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# Perceptions of Child Maltreatment by Parents from the Indian Subcontinent: Challenging Myths About Culturally Based Abusive Parenting Practices

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*Clinicians and researchers emphasize the importance of recognizing differential cross-cultural definitions of child maltreatment, cautioning awareness that some ethnic groups may use harsher methods to discipline their children. Using a mixed-method research approach, based on questionnaire and focus group data, 29 parents of South Asian descent provided input on their attitudes toward child discipline, maltreatment, and neglect. Study findings suggest that South Asian parents do not differ significantly from other populations in their judgment of appropriate parenting approaches; that is, persistent and excessive use of physical discipline was considered to be inappropriate, behaviors of parents that may have negative emotional consequences for children were recognized as inappropriate, and lack of proper supervision of children was seen as a concern. Notably, though, participants voiced their reluctance to contact child protective services should they encounter families struggling with abuse. Implications for practice and directions for future research are suggested.*

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**Keywords:** *child maltreatment; racial diversity; cultural diversity; ethnic diversity; South Asians; parenting; cross-cultural approaches*

As North American society becomes increasingly diverse, helping professionals face greater challenges in providing culturally sensitive and relevant services to the communities they are serving (Dyche & Zayas, 1995). These challenges are especially pronounced in situations where child maltreatment and/or neglect are suspected (Korbin, 2002). Although practitioners, especially those working in the field of child welfare, should always strive to assess families and disciplinary practices within a cultural context, not all forms of parenting practices should be accepted simply because of cultural relativism; that is, not every practice of a particular culture should be deemed to be acceptable solely because of cultural sensitivity (Abney, 1996). Given the paucity of research in this area, there is little consensus as to whether some cultures are more prone than others to employing abusive parenting practices (Crawford, 1998). There is also no agreement as to whether certain specific cultures hold more punitive attitudes in child rearing than others (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hong & Hong, 1991; Rose & Meezan, 1996; Shor, 1998, 1999). However, in light of the current trends of global relocation, a high volume of transmigration can be expected to persist. This is, therefore, a timely topic in the United States, Canada, and Britain.

Parenting, at any time, is a demanding task; however, under highly disruptive relocation circumstances, these tasks become even more difficult (Chun & Akutsu, 2003; Falicov, 1996; Maiter & George, 2003). Studies of immigrant families have found that the immigration process, itself, can significantly disrupt parent-child relations (Cornille, 1993), increase high-risk adolescent behavior (Brindis, Wolfe, McCarter, Ball, & Starbuck-Morales, 1995), and intensify intergenerational conflict (Lau, 1986). Added to this are the attitudes and belief systems that families bring with them in terms of parenting practices, including beliefs around the use of discipline and corporal punishment. These are introduced into a North American context in which helping professionals are observant about the ways in which parents "parent," are vigilant in assessing inappropriate use of child behavioral controls, and are guided in their professional assessments by legislation and mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect. These same helping professionals are trained to sometimes expect (although perhaps unintentionally so) more abusive parenting as the cultural norm in specific ethnic groups. For example, a film and handbook widely used to train child welfare professionals on issues of child maltreatment asserts, "Some ethnic or cultural backgrounds may be more likely to condone severe spankings or beatings as a form of discipline" (Crawford, 1998, p. 11). This statement, especially when shared in the context of child protection intervention strategy, can result in child protection workers easily falling prey to a certain stereotyping attitude that leads them to assume that all families from diverse ethnic backgrounds use harsh forms of punishment to discipline their children. Although this may be intended as a culturally sensitive approach to practice, it can also be negatively interpreted as profiling and stereotyping certain cultural groups, wherein families from vastly different backgrounds are seen as a monolithic group (Fontes, 1995, 2002).

In addition to these issues, other stressors place enormous pressures on family systems (Alaggia & Marziali, 2003). These include the experience of immigrating, the stressful process of acculturation, the maintenance of identification with their ethnic group, and meeting the challenges of adapting to the host culture. Family members may experience disorientation and disorganization, and the subsequent acculturation process is emotionally, psychologically, socially, and physically demanding (Ward, 1996). It affects, in unique ways, families and parenting practices (Herberg, 1993; Marín & Gamba, 2003) and is recognized as a major life event characterized by stress that requires adaptive responses (Suárez-

Orozco, 2002). Ward (1996) pointed out that acculturation is felt at multiple levels. Individual characteristics that influence the acculturation process include personality dimensions, language fluency, type of training and work experience, and adequacy of coping strategies. Macro factors that affect the success of acculturation include the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural characteristics of the host country, as well as discriminatory beliefs and attitudes held about newcomers by the host society. Undoubtedly, these factors can, to a greater or lesser degree, have a profound effect on family functioning and parenting.

To enable professionals to be fully responsive to the needs of culturally diverse families, research clearly needs to focus on contextual issues that affect parenting (e.g., the consequences of migration) as well as on definitional issues of what is considered to be child maltreatment by group members. Despite a dearth of literature addressing child maltreatment and cultural and ethnic diversity (Fontes, 2001) and with fewer than 7% of the articles published in the top child maltreatment journals addressing this issue in the past 20 years (Behl, Crouch, May, Valente, & Conyngham, 2001), some remarkable contributions have, nevertheless, been made. Terao, Borrego, and Urquiza (2001), for example, suggested a reporting and response model that assesses the level of acculturation of families to link this to the provision of relevant services. They suggest that less acculturated families would benefit most from psychoeducational intervention approaches, while families that are more acculturated would most likely need psychotherapy intervention. They go on to elaborate that there are some instances when less acculturated families would also need psychotherapeutic interventions. Yet the field remains unclear about definitional differences of child maltreatment among diverse ethnic/cultural groups. Greater clarity regarding these differences would lead us to a better understanding of the suggested models and their appropriate use in various circumstances; for example, knowing what other group members think of specific situations of maltreatment can contribute to making a more informed decision when utilizing Terao and colleagues' (2001) model. This understanding can help to gain needed information as to the thoughts of others from the group on the subject matter, thereby bringing greater clarity to the assessment of whether psychoeducation or psychotherapy would be the more suitable intervention strategy.

The current study, although focusing on the differential definitions of child maltreatment that to date remain largely unanswered, also recognizes the need for concurrent research of other contextual issues. As

such, we examined parental attitudes and perceptions of what constitutes child maltreatment and simultaneously explored the child-rearing approaches of a sample of parents from the Indian subcontinent (South Asians), who are now permanent residents of Canada. The term *South Asian* is socially constructed to refer to persons from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. As well, South Asian also refers to individuals from Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean, Guyana, Great Britain, and European countries—individuals who trace their origins to the Indian subcontinent. The term South Asian will be used, henceforth, in this article because it is favored by participating group members. Although this research focused on one ethnic group, the current study may also provide useful insight into service provision and research for other ethnic groups. This ethnic group is of particular interest, however, for the following reasons: The population of this community is rapidly increasing, in Canada and the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2001); child welfare professionals are raising concerns about the larger numbers of South Asians being served by child protective services (CPS; although there are no studies to support this as yet); difficulties in serving this population are being expressed by service providers; changing demographic patterns of migration by this group are now resulting in poorer immigrants coming from these countries predictably resulting in increased attention from public services (Pettys & Balgopal, 1998; Prathikanti, 1997); there is a sense among social service professionals that this group holds a diversity of norms and values relating to parenting (Maiter, 2003); and there is an immense gap in research-based knowledge about this population and child maltreatment to guide practitioners.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Korbin (1981, 1987a, 1987b, 1991) initially proposed, in her theoretical framework, that cross-cultural definitions of child maltreatment must be considered when providing services to families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Korbin (1991) identified three areas for consideration in child maltreatment and culture: (a) parenting practices that may be acceptable in one culture, but not in another, (b) limits within a culture suggesting that the practice is out of the range of acceptability and is considered abuse, and (c) societal factors such as poverty, poor health care, lack of housing, and similar issues that are beyond the control of parents. These areas provide some guidelines for consideration; however, they

need to be enhanced by research. They do suggest that it is to be expected that different cultures might hold varying beliefs about child-rearing practices, especially in relation to discipline, corporal punishment, and so on. Similar to Korbin's framework, Crawford (1998) also concluded that professionals must pay greater attention to assessing risk factors for children when dealing with culturally diverse families. Although Crawford's film and handbook (Chester, 1998; Crawford, 1998) do not provide research-based evidence for this conclusion, it is consistent with the perception that parents from certain cultural, racial/ethnic backgrounds may be more punitive in their child-rearing practices (Chand, 2000; Lau et al., 2003; Maitra, 1996). This perception is given further credibility by research findings that state that children of visible minority groups are consistently overrepresented in child welfare services across North America (Abney, 1996; Courtney et al., 1996; McPhatter, 1997).

In the absence of extensive cross-cultural research, helping professionals such as child welfare practitioners have simply assumed that there are significant differences in defining child maltreatment across cultures. Indeed, they may even have come to expect more extreme parenting behaviors from culturally different families. This is because few research findings are available from which to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the assessment of appropriate and inappropriate parenting behaviors practiced across cultures. Only a handful of empirical studies examining parental attitudes regarding child discipline have been conducted (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hong & Hong, 1991; Rose & Meezan, 1996; Shor, 1998, 1999). More interesting, these data reveal no significant differences among parents of different ethnic backgrounds, except to reflect a higher standard of care for children. In contrast, Payne (1989) did find a greater tolerance for, and practice of, corporal punishment from a sample of adults in Barbados; however, she also noted that even this study demonstrated that the younger respondents were less likely to support the corporal punishment of children. In an early study, Dubanoski and Snyder (1980) suggested a link between physical abuse and the value of physical discipline held by group members. They suggested that Samoan Americans were overrepresented in the child welfare system in Hawaii compared to Japanese Americans because of the value that the former group places on physical punishment and aggressiveness. Yet the study failed to make the necessary causal link between this group's valuation of physical discipline and actual acts of maltreatment. Other family stresses were not being taken into consideration, and

intracultural variability was left unexplained. Gray and Cosgrove (1985) note that Samoan service providers believe that physical discipline is one area that is highly misunderstood by non-Samoan service providers.

Researchers exploring cross-cultural definitions of child maltreatment have uniformly used vignettes and questionnaires to assess participants' views of various parental acts (Dubowitz, Klockner, Starr, & Black, 1998; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Hong & Hong, 1991; Shor, 1998, 1999). As early as 1979, Giovannoni and Becerra surveyed a large representative sample of Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks from the general Los Angeles population and found little agreement between these three populations with regard to the absolute ratings of specific incidents of maltreatment. They noted, however, that this disagreement was the result of significantly less tolerance for maltreating behaviors by Blacks and Hispanics. Dubowitz and colleagues (1998) used vignettes to examine the views on child neglect of African American and White community members of middle and low socioeconomic status. They contrasted these views with the views of professionals in the field of child maltreatment. They found small but significant differences, with middle-class African American and White community people showing greater concern for the psychological care of children than the lower class African Americans. Both groups of African American caregivers, but especially the lower income group, rated the physical care vignettes more seriously than did the Whites. Although not included in the design of the study they extrapolated that experiences of racism and stigmatization could result in the African American groups putting a higher value on physical care. Overall, they found considerable agreement throughout the community samples about what constitutes inappropriate behavior on the part of caregivers. Similar to others, they also found that the professionals had a greater tolerance for questionable parental behavior. These researchers concluded: "Even in a pluralistic U.S. society, there is substantial agreement across different groups concerning conditions that may harm children" (Dubowitz et al., 1998, p. 240). Hong and Hong (1991) used case vignettes to elicit responses from Chinese, Hispanics, and Whites about their definitions of, and preferred interventions for, particular forms of child maltreatment. Their data showed that there are significant differences in perceptions of child abuse and neglect between Chinese immigrants and the other two groups, even though there is a core of similarities among them. The Chinese respondents tended to judge parental conduct and the use of force less harshly than the Hispanics and Whites did. The

study was unable to distinguish whether physical discipline is the preferred method of discipline for the Chinese. In addition, as the sample comprised college students who presumably were not yet parents, it is unclear whether being a parent would make any significant differences in parenting approach. Similarities among the study participants were found in their responses to neglect of a child's physical health, uncommon sleeping habits, and encouragement of children to commit crimes. Hong and Hong's (1991) mixed findings suggest the need for further exploration of the parenting approaches of diverse ethnic groups.

Rose and Meezan (1996), who noted that their study was similar to Giovannoni and Becerra's (1979) study, explored how mothers from three cultural groups—Latino, White, and African American—perceived the seriousness of specific components of neglect. In addition, child welfare workers, including intake investigating workers and ongoing service providers, were also included in the study. Their findings suggest "that members of minority groups perceive some types of child neglect as more serious than do their Caucasian counterparts" (Rose & Meezan, 1996, p. 139). Although the study uncovered a high degree of similarity in responses from the mothers representing these three groups, it also exposed some notable differences. First, African American and Latino mothers were in close agreement about which dimensions of neglect were of the greatest concern in terms of their potential harm to children. When asked to rank specific dimensions of neglect, they rated exploitation of children, inadequate supervision of children, and raising children in unwholesome circumstances as among the potentially most harmful elements. Both groups considered circumstances in which food, clothing, and shelter were inadequate as less serious with regard to jeopardizing the child. In contrast, White mothers thought that the lack of adequate food placed children in greatest potential harm and that raising children in unwholesome circumstances, including providing inadequate education, placed them in less jeopardy. Investigating workers perceived more dimensions of child neglect as serious than did ongoing workers. More interesting, both sets of workers saw all types of neglect as less serious than did the mothers.

Although Rose and Meezan's (1996) findings are mixed, evidence to support the theory that families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds support harsher forms of discipline of children is far from clear. In fact, the investigators, referring to Giovannoni and Becerra's (1979) study, note that "More than ten years later, the present study confirms



that minority group mothers, contrary to popular belief, continue to hold members of their communities to somewhat more stringent child-rearing standards than mothers in the dominant Caucasian culture" (Rose & Meezan, 1996, p. 157).

Contextual differences in the lives of families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, however, may explain some differential parenting responses to children. For example, greater concern about poor school attendance may not be a true indicator of cultural norms, as much as it may indicate that ethnic minority families emphasize education as a way to overcome societal racism. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between responses resulting from cultural norms and those resulting from the experience of minority groups living within a larger society. For instance, some investigators have identified strategies used by African American parents to help their children succeed in impoverished American inner-city neighborhoods (Denby & Alford, 1996; Jarrett, 1999). Parental actions, such as parents' restrictions of their children's activities, can be motivated by the need to protect them from a dangerous external environment (Jarrett, 1999). Although this can be construed as harsh parenting, such practices appear to emerge from the need to protect rather than to be punitive. Similarly, Alaggia, Chau, and Tsang (2001) found that South East Asian youth reported high parental expectations regarding schooling because many anticipated that they would only be in Canada for a short period of time and needed to make the most of that time. Additionally, these youth described themselves in "parentified" roles because they needed to assist their parents (often a single parent) in negotiating daily instrumental tasks because of the language barriers and isolation their parents faced (Alaggia et al., 2001). Again these family dynamics could mistakenly be viewed as role reversal, and therefore dysfunctional, unless they are regarded within these families' context and as a function of their particular circumstances. It is essential to understand that

culture does not work on its own or in a vacuum, but in transactions with other variables at other ecological levels. Culture can bring with it both risk and protective factors, whose impact varies not only between cultures but also within any culture (Korbin, 2002, p. 640).

As questions regarding culturally based attitudes about child maltreatment and neglect remain largely unanswered, the current study sought to explore the following broad questions: (a) What do South Asian Canadian parents consider to be appropriate and in-

appropriate child-rearing practices? (b) Do South Asian Canadian parents have an awareness of the type of parental behavior that is generally considered unacceptable? (c) Do South Asian Canadian parents consider seeking help when they witness what they understand to be unacceptable parenting behavior? and (d) Who do South Asian Canadian parents prefer to contact when experiencing family problems?

## METHOD

Twenty-nine parents completed questionnaires and participated in focus group discussions. However, eight of the questionnaires are not included in the analysis as these were considered to be a pilot of the vignettes. The vignettes were changed to include a cultural context subsequent to the pilot as participants expressed the need to have some contextual information included in the vignettes. A total of five focus groups, three of mothers and two of fathers, with a total of 29 parents were conducted.

### *Participants*

The population for the study consisted of mothers and fathers who had emigrated directly from the South Asian region to Canada within the past 12 years and were caring for children 12 years of age or younger. The 12-year time frame was used because key informants, from agencies serving members of the South Asian community and child protection services, noted that newer immigrants, specifically those who have been in the country less than 12 years, appeared to be struggling more with child protection services. Literature also suggests that newcomers to a country are under greater pressures as a result of the loss of their previous social support systems, as well as having to cope with differences in the environment between their former and current countries (Falicov, 1996; Maiter, 2003). Only those parents with children 12 years or younger were included in the study so that parents could draw on current experiences of child rearing rather than on memories that may have faded or changed. Parents with adolescent children were not included in the study because advice from key informants and the experiences of the authors suggest that parental interactions with adolescents constitute an entirely different dynamic, warranting a separate study.

A convenience-sampling strategy typical of qualitative, nonprobability samples was used. Flyers were distributed through religious and community organizations frequented by South Asians, while other participants were acquired through snowball sampling. Recruitment of participants was stopped once data

analysis indicated that theoretical saturation was reached. Participants were chosen based on gender, religion, education, and socioeconomic status. Care was taken to ensure that all participants in a specific group spoke a common language. Because the researcher and the research assistant spoke English and four South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Gujarati), the focus group interviews were conducted in a combination of English and one or more of these languages.

Overall, the sample obtained in the current study captured the broad diversity within the South Asian population, including age, marital status, number of children per family, region of migration, languages spoken, religion, number of years in Canada, education level, employment status, income status, profession, and type of household (extended or nuclear). Of the participants, 62% were mothers and the rest were fathers. The mean age of the parents was 41.2 years, and most had three or fewer children. Most participants originated from India (37.9%), followed by Sri Lanka (27.6%) and Pakistan (24.1%). English, Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil were the most common languages spoken, although participants were primarily of the Muslim (41.4%), Hindu (34.5%), and Christian (10.3%) faiths. Other religious groups included Sikh, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian. Self-reported professions of participants included accounting clerk, babysitter, retail clerk, settlement counselor, daycare worker, engineer, ink technician, adult education instructor, manager, medical doctor, social worker, and speech language assistant. A relatively high number of the participants were not currently employed, which could be reflective of several factors, including, but not limited to the following: their more recent immigrant status resulting in their not having secured employment; their working on getting credentials recognized in Canada; the potential effect of snowball sampling; the fact that some participants were recruited from specific social service agencies; and/or the fact that some mothers simply were not seeking paid employment.

### Materials

**Vignette questionnaire.** Twenty-nine parent participants completed questionnaires comprising vignettes describing questionable parenting behavior that they were asked to rate on a 6-point Likert-type scale. Parents could choose a response from *appropriate to a large extent* to *inappropriate to a large extent*. As noted, eight of these questionnaires were not included in this analysis as they were used to pilot the vignettes used in the questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered to probe this sample of parents' perceptions of

child maltreatment, and to direct these parents' thinking to particular issues related to child discipline and maltreatment. The vignettes used for the questionnaire depicted parental actions relating to various forms of physical and psychological discipline, as well as those relating to neglect/lack of supervision. The questionnaire contained an open-ended section where parents could elaborate on ratings they assigned to each vignette. Initially, the questionnaire was developed based on vignettes previously used in the literature; however a pilot testing of the instrument determined that parents had difficulty responding to vignettes not grounded in culturally-specific context. For example, parents could not understand the use of corporal punishment without being provided a context for its use. New vignettes were developed with input from key informants (South Asian service providers who shared some of the parenting issues that members struggled with). Some vignettes from the established literature were also used (e.g., Shor, 1998, 1999). The new vignettes included the context within which discipline was used, context specifically relevant to members of the South Asian community. These new vignettes were further pilot tested with two South Asians for clarity and relevancy. Except for minor changes, the vignettes were then adopted for the study. Appendix A contains the vignettes used in the study and the other questions asked in the questionnaire.

**Focus group discussions.** Five focus group interviews/discussions were conducted; three with mothers and two with fathers, for a total of 29 parents interviewed. Focus groups with mothers were conducted separate from focus groups with fathers to control for the possible influence of gender dynamics. This step was taken because research shows that, depending on various elements of the participants' personalities (i.e., biological, social, and cultural), gender differences can influence interpersonal interactions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) and subsequently influence the quality of the data obtained.

Focus group discussions probed for participants' thinking about parenting, discipline and supervision of children, and relevant cultural considerations. A semistructured interview guide was used to direct the discussions, which were audiotaped and later transcribed (see Appendix B for focus group schedule). Notes were taken by one of the two focus group moderators to add to the data collected.

The current study employed focus group interviews because they provide certain advantages that other qualitative data-gathering techniques do not. Not only can researchers learn about specific topics of

interest, but also interactions between focus group members can lead to the introduction and discussion of different aspects of a topic (Berg, 1995). The researcher can engage in these discussions and observe the interactions between and among group members about distinct aspects of topics. For example, in the current study, differences and similarities in thinking among group members fostered interesting discussions. This article focuses on the interviewees' impressions regarding what they perceive to be appropriate and inappropriate actions taken to regulate the behavior of children, and whether help should be sought when experiencing problems.

### **Procedure**

First, vignette questionnaires were administered to individual participants who completed them on their own. Trained research assistants were available to help participants if they needed clarification of any items on the questionnaire. Second, participants took part in the focus group discussions. Two researchers, one a doctoral student, and both having master's degrees in social work, conducted focus group interviews. The research assistants were purposely selected because of their South Asian background, in addition to their experience in providing social services to members of the South Asian community and their knowledge of the child welfare system. Similarity of ethnic background with research participants can help to relieve the anxiety about disclosing culturally specific behaviors and the fear that those not familiar with the ethnic group may misconstrue these behaviors. The focus groups were primarily conducted in English; however, given the benefit that the researchers spoke four South Asian languages, allowances could be made for participants who wanted to clarify or elaborate on points in one of the four other languages. Aside from having a cultural knowledge of the group, the research assistants prepared for their role by participating in training specifically designed to teach them how to conduct focus groups in an ethically appropriate manner. Such training teaches focus group leaders how to be noncoercive or overly directive, while still allowing them to take leadership of discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Descriptive analysis of the demographic data for the questionnaire was conducted. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the open-ended section of the questionnaire and focus group interviews. In the next stage, data were imported into the software program NUD\*IST (QSR NUD\*IST, 1997) to refine the analysis through different levels of coding consistent with qualitative approaches to analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Attitudes Toward the Use of Corporal Punishment***

Examining the responses to Vignettes 1 to 4 suggests that the use of harsh corporal punishment was neither accepted nor condoned by the parent participants in this sample. The majority of parents (90.5%) perceived the mother's actions in Vignette 1 as inappropriate to some degree, while only 9.5% viewed the mother's action as appropriate to some degree (see findings for all vignettes in Figure 1). Disapproval increased as the severity of corporal punishment increased and with the use of an instrument. In response to Vignette 3, wherein the father used an instrument to discipline the child, causing bruising, 90.4% of parents viewed the action to be inappropriate to some extent, while 76.2% viewed the action to be inappropriate to a large extent. Disapproval was highest for Vignette 4, which described a father hitting a 12-year-old daughter across the face, leaving a cut lip. In response to this vignette, 95.2% viewed the action as inappropriate. The parents in this sample clearly disapproved of the use of physical force to discipline children and were concerned about the use of an instrument for disciplining children.

Parent participants largely responded that the families in the vignettes should obtain help for the difficulties they were encountering, especially as the severity of the corporal punishment increased. For example, in the case of Vignette 1, 57% of the participants responded that the family should seek help. For Vignettes 2, 3, and 4, 76%, 81%, and 67% of parent participants, respectively, responded that families in the vignettes should seek help. Parents most frequently suggested that the help should be obtained from relatives or family friends. A smaller percentage of parents recommended that help be obtained from professionals in the field. This percentage, however, also differed depending on the severity of punishment used in the vignette. For example, one third of the participants suggested that the family should obtain help from a professional for Vignette 3, in which the father spanked the son with a belt; whereas less than 10% suggested that the family should obtain professional help for Vignette 2, in which the father slaps his son. Data from the open-ended section of the questionnaire suggested that parents generally tended to agree that use of corporal punishment was harmful to a child's self-esteem, provided inappropriate role modeling for the child, and could potentially result in aggression on the part of the child. Although participants were understanding of parents' wishes to transmit cultural values to their children, they sug-

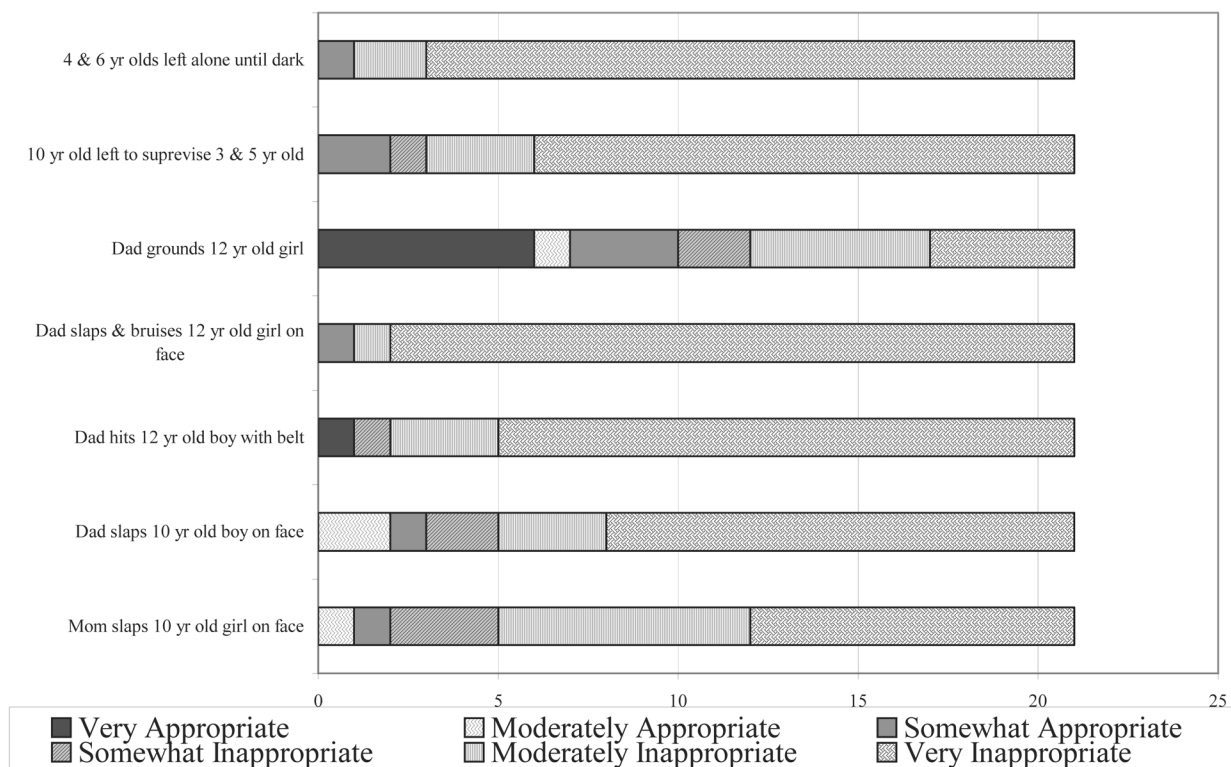


FIGURE 1: Parental Ratings of Vignettes (N = 21)

gested alternative means to achieve this, such as talking to the child about his or her misbehavior.

Findings from the focus groups matched those derived from the questionnaire. There was general consensus among participants from all five focus groups that persistent and excessive use of physical discipline was not an appropriate way of handling children's misbehavior. For example, one parent commented:

I don't agree in hitting or beating. A little spank here or there, that's okay. But no hitting or beating in any form. There can be a way of removing privileges, grounding, go to your room, sit there, you said this again, okay, go there another 5 minutes. That sort of removing privilege. If today he wants a Play Station game, use that, also [Or say] okay, this weekend you're grounded. And stick by it.

If physical discipline was used sparingly and occasionally, it was then accepted by some as a valid form of parenting, as exemplified by the following statement: "A spank here or there . . . yeah . . . [but] you can't beat the child like with a shoe, that's going too far." For others, however, use of physical discipline was not seen as viable as noted by one participant: "Physical violence, to hurt the child, in no way should you hurt

the child." Leaving bruises, hitting on the face, hitting older children, using an instrument, and more than an occasional slap, were considered to be inappropriate.

#### *Attitudes Toward Psychological Approaches to Discipline*

The responses by parents to Vignette 5 (use of psychological approach to discipline) was mixed, suggesting that use of psychological control/maltreatment of children was a recognized phenomenon. Almost 29% (28.6%) perceived the father's behavior in this vignette to be appropriate to a large extent; however, a very close second-highest response was that the father's behavior was inappropriate to a moderate extent (23.8%). In total, 48.0% of all parents considered the father's action to be appropriate to some degree, and 52.0% of all parents considered the father's action to be inappropriate to some degree. The majority of parents (61.9%) interviewed believed that the family should get help from someone.

When parents were asked to provide at least one reason why they considered the action as appropriate or inappropriate, one third of parents (33.3%)



described the father's actions as appropriate because they felt the daughter was too young to date. One parent indicated that the action could be considered appropriate because of culture-specific norms regarding dating. A smaller group of participants (28.6%), however, felt that the father overreacted, and they considered his actions to be too strict and harsh. Additional responses from the focus groups provided insights into other examples of perceived inappropriate parenting styles. Specific behaviors of parents that could have negative emotional consequences for children were recognized. For example, embarrassing a child when disciplining, or disciplining children in the presence of others, regardless if these were friends or neighbors, were considered to be inappropriate parental behaviors.

Themes regarding inappropriate behavior of parents were derived from the actions of the parents and their general approach to parenting. For example, parents who were very busy or in situations where both parents worked outside the home with heavy work demands were cited as examples of inappropriate parenting. In addition, the impact of parental conflict on children was raised as potentially harmful to children. One participant stated: "Quarrelling and bickering in front of the children, shouting at the children, speaking in raised voice to them—all these things children observe . . . and it is not to be done."

Finally, some participants commented that it was inappropriate if parents did not set any rules for children as it left children with no structure in their life. For example, a participant noted the following: "Sometimes parents keep the children with them all the time. If they go out, they take the children. When they are out late at night as well. They watch TV, even late at night, the children sit with them. That is not good for the children." Other participants, however, qualified that having excessive rules was also inappropriate, as captured in the quotation: "They impose and they won't allow the child out even at the weekend, they just keep pushing the child, not allowing the child to have any choices. Children have desires as well. This starts the children thinking negatively."

#### *Attitudes Toward Inappropriate Supervision*

Two case vignettes of inappropriate supervision (Vignette 6 and 7) were included in the study. In response to Vignette 6, most parent participants perceived the behavior of the parents as inappropriate to a large extent (71.4%), while only 9.5% of participants felt that the action of the parents was appropriate to some degree. The majority of participants (81.0%) believed that the family in Vignette 6 should get help from someone. Most parents sug-

gested that help should be obtained from relatives/friends, while a few felt that help should be obtained from a social service agency. A relatively small number chose religious/community leaders as a source of help. When parents were asked to provide at least one reason why they considered the mother's and father's actions to be appropriate or inappropriate, 28.6% noted that a 10-year-old is too young and not capable of looking after two small children. A second group of parents (23.8%) believed that it is too much responsibility for a 10-year-old child to look after a 5-year-old and a 3-year-old. Others felt that lack of supervision placed the children at risk. A small percentage of parents (9.5%) did not see anything wrong with leaving a 10-year-old child to watch two small children. They felt that the action was perhaps necessary because the parents may not have had any choice because of lack of finances to obtain child care. Financial hardship was viewed as a rationale for this decision.

The majority of participants (85.7%) felt the parents' behavior in Vignette 7 to be inappropriate to a large extent. Only 4.8% of the participants considered the behavior to be appropriate to some degree. The majority of participants (85.7%) believed the family should get help from someone. Relatives/friends (88.9%) were considered to be the most useful source of help, followed by a social service agency (27.8%). Religious/community leaders were only considered as a source of help by 16.7% of the participants. When parents were asked to provide at least one reason why they considered the action of the parents in this vignette to be appropriate or inappropriate, close to one half of participants (47.6%) felt that the action was inappropriate because the children were inadequately supervised. One third of the participants (33.3%) stated that the children were in a high-risk situation. Other participants noted that the parents should have made appropriate arrangements to have the children supervised. Parents also suggested that the parents in the vignette needed information about options for childcare and counseling.

In addition to issues around physical and psychological discipline, the South Asian parents in this sample expressed concern about the lack of proper supervision of children. A 10-year-old left to take care of two younger siblings was viewed as slightly less severe than two young children being left alone outside after dark. Nevertheless, the former was still considered to be generally unacceptable. Inadequate support and finances were offered as possible reasons for parents leaving a 10-year-old to take care of her younger siblings, suggesting that, rather than being a culturally sanctioned norm, financial stress might be the cause of inappropriate supervision.

Inappropriate supervision or neglect of children was also a topic of discussion in the focus groups. Within the arena of neglect, the following themes were identified in terms of assessing the safety of situations for children: lack of supervision, inappropriate dress, lack of parental response to a dangerous environment, and the degree of parental involvement. Several of these themes are illustrated in the following anecdote:

I had my son's and my daughter's birthday last week and I see this boy. He came to the house. He plays down the street; I don't know where he lives. I don't know his parents, and I've seen this quite a few times. This started from last week; he took the phone number from my daughter and said I'm coming to your party. I don't know him, nothing. He comes to the party, and my party is till late in the night. I don't know where the mother is. I said: "You have to go home." He said, "No, my mother knows about it." It's 11 o'clock then I start getting worried because this is a 6- or 7-year-old child and I don't know where the parents are. I go down the road, ask which house, but he refuses to come. I have so many guests; so when the parent comes at 11, 11:15 . . . I was really mad. . . . I couldn't believe it could happen to an Asian family. We think that we are very protective.

### *Preferred Parenting Behavior*

Focus group discussions offered opinions about what are considered to be appropriate approaches to parenting. Participants noted that parents have the option to utilize a number of approaches to regulate the behavior of children without resorting to physical or psychological maltreatment. Even though rules were considered important and routines essential, the need to be flexible around rules was also noted. For example, participants explained that parents should be flexible around routines such as bedtimes if there were special occasions that necessitated a change in the routine. The theme of flexibility was also evident around the subject of religion. Parents commented that they told their children about religion, prayer, times for worship, and so on, however they allowed them flexibility to fit these rituals into their own timeframe. This was captured in the following statement:

I tell my children to try to pray and worship. To make an effort. Spend time on it. When it is time for prayer, pray at that time. And try to fit it into your [schedule]. You have to do all your work, yes; but see and decide what is the best time for you to do your homework, go to bed. What suits you best!

Parents felt that it was important to take cues from the child. Several participants gave examples of how they

would accommodate their children's wishes and desires when trying to have them follow rules. One parent shared how she coped with her child:

There was a time when my son, even now he does it, he'd drop anything when he picks it up. Even a pencil. I used to be very upset with him, upset and angry—no hitting, no beating, no nothing, but shouting. But I thought to myself that that is not the right thing because the moment he picks up something, it will probably be psychological—he's probably hearing the mother say, "Oh, see that you don't drop this." So now what I've started to do is, I just ignore. I know he's picking up that coke bottle. I know it's going to fall on the floor. I know I'll have to clean it up. But I just sit there and I look at my husband and we just keep quiet. And it seems to be changing, you know. You have to build up the self-esteem of the child. . . . He will grow out of it. I think it's working.

Comments were also made that acknowledged that children had feelings, desires, and wishes; that it was the parents' responsibility to accommodate these. For instance, if children disobey, despite parents' best efforts, participants suggested that they would continue to try and would resist giving up on the child. Some of the suggestions included talks with the child, asking the father to become involved, telling the child stories that capture good behavior in children, taking away privileges, ignoring the action of the child, being emotionally unresponsive to the child, and removing themselves from the situation if they found that they were becoming too angry.

Findings of appropriate and inappropriate parenting were consistent across the five focus groups. Parents had lengthy discussions around the use of physical discipline. Two parents had little objection to the use of physical discipline, while a couple of parents opposed its use categorically. The findings suggest that only a few parents accepted harsher physical and psychological disciplinary approaches, while the majority of the study parents did not condone the use of such practices.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Findings reported here are the result of only five focus groups with 29 parents held in one large metropolitan Canadian city. A convenience-sampling strategy, combined with snowball sampling of participants, was used to ensure representation of some of the diversity within the South Asian population with regard to language, age, and religion, and to ensure gender representation. However, because a non-probability sampling strategy, typical of qualitative research, was employed, the findings should not be seen to represent all South Asians. Interviews with

people from different backgrounds reflecting a variety of levels of education, areas of migration (urban/rural), current geographic locations, and acculturation could potentially provide different findings. It should also be noted that this was a voluntary, community sample of parents. It did not include parents who had been involved with child protection services. A sample that includes parents whose children have been involved in the child welfare system would likely produce a broader range of responses.

It is also reasonable to assume that participants might have felt compelled to provide responses that reflected more socially sanctioned parenting practices, potentially skewing the results of the study, somewhat. Nevertheless, the parents in this sample provided concrete examples from their lives to show their parenting approach rather than just speculating on imagined scenarios. Similarity of findings across both research tools—the questionnaire and the focus groups—provides further support for the findings.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings about the attitudes and perceptions of this sample of parents, regarding use of physical discipline and concerns of supervision of children, appear to meet wider community standards for appropriate child-rearing practices as identified by others (Dubowitz et al., 1988; Portwood, 1999). The information elicited through the vignette questionnaires and focus groups suggest that this group largely conforms to North American definitions of child maltreatment. Indeed, study parents (a) demonstrated flexibility in their approach to child rearing; (b) recognized that certain parental behaviors, such as demonstrating a high degree of marital conflict in the presence of children, is unacceptable; (c) suggested alternatives to physical discipline; (d) recognized that all behaviors of children cannot be controlled; (e) understood age-appropriate standards of supervision; and (f) showed awareness of the importance of meeting the basic needs of children. These findings support the work of other researchers on this subject (Dubowitz, et al., 1998; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Portwood, 1999; Rose & Meezan, 1996).

Important conclusions can be extrapolated from the current study and previous research findings. It can be said that, in every culture, parenting practices range from appropriate use of discipline to the extreme ends of the spectrum, including neglect and abuse. Moreover, a number of the parental responses indicated that the parents were able to recognize inappropriate parenting within their own cultural group. When providing examples of parenting prac-

tices that raised their concern, they were clear that they would not accept abusive or neglectful behavior from any parent in their community.

Why children from visible minority groups (as well as poor children) are overrepresented in child welfare systems, is a question that is still open to debate. Structural issues, such as increased levels of poverty and/or stress from unemployment or underemployment, could account for their overrepresentation (Dubowitz et al., 1998). These families may also lack access to support systems that protect other children from entry into the child welfare system (Lau et al., 2003). Alternatively, this situation may reflect pathologizing attitudes about certain minority groups whereby these parents are seen to need greater correction and these children are seen to be at greater risk (Chand, 2000; Lau et al., 2003). Nonetheless, their overrepresentation has sometimes been interpreted as evidence that there may be a greater tolerance for abusive discipline in the parenting practices of certain cultural, ethnic, and racial groups (Korbin, 2002; Lau et al., 2003). It has been shown that particular factors, such as financial hardship, can produce parental stress—stress that has, in turn, been related to increased risk of child abuse (Korbin, 2002; Thompson et al., 1999). It is reasonable to assume that new immigrants might experience this type of stress. However, in this sample, a significant number of participants were new immigrants who were unemployed, yet their responses did not reflect increased tolerance for abusive parenting practices. At the same time, a small number of participants acknowledged that financial stresses might cloud the judgment of some parents and lead to questionable decisions about leaving children to care for themselves. It is also possible that parents may find some parenting behaviors unacceptable but may resort to this behavior if they do not have adequate resources.

Study findings also show that a small number of the parent participants in this sample sanctioned physical discipline if it did not result in marks or injuries. Given that most child welfare legislation across North America continues to condone “the use of physical force within reason” (e.g., spanking) as acceptable disciplinary practice by any adult, the acceptance of physical force by some South Asian parents (as with parents of any other culture) should not be viewed as deviant within the overall North American culture. Surveys indicate that in the United States spanking occurs in 60% of families with children younger than age 18, and, in fact, in 20% of families spanking occurs with a belt (Wissow, 2001). Without question, these are complex issues. On one hand, helping professionals and other adults working with children do

not want to overlook incidences of child maltreatment. On the other hand, care has to be taken to not uniformly ascribe negative parenting characteristics based on cultural stereotypes.

In addition to these findings, parents in this sample were unlikely to seek help from counseling agencies, and only in very few instances did they recommend seeking help from religious/community leaders. The hesitancy to seek professional help may exist for any number of reasons, including fear of professionals, concerns that their needs may not be recognized or met, fear of stigmatization, and/or lack of understanding/familiarity of the role of professionals (Falicov, 1996; Maiter, 2003). Professionals in the child welfare field need to be aware of this hesitancy to ask for help and may need to find creative ways to provide services. These findings regarding this group's preferred source of help also raises questions about the commonly held view that families from diverse ethnic backgrounds rely on their religious leaders for help. The implications of this finding for practice is that practitioners need to assess, on a case-by-case basis, who would be regarded as most helpful to these families.

### *Implications for Practice and Research*

The field appears to be vacillating between two or more polarized positions that can lead to confusion, frustration, and bewilderment for social workers. The first position maintains that social workers must be culturally sensitive in working with clients to demonstrate that they are culturally competent. This is evidenced by the numerous cultural competency initiatives in existence today. From this position, workers are often trained to expect more abusive behavior from culturally different clients, while simultaneously being educated about practices that are deemed abusive by North American standards. Underlying this position is the concept of acculturation wherein, depending on their level of acculturation, some clients may need to be "educated" about North American standards of parenting. The second, more recent argument, takes the position that assumptions that promote the thinking that some cultural groups sanction harsh treatment of children, as norms within their culture, should be examined and challenged. Examination of these assumptions is advised because they may be based on negative stereotyping, generalizations, and basic misinformation. From this position social workers who counsel clients of different cultural backgrounds are encouraged to take a stance of naïveté and curiosity while listening carefully to the

nuances of client narratives to resist acting on assumptions (Dyche & Zayas, 1995). However, it is important to note that this approach is not necessarily appropriate for child protection work. Child welfare work often requires the use of rapidly executed risk assessment tools and dispositions that need to be reached within tight time frames. Interventions that promote a stance of curiosity may not be the most compatible while working within the crisis of a child abuse investigation.

Despite these differing positions, it should be clear that when children are investigated for suspected child abuse, they should never be left in a harmful situation because of a worker's attempt to respect the culture by allowing for parenting behavior that is deemed abusive by North American standards (Maiter, 2003). For instance, it is reasonable to assume that during their professional career, clinicians and child protection workers may encounter clients from diverse backgrounds who claim that some potentially abusive practices are appropriate and accepted in their culture, and that their actions are being misunderstood by service providers. This explanation by the client is questionable as considerable variation exists in groups about parenting approaches. On the other hand, faulty assumptions that workers might hold about culturally based abusive parenting practices can result in precipitous apprehension. With these divergent ideas and approaches influencing them, practitioners struggle to find the best way to provide services that are culturally sensitive, while reducing risks to children.

As noted earlier, Terao et al. (2001) proposed a model to guide clinicians through the decision-making process and discuss intervention and clinical responses. Their model, however, is premised on the idea that if parents are less acculturated, then they simply need to learn more about North American rules. Certainly, knowledge about North American standards and laws—laws pertaining to use of excessive physical force—is always useful. However, this intervention may only partially meet the needs of minority ethnic, particularly immigrant families. Because our study, comprising fairly new immigrant families, shows that they do have an understanding of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate parental actions toward children, we are more inclined to think that there are other factors that need to be addressed when these families come to the attention of CPS and other related professionals. These may include issues related to mental illness, substance abuse, personality of parent and child, temperament



of parent and child, and availability of social supports (Belsky, 1993). However, for minority immigrant families, isolation, loss of social supports, psychological distress because of leaving the home country, not to mention struggles with settlement issues such as not having their professional credentials recognized, finding work, connecting with the school system, experiencing racism, and so on must be factored into the assessment (Maiter, 2003). Interventions should then be tailored to address the particular issues that may potentially be resulting in inappropriate responses toward children.

Coohey's (2001) study of *familism* among Latino's provides additional insights for South Asian, as well as for other minority ethnic groups. Familism "refers to attitudes, behaviors, and family structures operating within an extended family system and is believed to be the most important factor influencing the lives of Latinos" (Coohey, 2001, p. 130). South Asians also come from a collectivist culture where supports from the immediate and extended family system are central (Maiter, 2003; Pettys & Balgopal, 1998; Pratikhanti, 1997). Coohey (2001) found that com-

pared to abusive Latinos, nonabusive Whites, and abusive Whites, the nonabusive Latinos had the highest level of familism. Availability of contact with family should be an area of assessment for South Asian families, and intervention efforts should be made to enhance contact with families. If extended families are not close by, then efforts must be made to further assess the isolation that the parents may be experiencing and attempts made to help them to establish social support networks that are acceptable to them.

Findings from the current study challenge the premise that maltreating behaviors are culturally bound. The South Asian parents participating in this study, for the large part, demonstrated awareness of behaviors harmful to children and articulated preferred child behavior management strategies. This does not suggest that there are no examples of abusive parenting from the South Asian or any other culture, or that these findings are generalizable. The next leg of research should make use of comparative data derived from a clinical sample of parents from the South Asian community to examine the differences in their parenting attitudes and actions.

## APPENDIX A

### Vignettes

#### Use of corporal punishment:

1. A mother of a 10-year-old girl slaps her on the face because she refuses to help out when the family has company visiting.
2. A father of a 10-year-old boy often slaps him across the face because he refuses to go to the temple/mosque/gurudwara/church for religious occasions.
3. The father of a 12-year-old boy spansks him with a belt leaving welts on his back, arms, and legs because the boy does not listen to him, refuses to do his school work, and is rude to the father and the mother.
4. The father of a 12-year-old girl hits her across the face causing a swollen and cut lip and bruising on her face because she sneaked out to go to a dance at school.

#### Psychological punishment

5. A 12-year-old girl is seen by her parents at the mall holding hands with a boy. The father grounds the girl except for going to school. He takes her to school and picks her up. She is not allowed to use the phone or to see any friends from school.

#### Inappropriate supervision

6. The parents of a 10-year-old girl go out shopping, visiting, and to work, leaving their 10-year-old daughter to take care of the two younger children ages 5 and 3 years.
7. The parents of a 6-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy often leave their children outside the apartment block till well after it is dark as the father works late and the mother is on medication that makes her drowsy.

*Appropriate to a*

*Inappropriate to a*

<i>Large extent</i>	<i>moderate extent</i>	<i>little extent</i>	<i>little extent</i>	<i>moderate extent</i>	<i>large extent</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6

Do you think this family should get help from someone?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you think the family needs help, who should be contacted? Select all that apply.

\_\_\_ Relatives/friends      \_\_\_ Religious/community leader      \_\_\_ Other social service agency,  
 \_\_\_ Children's Aid Society      \_\_\_ Police      \_\_\_ Other, Please explain \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you think the action of the parent was appropriate or inappropriate?

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## APPENDIX B

### Focus Group Schedule

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#### 1. Appropriate discipline

What kinds of rules do you think should be set for children? (Probes: for instance regarding religion, school, homework, household chores, bedtimes)

If children don't follow the rules or wishes of parents what do you think should be done?

#### 2. Inappropriate discipline

Are there some actions of parents when they are trying to get children to follow rules that you think are not okay?

What would these be?

#### 3. Sanctions of the community

If parents are engaging in these actions or forms of behavior do you think something should be done?

What do you think should be done?

#### 4. Help-seeking behavior

Who do you think is the best person to help parents if they are having problems with their children?

Since moving to Canada have you found it difficult to get the help needed to parent children?

#### 5. Contextual and cultural issues

What are some of the issues that South Asian parents face in Canada in raising their children?

Would these be different in your previous country?

#### 6. Perspective of difference

Do you feel that your parenting is different from mainstream parenting?

Has it been difficult for you to raise your children since coming to Canada?

What have some of these difficulties been?

Do you think that the experiences of other South Asian parents are similar to yours?

## 6. Closing question

Is there anything else you would like to add about any of the questions or issues discussed today?

(Additional thoughts, comments or opinions you may have about our discussions.)

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