other countries. The comparison of countries according to their progress toward a total ban of corporal punishment indicated that parents from Germany and Spain (where there is a total prohibition of corporal punishment) reported lower levels of acceptability of corporal punishment and the use of smacking when compared to the other countries (where there is a prohibition in some settings). However, parents from Germany and Spain were still using coercive parenting more often and some positive parenting strategies less often than the parents from the other countries. Recent Spanish data demonstrate ongoing acceptability of corporal punishment (Burns et al., 2021), suggesting that the earlier ban has not resulted in changes to attitudes. This can be potentially explained by the strong family values of Spanish families, which may place corporal punishment as an acceptable strategy to be used in the privacy of the home and away from potentially untrusted government and child safety authorities (Burns et al., 2021), as long as it is not affecting the quality of the parent–child relationship. Although a full prohibition of corporal punishment is one of several steps that countries can take toward ending violence against children (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021), our findings show that legislative bans in isolation may not be sufficient to reduce the use of coercive parenting and highlight the necessity to focus on aiding parents in fostering a caring and nurturing environment for raising their children, extending beyond mere legal bans.

In contrast, national representative surveys from Germany, a country with 20+ years of a total ban (Khachatryan et al., 2023), and Australia, where corporal punishment is still legal (Haslam et al., 2023), have compared older versus younger respondents indicating a shift in parents' attitudes and behaviour in younger generations. This may reflect changes in social norms of the population of these countries moving toward a gradual intergenerational reduction in the use of corporal punishment at the societal level. It is possible that legislative bans may be more effective in countries like this were attitudinal and parenting change may already be occurring independent of legal status. Furthermore, it would be important to consider parents' and general public's attitudes toward parenting and child rearing to design and implement public campaigns (Bussmann, 2004; Durrant, 1999; Fréchette & Romano, 2015; Radford

et al., 2012) to discourage the use of corporal punishment and promote positive parenting for parents and the wider community.

Nevertheless, Bussmann et al. (2010) identified that 64 per cent of parents from Germany believed that corporal punishment is used when parents do not know what else to do, being the highest percentage compared with other European countries included in their study (i.e., Sweden, Austria, Spain and France). These findings illustrate that in order to change societal child-raising practices, more comprehensive solutions are likely to be needed to support parents, which assist parents in developing the skills and competencies to provide a safe, responsive, nurturing environment for children. Thus, it is essential to provide opportunities for early intervention and parenting support and promote parents' engagement with such support (Afifi et al., 2022; Durrant, 1999; Havighurst et al., 2023; Van Geertsom, 2011).

Our study was not designed to disentangle the reasons for country differences, nor did we complete comprehensive assessments of the policy contexts present in these countries which might contribute to differences in attitudes, behaviours and parenting practices. For example, Belgium had the lowest use of coercive strategies in comparison with all other countries. It is possible that the implementation of national programmes tackling child poverty by including parental financial support and support services for parents have played an important role in providing better conditions for parents and their families (Van Geertsom, 2011). Comprehensive approaches to supporting families and communities promoted and supported by relevant government policies are essential in addition to a legal ban of corporal punishment.

To ensure children's right to safety from violence in the home, as in all settings, it is important to address not only legislative reform as a method of signalling the unacceptability of violent parenting (Havighurst et al., 2023), but address the underlying attitudes that sees it as an acceptable practice. A legal ban of corporal punishment in all settings may help to speed up the process of changing parents' and general public's attitudes by setting clear social norms about the right way to treat children as full agents of rights. It is important to address the full range of parenting skills and practices, and to avoid "spill over" from corporal punishment to similarly punitive and harmful coercive non-physical punishments (Lansford et al., 2014). Despite banning corporal punishment, and having lower acceptability in Germany, German parents' use of coercive parenting was higher than in Australia. Replacing physical violence with coercive parenting practices will not benefit children's well-being and development. It will be important to explore how countries, such as Belgium, where the use of coercion was low, were able to achieve this, and what can be learned from their experience.

4.1 | Limitations and future research

Given that the International Parenting Survey used a convenience sample, there was a potential risk of bias related to self-selection and it cannot be inferred that each country sample is representative of the whole population in that country. Future studies would expand the current evidence by conducting national representative surveys to monitor parents' beliefs and behaviours where corporal punishment is included within a broader ecological approach to parenting. Furthermore, all the participating countries were categorised as high-income and primarily individualistic—primarily representatives of western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic societies (Henrich et al., 2010). Although there is some research providing further information about corporal punishment in low- to middle-income countries (Cuartas, 2021), parenting variables have not been covered sufficiently in the corporal punishment literature yet. Thus, future research should explore parents' beliefs and behaviours related to corporal punishment, relationship with their children and parenting practices in low- to middle-income countries.

The questionnaires in this study asked parents directly about their acceptability of corporal punishment and the use of smacking and other coercive parenting strategies. Previous studies have used strategies to reduce social desirability, such as including measures of social desirability as a control (Vanderfaellie et al., 2023), using vignettes (Burns et al., 2021) and asking what behaviours are acceptable in their communities (Wadji et al., 2023). Thus, it is possible that this study's questionnaires might have resulted in underreporting of corporal punishment and coercive parenting due to participants' potential inclination to provide socially desirable responses (Vanderfaellie et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to think about different ways to ask parents these “hard” questions to gather responses about their daily interaction with their children, and to evaluate the implications of these different approaches for prevalence, intervention and public policy studies; and ultimately to progress toward a total ban of corporal punishment. Furthermore, there is a call for action to develop an international consensus about the best practices to evaluate a country's progress toward a total ban and systematically include any other policy and public health measures that effectively complement this legal action. Parents' beliefs and behaviours need to be part of this continuous monitoring to make sure that any legal change also translates into changes to culture and values regarding parenting and children's right to a childhood free of either violence or coercion.

5 | CONCLUSION

The overall conclusion from our analysis is legislative bans on corporal punishment do not automatically translate into consistent use of positive parenting practices if implemented on their own. Changing legislation is only part of the story. Rather, changing attitudes, knowledge of alternative practices and skill and confidence to use nonviolent, emotionally attuned parenting is also needed. This may serve to both reduce corporal punishment and enhance the effectiveness of bans. We need to learn from the variability in parenting practices in those countries where bans have been put in place, and yet have high endorsement of practices such as coercive parenting, and lack of positive encouragement. Conversely, we need to look at countries where bans have not yet been implemented but have more positive parenting practices to understand the cultural norms, and/or parent education and supports that might be in place to contribute to this.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Carolina Gonzalez: Conceptualisation (equal); data curation (lead); formal analysis (lead); investigation (lead); methodology (lead); project administration (lead); software (lead); visualisation (lead); writing—original draft preparation (lead); writing—review and editing (equal). **Alina Morawska:** Conceptualisation (equal); investigation (supporting); methodology (supporting); writing—review and editing (equal). **Daryl J. Higgins:** Conceptualisation (equal); methodology (supporting); writing—review and editing (equal). **Divna M. Haslam:** Conceptualisation (equal); investigation (supporting); methodology (supporting); writing—review and editing (equal).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for this study. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the International Parenting Survey Project Committee, upon reasonable request. Contact details: Associate Professor Alina Morawska, alina@psy.uq.edu.au.

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A/Prof Alina Morawska is the director of the Parenting and Family Support Centre, The University of Queensland. She is passionate about creating a world where children develop the skills, competencies and confidence to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world. Her research focuses on the central role of parents in influencing all aspects of children's development, and parenting interventions as a way of understanding healthy development and a tool for the prevention and early intervention in lifelong health and well-being.

Professor Daryl J. Higgins is the director of the Institute of Child Protection Studies at Australian Catholic University. For 30 years, he has been researching child abuse prevalence, impacts and prevention; public health approaches to protecting children; child-safe organisational strategies; and approaches to promoting child and family welfare. He was a chief investigator on the first national study of the prevalence in Australia of child abuse and neglect, and its health outcomes—the Australian Child Maltreatment Study.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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