



***Physical Punishment of Children in the Culture and Conduct  
of Fatherhood: The Experiences of Three Generations  
of Fathers***

***Kary fizyczne wobec dzieci w kulturze i praktykach ojcostwa –  
doświadczenia trzech pokoleń ojców***

**ABSTRACT**


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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of this article is to examine physical punishment in the context of the culture and practices of fatherhood, presenting both continuity and intergenerational change.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The research problem is, how in the experiences of fathers belonging to three generations of the same family line (grandfather, father, son) is situated the physical violence experienced from their own fathers and used against their children. The data presented is a part of a broader project using qualitative methods and three research techniques: problem-focused interviews, photo-assisted interviews, and interviews based on family maps.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The introduction presents fatherhood as a variable social phenomenon, currently taking two basic forms – traditional fatherhood and new fatherhood. These models also differ in their approaches to violence understood as a disciplinary physical punishment. These differences are illustrated with examples from research on fatherhood from an intergenerational perspective.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The analysis illustrated the similarities and differences in cultures and practices of fatherhood relating to physical punishment among representatives of three generations of fathers. It revealed elements of continuity and intergenerational change.

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**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:** The research leads to the conclusion that education on physical punishment of children is justified. This should be the basis for activities that encourage fathers to reflect on their role and relationship with their children (educational projects, media discourse).

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→ **KEYWORDS:** **FATHERHOOD, VIOLENCE, PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT, MASCULINITY, INTERGENERATIONALITY**

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## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem artykułu jest ujęcie kar fizycznych w kontekście kultury i praktyk ojcostwa prezentujących zarówno ciągłość, jak i zmianę międzypokoleniową.

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**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Problemem badawczym jest to, jak w doświadczeniach ojców należących do trzech pokoleń tych samych linii rodzinnych (dziadek, ojciec, syn) sytuuje się przemoc fizyczna doznawana ze strony własnych ojców oraz stosowana wobec swoich dzieci. Prezentowane dane stanowią część szerszego projektu wykorzystującego metodę jakościową i trzy techniki badawcze: wywiad skoncentrowany na problemie, wywiad wspomagany fotografią oraz wywiad wokół tworzonych map rodziny.

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**PROCES WYWODU:** Wprowadzeniem jest prezentacja ojcostwa jako zmiennego zjawiska społecznego, przybierającego obecnie dwie zasadnicze formy – ojcostwa tradycyjnego i ojcostwa nowego. Modele te różnią się od siebie także kwestią podejścia do przemocy ujmowanej jako dyscyplinujące kary fizyczne. Te różnice zilustrowane są przykładami z badań ojcostwa w perspektywie międzypokoleniowej.

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**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Analiza dostarczyła ilustracji podobieństw i różnic kultur i praktyk ojcostwa odnoszących się do kar fizycznych u przedstawicieli trzech pokoleń ojców. Ukazała elementy ciągłości oraz zmiany międzypokoleniowej.

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**WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ:** Z badań można wyciągnąć wniosek o zasadności edukacji na temat kar fizycznych wobec dzieci. Powinno to być podstawą działań wzbudzających refleksyjność u ojców na temat ich roli i relacji z dziećmi (projektów edukacyjnych, dyskursów medialnych).

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→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** OJCOSTWO, PRZEMOC, KARY FIZYCZNE, MĘSKOŚĆ, MIĘDZYPOKOLENIOWOŚĆ

## Introduction – Fatherhood, Masculinity, Violence

Fatherhood in contemporary research is most often understood as a time-bound social construct, which means that: “it should be viewed as a social role and a socio-historical institution, and should be understood as a set of norms that men should adhere to when they become fathers or are about to become fathers” (LaRossa, 1997, p. 10). It can be analysed in the context of the division between “fatherhood culture” and “fatherhood practices” (LaRossa, 1988). Fatherhood culture is a set of ideas, norms and values, as well as expectations of what a father should be like. Practices refer to the actual actions of fathers – what they do in their relationships with their children and family. Change in the culture of fatherhood often precedes change in fatherhood practices – society is quicker to create new models of fatherhood than to implement them. However, fatherhood in both areas is currently undergoing a transformation, manifested primarily in the fact that

the traditional role of the father as the breadwinner is being replaced by more diverse forms of participation in family life, which include involvement in the care and upbringing of children. The patriarchal model is giving way to models such as new fatherhood (Wall & Arnold, 2007), involved fatherhood (Lamb, 2010) and active fatherhood (Švab & Humer, 2013). All of them emphasise the participation of fathers in the everyday lives of their children. These processes are closely linked to changes in the social system of gender roles – we cannot fully understand how men engage in parenting without considering changes in models of masculinity (Suwada, 2017; Błasiak & Żurek, 2025). Non-traditional patterns of fatherhood are one of the key elements of caring masculinity (Hanlon, 2012; Elliott, 2016), which reject the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). The main features of this type of masculinity are: renunciation of dominance, emphasis on relational and affective characteristics of care, and a departure from traditional masculine values that generate the model of the breadwinner and head of the family. A father who creates his role based on these assumptions is not only supposed to be involved in his child's life, but to do so on the basis of tolerance, patience and empathy. Contemporary fathers are influenced by both models – traditional and modern fatherhood – which may result in the emergence of the so-called “new male mystique.” This phenomenon refers to conflicting socio-cultural expectations of men who feel that they should be both involved and affectionate fathers and, at the same time, the main breadwinners of the family, fulfilling the norms of traditional masculinity (Aumann et al., 2011).

The impact of both models can be observed in relation to the issue of fathers using physical violence against children. In the parental context, it most often takes the form of physical punishment, which is intended to correct or control behaviour. Although the use of violence in these cases is only a means to achieve an educational goal, the fact that these punishments are inherently associated with inflicting pain means that they should be seen as one dimension of physical violence and not as a separate phenomenon (Wójcik, 2012). Physical punishment is still a subject of debate, both in academia and in everyday life. Representatives of the conservative model express their conviction about the legitimacy and effectiveness of its use, which is a result of views that have prevailed for centuries, based on the perception of parental tasks as educating and maintaining discipline and obedience in children (Sikora, 2009). However, the prevailing view now is that it constitutes violence, harms children and violates fundamental human rights (Halemba & Izdebska, 2009).

The use of physical punishment has traditionally been associated in many cultures with so-called parental discipline, and especially with the patriarchal model of fatherhood (Breger et al., 2019). Patriarchy, literally meaning “rule of the father,” generated such relationships within the family in which the father is the strict and final authority for discipline and punishment. Research indicates that fathers use “spanking” more often than mothers, and more often justify the use of physical punishment on the grounds of its effectiveness, necessity and the good of the child (Makaruk & Drabarek, 2022). The use of corporal punishment by fathers, especially towards sons, can be situated within the framework of cultural masculinity in a hegemonic sense – as a way of demonstrating

and shaping masculinity (Connell, 1995). This type of masculinity, which includes elements such as unemotionality, toughness and resilience, corresponds to the patriarchal image of a caring mother and a punishing, authoritarian father. Various types of physical violence by fathers can be interpreted through references to masculinity. Brian Heilman and Gary Barker (2018) refer to the issue of masculinity in studies on violence against children, pointing to the importance of gender norms, and in particular the view that boys should be raised strictly to grow up to be “real men.” Other researchers also link the use of corporal punishment to attitudes towards the social construct of masculinity, arguing that fathers who are attached to hegemonic masculinity norms are less involved in expressive parenting and more likely to use harsh discipline with their children (Petts et al., 2018). Research also covers issues of intergenerational transmission of violence, showing that children who experience domestic violence are more likely to commit it in adulthood (Heilman & Barker, 2018). Despite this correlation, young fathers largely have a different approach to punishing children than older generations. This is influenced, among other things, by research findings indicating that parental violence, even when perceived as correcting undesirable behaviour, is harmful to children’s cognitive development and social functioning (Ward et al., 2025). This corresponds to the patterns of new fatherhood, which is supposed to be present, reflective and non-violent.

## Research Method

The data presented in this article comes from the research project “Comparing three generations of fathers in Poland and Germany: continuity and change in fatherhood practices”.<sup>1</sup> Its main objective is to identify the differences and similarities between the cultures and practices of fatherhood in Germany and Poland from an intergenerational perspective. The research is qualitative in nature – it consists of individual interviews with fathers belonging to three generations of the same family lines – grandfathers, fathers and sons (who also already have children). Each conversation consists of three parts – a problem-focused interview (Witzel & Reiter, 2012), an interview using photographs (Collier & Collier, 1986) and an interview based on family maps (Levin, 1993). In the problem-focused interview, the narrative is elicited by asking the interviewee to describe the history of his fatherhood. For the purposes of this article, only Polish research was used – thirty interviews with representatives of ten family lines. The interviewees were men living in various locations – both in large and small towns and in villages. The grandfather generation consists of men born in the 1930s and 1940s, the father generation in the 1960s and 1970s, and the son generation in the 1990s. Their statements coded as “physical punishment suffered” and “physical punishment used” were used for the analysis. Each of the respondents was the father, but to distinguish between

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<sup>1</sup> The project, planned for 2024–2027, is being carried out by researchers from the University of Wrocław and the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (Munich).

generations and at the same time indicate the belonging of the three respondents to one family line, the following designations were used: G (grandfather – oldest generation), F (father – middle generation), S (son – youngest generation) plus family line number.

## Research Results

### Grandfathers

The childhood of the men belonging to the oldest generation studied coincided with World War II and the early post-war years. The respondents described their fathers as “strict,” which mainly referred to punishments for various types of misdemeanours. In the case of the authors of the following statements, the first situation concerned punishment for smoking cigarettes, the second for grimacing during a meal.

He slaps me in the face a second time. (...). I'm covered in blood, my whole shirt is bloody (G2).

Sir, when my father caught me, his mother, my grandmother, tore me out of his hands, sir, because he was torturing me terribly (G3).

The descriptions of the punishments experienced were characterised by strongly emotional terms. One of the men, describing the necessity of standing in a given position for a long time as a consequence of a misdemeanour, used the phrase “backbreaking labour.” The statements of the respondents mentioned objects used for punishment – a belt, a whip.

The whip had, ma'am... [...]. Straps, straps. At the end, there were also little balls. And every beating, one... when I was beaten, they cut off one strap. I wasn't exactly a saint [...] (G7).

When talking about the physical punishment they experienced, the men tried to explain and justify their fathers' actions. They rationalised these situations by referring to external circumstances, such as having many children, being overworked, and the stress associated with difficult living conditions. They treated physical punishment as part of the upbringing process. Sometimes they also blamed themselves for provoking punishment through inappropriate behaviour.

I never resented my father for this, because I understood... Children who are not brought up, when there are no strict rules... and they need this upbringing, end up in prison. [...] So there must be some strictness (G10).

And my father, in his anger, hit me in the face until I bled [...] but it was... it was a lesson (G2).

Men from the oldest generation devoted little space in their narratives to the issue of physical punishment of their children. When asked about it, they presented three categories

of statements. Several of them claimed that they did not remember ever practising this type of punishment. Others admitted that such situations had occurred in their fatherhood, but pointed out that they were rare. A few others declared that they did not hit their children. Those who mentioned the use of punishment spoke of “spanking” or using a belt. This is illustrated by the following statement, whose author felt that it was an effective parenting technique (forcing a confession of guilt as a lesson in truthfulness) and recalled one such situation with amusement.

He says, “No, no, no, I’m not lying”. I say: “Lie down, when you get it, maybe you’ll remember.” He got it once. I say: “Do you remember now?” “No, no, no.” He got a second slap with the belt. Then he got a third slap, and the third time he remembered [laughter] (G10).

Men who admitted to using corporal punishment downplayed its significance, saying, for example, “*well, it could happen*” (G1) or “*oh, just a little bit, with a belt...*” (G6). It was not a topic they wanted to explore or discuss in depth.

## Fathers

Representatives of the middle generation spoke of the violence they experienced as common in their childhood. It included beating with a hand, a belt or a cable. The interviewees rationalised these situations by referring to the prevailing norms of acceptance of physical punishment at the time.

Well, I mean, corporal punishment, we did it, yes, those were different times [...] a belt, you got hit with a belt, well, it was accepted back then and you didn’t deny that your arse, excuse my language, was all bruised (F6).

In several cases, there was a clear discrepancy between the accounts of interviewees from this generation and the narratives of their fathers. For example, one grandfather declared that he did not use punishment, while his son recalled being beaten with a belt. He did not deny the legitimacy of the practice of punishment itself, but rather its ceremonial form and injustice (he was punished for being late, which was beyond his control).

I didn’t punish my children, God forbid, no (G2).

My father used a belt on me several times. [...] it was just a form of child-rearing in the countryside [...]. And I resent him for that, because he carried out a sentence which... And the sentence was that you had to bring a stool, bend over, lean over (F2).

Another grandfather, when asked about the use of punishment, also stated that he did not use any, while his son recalled physical punishment related to problems with schoolwork.

There was no need. Thank God they were so obedient, sir, they did what they were told. I didn’t need to punish them, sir (G3).

When I had problems with reading, I got a beating with a cable, no. So... that was how we were brought up... (F3).

The above statement is one of several presenting a discourse that normalises violence, treating it as an obvious method of upbringing. One of the men, referring to the punishments he received from his father, clearly internalised his father's message, using the phrase: "I deserved it." Another man also interpreted being beaten with a belt for failing at school as "deserved." In his statement, as in two others, the issue of using certain defence strategies – protecting the body from expected blows – was raised.

Of course, for school, definitely... definitely for school, what else, I don't remember. But it was... it was... I don't think it was wrong. It was deserved. However, I was already cunning later on, because when I knew that something was coming, I would put on four pairs of shorts (F7).

Representatives of the middle generation admitted that they also used physical punishment on their children. They shared with their fathers an emphasis on the rarity and exceptional nature of these practices, but their emotional approach to these experiences differed. While the older generation downplayed the significance of violent situations, in their case it was "beating with remorse." Some saw it as an unpleasant necessity – one of the men treated physical punishment as part of his role as a father, but did not feel comfortable with it, finding it emotionally burdensome. Another interpreted beating children as an expression of powerlessness.

I told him that once. That what you got from me, those two or three times, don't think it just rolled off me, because it... I just sat there, didn't talk to my wife for half the evening at all [...]. Yes, the emotions, that I had to... (F7).

And I also used the belt on G., definitely, and on my daughter, and I regret it [...]. It only made him hate me more. Nothing else. But I felt powerless and so I did it. I regret that (F2).

The respondents explained their practices by the specific nature of the times. They were aware that views on corporal punishment had changed and did not deny the validity of these changes. Several of them changed their approach to these practices during their fatherhood – they punished their first children with beatings, but did not use such punishments with their youngest children. They were also aware of the importance of intergenerational transmission – one of the respondents explained that in a situation of helplessness, repeating the actions used by his father, i.e. corporal punishment, was the simplest response to his son's unacceptable behaviour.

Well, we argued, I was able to raise my hand to M., so it was like... those were the times when I wasn't aware that it was better not to do that, no, so I was able to slap M (F5).

[...] as if I couldn't think of how I should react, so I repeated what my father did, I think, who did it to me maybe two or three times in my life, he just spanked me. With all the ceremony,

bend over and you'll get it in the bum [...]. Stupid, but repeating a certain pattern [...]. In the case of my younger son, I never hit him (F4).

Another man, referring to the differences between himself and his father, said that he really did not want to repeat the ritual of punishment he knew from his childhood, which followed some time after the "offence." He admitted that he beat his children himself, but unlike his childhood experiences, he perceived it as a more appropriate punishment, as it was not administered "coldly" but situationally, in the heat of the moment.

## Sons

In the case of the youngest generation, there was also a discrepancy between their experiences and their fathers' statements. The most drastic difference occurred in one family, where the father admitted that he sometimes "raised his hand" and "slapped" his son during arguments, while the son recalled much more frequent and brutal situations.

I was beaten blindly with a belt, not with a belt, on the head, clothes hangers were broken on me, I was beaten with fists, so that I had bruises (S5).

As in the case of the older generation, those who were beaten rationalised it and tried to explain their fathers' behaviour. The author of the above statement referred to his father's young age, who, in his opinion, was not prepared for parenthood, and to his hot-tempered nature. Others saw themselves as giving reasons for being punished.

However, I also remember that after parent-teacher conferences, sometimes as soon as a parent came home, there would be a beating without any questions asked [...]. And, as I said, I wasn't exactly an angel, so if I had accumulated enough misdemeanours over a month, I knew what was coming (S8).

Respondents whose childhood fell at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, like their fathers, sometimes treated physical punishment as something that was normalised at the time, seen as an obvious part of the relationship between parents and children. In several cases, "traditional" objects for beating – belts – were still used.

Regarding their own children, some representatives of the youngest generation clearly stated that they did not use physical punishment. Sometimes this was due to internalised patterns of new fatherhood and the belief that it should be based on partnership, communication and empathy. In the case of the author of the following statement, this was combined with a desire to avoid repeating the practices used by his own father.

I know I'll be different from my father because I'll simply listen to her more, I'll be less self-centred than my dad was, and I'll definitely focus more on this child, on talking to her [...], because I'll never, ever scold her, oh. Even emotionally, like: "But what have you done!", I won't do anything like that (S6).

However, some men were convinced of the effectiveness of “spanking” or even beating with objects when unable to control the child. They tried to present such situations they had experienced as necessary strategies, although sometimes they cost them a lot of emotion.

Well, you know, you know that there is a certain... there comes a point when the child is out of control, throwing things, destroying things, making holes in the walls, so you know that when you have to use a slipper or a belt, well... it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, you know, well, the child is offended by you, you are angry, but deep down you love that child and probably after 15 minutes you will come and say, “Oh, I love you so much” (S7).

A characteristic feature of the respondents was that they were more reflective than their fathers and grandfathers about punishing children, both in cases of rejecting these practices and accepting them. The author of the statement quoted below, admitting that he had hit his daughter several times, reflected on the mechanism of intergenerational pattern replication.

I have these primal instincts that lead me to simply use these innate, quickest solutions without thinking [...]. Because I know these methods, they were used on me, and whether I think they worked, I don't know, well, I grew up to be a human being. Would I have grown up to be a better person if I hadn't been beaten with a belt? Maybe, I don't know (S5).

This interviewee's reflections contain references to a defence strategy sometimes used by perpetrators of violence – the argument that they themselves, although they suffered violence, grew up to be “decent people.” In this case, the man took this aspect into account, but approached it quite reflectively, with thoughtfulness rather than stereotypical certainty.

## Summary

Paternal violence was present in the experiences of representatives of each of the generations studied – both suffered and perpetrated. In the case of grandparents, it stemmed from several sources – social norms regarding fatherhood, models of family life and child-parent relationships, as well as general external living conditions. The dominant norms at the time were patriarchal in nature – the father was usually the final authority in matters of discipline, children were not treated as individuals, and family relationships were often more instrumental than emotional. When talking about their fatherhood, the grandparents did not devote much attention to the physical punishment they used; it was not an area of reflection for them. In the case of the middle generation, the influence of anti-patriarchal ideas and changes in family positions and roles is already evident. They used corporal punishment, but now interpreted it either as a weakness or something that was emotionally difficult for them. For some, beating children was problematic even while they were practising it, while others only began to consider it inappropriate years

later. In the statements of the sons' generation, the influence of the idea of new fatherhood is clear, but this does not mean that they never used physical punishment on their children. Sometimes they felt that, "whether they wanted to or not," they were repeating patterns familiar from their childhood. Some of them were unequivocally convinced of the harmfulness of physical punishment and did not use it. Others, on the other hand, believed that it was sometimes necessary. What united the respondents from all three generations was their justification of their fathers' use of violence against them. The cultures and practices of fatherhood represented by the respondents illustrate both their continuity and change. Successive generations change their approach to physical punishment, but they also feel the influence of the models they knew from their childhood. Among the youngest respondents, the patterns of new fatherhood are visible primarily in the reflection on the role of the father, which, however, due to the continuation of certain intergenerational practices, does not always result in a complete rejection of the use of physical punishment against children.

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