

The Effectiveness of Corporal Punishment in Malaysian Public Schools in Addressing Bullying and Pornography Addiction: A Psychological Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100041>

Received: 04 January 2026; Accepted: 09 January 2026; Published: 20 January 2026

ABSTRACT

Corporal punishment (CP) remains a legally sanctioned disciplinary practice in Malaysian public schools despite increasing global concern regarding its psychological, developmental, and ethical implications. Its continued use is frequently justified as a means of addressing serious adolescent misconduct, including bullying and problematic pornography use (PPU), both of which are rising in prevalence and are increasingly recognised as behaviours associated with emotional dysregulation, neurodevelopmental vulnerability, and psychosocial stressors. This narrative review examines the psychiatric and psychological evidence regarding the effectiveness of corporal punishment in addressing bullying behaviour and pornography-related misconduct among adolescents in Malaysian public secondary schools, within the context of existing legal frameworks and cultural norms. A review of international and Malaysian literature was conducted, drawing on findings from meta-analyses, neurodevelopmental research, and school-based mental health studies focusing on corporal punishment, adolescent internalizing and externalizing behaviors, bullying, and problematic pornography use. The reviewed evidence indicates limited support for corporal punishment as an effective strategy for sustained behaviour modification. While CP may be associated with short-term behavioural compliance, it is consistently linked to adverse psychological outcomes, including increased aggression, anxiety, emotional distress, impaired emotional regulation, and deterioration of student-teacher relationships. Neurodevelopmental evidence suggests that exposure to stress-based disciplinary practices during adolescence may adversely affect executive functioning and self-regulatory capacity. Furthermore, CP appears to reinforce shame-aggression cycles that are implicated in both bullying behaviours and maladaptive coping strategies such as problematic pornography use. Overall, current evidence suggests that corporal punishment has limited effectiveness in addressing complex adolescent behavioural issues and may contribute to unintended psychological harm. These findings highlight the importance of re-evaluating school disciplinary practices in Malaysia and considering the integration of psychologically informed, evidence-based, and restorative approaches to support adolescent mental health and behavioural regulation.

Keywords: corporal punishment; bullying; problematic pornography use; adolescence; school discipline; mental health

INTRODUCTION

The role of corporal punishment (CP) within educational institutions globally has become a central point of discussion, particularly concerning its effectiveness and ethical implications in managing discipline and behaviours of students. Corporal punishment is defined as any punishment utilising physical force intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. This typically includes actions such as hitting children with a hand or an implement, slapping, pinching, kicking, or forcing uncomfortable positions (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). The legal and moral debate surrounding CP zooms on its supposed effectiveness versus the psychological and physical harm it may inflict on school children.

Legal Status and Policy Framework in Malaysia

In Malaysia, this debate is highly relevant as CP remains a legal disciplinary tool in public schools. The current legal framework governing school discipline is rooted in the Education (School Discipline) Regulations 1959.

Under current guidelines, the administration of CP is highly regulated, permitted solely for male students, and limited to blows with a light cane on the palm or on the buttocks over clothes, administered in private by the school principal or an authorized staff member. Conversely, Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) explicitly forbids any form of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of children, a provision that many international legal bodies interpret as encompassing all forms of corporal punishment (CP), regardless of its severity. Despite being a CRC signatory, Malaysia's reservation towards Article 37 enables the practice to continue legally in public schools in the nation (Balasingam, Mohamad Nor, & Ahmad Shah, 2019).

Societal Attitudes and Current Climate

This retention of a punitive legal structure is underpinned by deep-seated societal norms. Data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) reveals that 60% of Malaysian parents believe physical punishment is necessary to raise a child properly, with nearly 55% actively practicing it at home (Chan et al., 2022). Furthermore, reliance on CP persists due to systemic challenges within the education system, such as a reported shortage of school counselors, which is estimated at a disproportionate ratio of 500 students to one counselor. This reliance is increasingly juxtaposed against a disturbing rise in complex behavioral issues that CP is authorized to address (Ooi, Wan Jaafar, & Baba, 2015).

Rising Trends in Bullying and Pornography-Related Misconduct

Escalating prevalence of these issues in Malaysian schools necessitates effective intervention strategies. Incidents of school violence and bullying have seen a continuous climb, with the Ministry of Education recording 7,681 bullying cases in 2024, representing a 17% increase from 6,528 cases in the preceding year (The Straits Times, 2025). This includes not only physical and verbal aggression but also the rapidly emerging problem of cyberbullying, an area where Malaysia ranked second in Asia in 2020 (UNICEF, 2020). Simultaneously, the issue of pornography consumption and addiction has intensified, particularly within Generation Z (aged 11 to 22), who are identified as being at the highest risk due to pervasive accessibility via digital platforms (Rahman, Tengku Razak, Mohmud, Harun, Tukiran, Hashim, & Rasit, 2022).

Problematic pornography use is a critical concern, given adolescents' physiological vulnerability, including surges in sex hormones and the varied ability of the pre-frontal cortex (PFC) to self-regulate behavior (Brown & Wisco, 2019).

Rationale And Objectives of The Review

The gap between the traditional, legally sanctioned approach and the complex psychological nature of adolescent misconduct highlights a critical need for evidence-based evaluation of the application of CP in schools. Malaysia is underserved by psychiatric-focused research in regards to it. This review focuses on public schools governed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, with emphasis on secondary institutions. By examining psychological evidence and Malaysian cultural context, this review aims to evaluate whether corporal punishment is a psychologically effective approach to addressing bullying and pornography addiction among Malaysian adolescents.

Specifically, this review aims (1) to evaluate the psychiatric effectiveness of corporal punishment in addressing the behavioral manifestations of bullying and pornography addiction in Malaysian public schools, and (2) to identify critical research gaps and propose psychologically informed alternatives that promote positive discipline and mental wellness.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Corporal Punishment in Malaysian Schools

Corporal punishment in Malaysian schools is acknowledged as a key form of disciplinary action aimed at managing student misbehavior. The purpose of administering CP is explicitly to enforce rules and assert power and dominance within the school structure. For very serious violations such as bullying or distributing

pornography, a student may receive up to three strokes of a light cane on the clothed buttocks, with the list of punishable offenses determined by the principal.

Corporal punishment in Malaysian public schools is governed by the Education (School Discipline) Regulations 1959 and the Ministry of Education (MOE) Circular 2003. The regulations empower the head teacher to oversee school discipline, prohibit CP for female students, and limit male students to light caning on the palm or clothed buttocks. Caning must be administered privately by the principal or an authorized staff member and is intended solely as a disciplinary measure, not to cause physical or psychological harm. (Balasingam, Mohamad Nor, & Ahmad Shah, 2019)

Malaysian regulations attempt to position corporal punishment (CP) as a measured disciplinary act that avoids "physical or mental pain," according to the Ministry Circular No 7 of 2003 para 3.

However, research by Durrant, J.E (2008) indicates that distinguishing between discipline and abuse is practically difficult. International bodies such as UNCRC define CP as any use of force intended to cause pain, however light. Psychological studies and meta-analyses consistently show that even "ordinary" CP such as spanking is ineffective, increases the risk of escalating to abuse, and leads to negative behavioral and emotional outcomes in children (Larzelere, Gunnoe, Pritsker, & Ferguson, 2024). Consequently, the global consensus considers CP as a detrimental management strategy.

Psychological And Psychiatric Theory

Internalizing and Externalizing Disorders

Adolescent psychopathology typically manifests as internalising disorders (inward: anxiety, depression, isolation) or externalizing disorders (outward: aggression, bullying, defiance). Problems like bullying and Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) which often involve a mix of shame (internalising) and aggression (externalizing) stem from these underlying issues.

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that Corporal Punishment (CP) exacerbates both internalizing and externalizing behaviors rather than mitigating them.

Neurodevelopmental Vulnerability

Adolescence is characterized by a developmental imbalance: the limbic system, responsible for impulse and emotion, matures early, whereas the prefrontal cortex (PFC), responsible for executive function and self-control, does not fully mature until early adulthood (Casey et al., 2008). CP acts as an acute stressor, activating the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis and increasing cortisol levels. Chronic exposure can alter brain structure, particularly by reducing grey matter volume (Tomoda et al., 2009). Thus creating a paradox: CP impairs the brain's ability to regulate the impulsive behaviors it seeks to correct, such as bullying and PPU.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three major theoretical frameworks help explain how behaviors like bullying and PPU develop and how CP may interact with these phenomena:

Social Learning Theory (SLT): Meta-analytic reviews show that CP models violence as a solution to conflict, directly contributing to the "Violent Behavior Spectrum" (VBS) in adolescents. By observing authority figures use physical force, students internalize aggression as a legitimate tool for social dominance, which perpetuates cycles of peer bullying and externalizing behaviors (Ouyang et al., 2024; Neaverson et al., 2022).

Attachment Theory: In the educational context, teachers function as critical "secondary attachment figures" who provide a secure base to students. The administration of CP introduces fear into this dynamic, dismantling the trust needed for healthy student-teacher relationships. This erosion of attachment security fosters an environment of isolation and secrecy, creating the precise conditions under which maladaptive coping behaviors, such as PPU, are likely to thrive (Verschueren & Koomen, 2021; Neaverson et al., 2022).

Behavioral Addiction Models: Research identifies Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) as a primary maladaptive coping mechanism for emotional dysregulation. Due to neurodevelopmental imbalances, adolescents may turn to compulsive pornography consumption to manage distress, loneliness, or stress. Recent studies indicate that this reliance on digital escapism can rapidly escalate into tolerance and withdrawal symptoms, mirroring substance dependence patterns (Cardoso et al., 2022; Grubbs et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Link Between Bullying Behaviour and Pornography Addiction and The Relevance of CP

The co-occurrence of bullying behaviour and problematic pornography addiction in adolescents suggests shared psychiatric pathways and vulnerabilities, which are critical when evaluating punitive interventions like CP.

Bullying and Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) are interconnected through shared psychiatric pathways, primarily involving trauma and emotional dysregulation. Both function as maladaptive coping mechanisms for distress; adolescents may utilize pornography to self-soothe emotional turmoil, while others engage in bullying to externalize frustration. A critical link is low empathy, a trait strongly associated with heavy pornography consumption. Recent research confirms that adolescents with high pornography use are significantly more likely to perpetrate interpersonal aggression and sexual harassment, driven by these underlying deficits in emotional regulation (Chiclana-Actis et al., 2025; Estévez et al., 2021).

Pornography influences adolescent behavior by normalizing aggression and sexual violence. Exposure to violent content desensitizes youths, fostering the belief that aggression is a normal component of sexual relationships. Consequently, high consumption correlates with increased perpetration of sexual coercion and sexualized bullying, as adolescents adopt scripts where consent is disregarded (Chiclana-Actis et al., 2025; Mestre-Bach et al., 2025).

Another critical link between bullying and Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) is the shame-aggression cycle. Adolescents engaging in PPU frequently experience profound moral incongruence of the distress caused by the conflict between their pornography consumption and their internal values (Grubbs et al., 2022). This shame can trigger a maladaptive "fight" response, where internal distress is externalized as aggression to shield the self from humiliation. This cycle is exacerbated by social isolation as adolescents turn to pornography to cope with loneliness, they withdraw further from peers, reinforcing the feedback loop of addiction and maladaptive coping. This externalized aggression often manifests as bullying behaviors, where adolescents "act out" to regain a sense of dominance and control over their emotional turmoil (Chiclana-Actis et al., 2025; Estévez et al., 2021).

Corporal punishment (CP) actively exacerbates the shame-aggression cycle by deepening adolescent humiliation and distress. Instead of addressing the root causes of bullying or PPU, CP serves as a model for violence, reinforcing a mentality in which force is valued over emotional regulation. Research shows that CP is counterproductive; rather than curbing misconduct, it increases risks of anxiety, depression, and further aggression, perpetuating a cycle of harm rather than a solution. (Gershoff, 2013).

School Mental Health Systems and Structural Gaps (Malaysia)

In Malaysia, schools serve as the primary avenue for student mental health support, yet critical infrastructure gaps undermine effectiveness. Although secondary schools are mandated to employ full-time counselors, these professionals often face capacity limitations and role conflict in balancing support with disciplinary duties. Furthermore, teachers in Malaysia demonstrate insufficient mental health literacy (MHL), with recent data indicating an average MHL score of only 73.03% (Siti Aishah et al., 2023). This knowledge gap frequently leads to the misinterpretation of mental health struggles as behavioral misconduct, delaying necessary intervention. Recognising these deficits, the National Strategic Plan for Mental Health 2020–2025 has prioritised enhanced teacher training in psychological first aid and early identification to bridge this competency gap (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). Structural barriers, including rural inaccessibility, deep-seated stigma, and complex referral protocols, necessitate urgent systemic reform to ensure equitable care.

International And Comparative Perspectives

Comparative analysis highlights both regional risks and opportunities for Malaysia. In Southeast Asia, cyberbullying and online exploitation have surged. While Malaysia relies on legislative frameworks like the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017, neighboring countries offer models for proactive intervention. For instance, Vietnam has implemented a comprehensive National Programme on Child Online Protection (2021–2025), which integrates school-based digital safety education with national policy, offering a blueprint for a more holistic approach to digital safety (Government of Vietnam, 2021).

Globally, evidence supports shifting away from corporal punishment toward evidence-based behavioral management. Interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are proven effective alternatives. In Malaysia, the **STAR program** (a school-based CBT module) has shown significant success in reducing depressive symptoms among adolescents, validating the efficacy of non-punitive approaches in local contexts (Saw et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

This review critically evaluated the role of corporal punishment (CP) in Malaysian schools, revealing a profound disconnect between current disciplinary practices and the psychiatric needs of adolescents facing bullying and pornography addiction.

Immediate Compliance Vs. Long-Term Psychopathology

Although corporal punishment (CP) may secure immediate compliance, recent evidence confirms it is fundamentally counterproductive for behavior modification (Heilmann et al., 2021). Short-term obedience is often achieved at the expense of psychological well-being. It manifests as heightened anxiety and the adoption of survival strategies that suppress cognitive development. Long-term, CP acts as a predictor for increased externalizing behaviors and aggression rather than improvement (Ouyang et al., 2024). Consequently, the continued reliance on the Education (School Discipline) Regulations 1959 prioritizes momentary order while risking lasting psychological scarring and maladaptive development.

Cultural Considerations and Public Perception

The persistence of corporal punishment (CP) is deeply entrenched in Malaysian social norms, with 60% of parents deeming physical punishment necessary for child-rearing (Chan et al., 2022). This belief conflicts with contemporary psychological consensus and CRC standards advocating non-violent discipline. To dismantle this support, the public must be educated on the detrimental child outcomes, including impaired social-emotional development and increased violence that CP imposes (Cuartas et al., 2025; Heilmann et al., 2021). Hence, a move to legally prohibit CP is not only necessary for child protection but also serves as a critical educational tool to shift societal norms and re-educate public perspectives.

Evidence-Based Alternatives and Policy Implications

The findings necessitate a shift from punitive measures to preventative, psychological support systems. Schools should adopt Psychological Interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and the Anti-Bullying Program, which recent studies confirm are effective in managing anxiety and significantly reducing bullying incidents (Meher, 2025; Yanti & Allo, 2025). Furthermore, transitioning to Restorative Practices (RP), which utilizes strategies such as restorative circles, focuses on repairing trust instead of inflicting retribution. This approach has been proven to reduce school violence and improve students' emotional well-being (Alonso-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Finally, Targeted Interventions must address the specific dynamics of cyberbullying and Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) through trauma-informed care and media literacy, treating these as public health issues rather than disciplinary offenses (Chiclana-Actis et al., 2025).

Implications for School Mental Health Systems and Disciplinary Policy The findings of this review have direct implications for school mental health systems and disciplinary policy in Malaysia. While corporal punishment (CP) remains legally sanctioned and culturally endorsed, the psychiatric evidence reviewed consistently

demonstrates that it fails to address the underlying emotional dysregulation, trauma exposure, and neurodevelopmental vulnerability that drive bullying behaviour and problematic pornography use. When used as an early-intervention tool rather than a punitive label, such reporting mechanisms may facilitate timely psychological assessment, counselling referral, and continuity of care across school settings.

CONCLUSION

This review concludes that corporal punishment (CP) in Malaysian schools is consistently associated with detrimental mental health outcomes including anxiety, aggression, and antisocial behavior rather than effectively managing behavioral issues (Heilmann et al., 2021).

Simultaneously, the rise of Problematic Pornography Use (PPU) poses complex psychiatric risks, alongside increased risks of sexualized bullying and online victimization. Applying CP to these behaviors creates a dangerous paradox. Rather than resolving the core issues, these punitive measures mimic violence and worsens the emotional dysregulation and shame that drive both bullying and addiction (Chiclana-Actis et al., 2025).

To address these vulnerabilities, the Ministry of Education must transition from the retributive philosophy of the 1959 regulations to approaches that are rooted in psychological safety.

Reliance on CP undermines student trust and emotional safety, integrating fear into the developmental blueprint of the child. Therefore, the gradual elimination of CP is not merely a legal obligation but a public health necessity, supported by global evidence that shows physical discipline impairs social-emotional development in low- and middle-income countries such as Malaysia (Cuartas et al., 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective transition may be suggested through three targeted structural reforms:

Adoption of Restorative Frameworks: Schools should implement Restorative Practices (RP) and trauma-informed care. Recent systematic reviews indicate that RP significantly reduces school violence and improves emotional wellbeing by focusing on accountability and repair. (Alonso-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Such approaches shift disciplinary focus away from fear-based compliance toward moral internalization, accountability, and emotional regulation. These models have demonstrated reductions in school violence and improvements in emotional wellbeing when implemented consistently across institutional levels rather than as isolated interventions.

Capacity Building: Capacity building within schools is critical to reducing reliance on corporal punishment. Teachers and counsellors require structured training in mental health literacy, trauma-informed classroom management, and positive behavioural reinforcement strategies. Strengthening the psychological competence of educators reduces the misinterpretation of emotional distress as willful misconduct and allows schools to function as early detection hubs rather than disciplinary endpoints.

Cultural Engagement: Interventions must extend beyond the school gates. Hence, education and collaborations with families is crucial to debunk cultural narratives that equate strictness with good upbringing. Ensuring consistency between home and school environments is important for a holistic approach on this matter.

Targeted Interventions for Bullying and Problematic Pornography Use

Problematic pornography use (PPU) and bullying require differentiated yet complementary intervention strategies. For adolescents struggling with PPU, cognitive-behavioural interventions, digital resilience training, and healthier emotion-regulation strategies are essential to disrupt cycles of secrecy and shame. In the context of bullying, evidence supports bystander intervention training and the assignment of prosocial leadership roles that allow adolescents to meet status needs without resorting to aggression. Treating these behaviours as manifestations of psychological distress rather than moral failure is critical to preventing recurrence and escalation.

To conclude, ensuring safe learning environments requires viewing discipline not as control, but as connection. By moving beyond the “*rotan*” toward evidence-based and psychologically informed approaches, Malaysian

schools can better protect students, mitigate the adverse effects of digital addiction, and promote healthy emotional resilience.

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