

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
of  
CONTEMPORARY  
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH


JCER

# International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research (IJCER)

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## Mothers' Punishment Styles for Their Children: A Qualitative Study

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Article History

Received: 01.05.2022

Received in revised form: 13.08.2023

Accepted: 09.09.2023

Article Type: Research Article



### To cite this article:

Savci, H., & Aysan, F. (2023). Mothers' Punishment Styles for Their Children: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 10(3), 735-744. <https://doi.org/10.52380/ijcer.2023.10.3.475>

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## Mothers' Punishment Styles for Their Children: A Qualitative Study\*

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### Abstract

The aim of the present study is to analyze the punishment styles used by mothers in the process of teaching behaviors to their children. To accomplish this objective, data were collected from 26 mothers with at least one child aged between 3 and 11 years, utilizing a semi-structured interview format. The gathered data underwent content analysis. The analysis revealed that mothers used two distinct punishment styles: Verbal/Physical Violence and Verbal/Physical Restraint. Verbal/Physical Restraint includes maternal behaviors such as restricting children's access to something they like or want, not talking to them at all or talking less, sending them to a different place and making them stay there for a while, and ignoring them audio-visually for a while. Verbal/Physical Violence includes maternal behaviors such as rebuking, threatening, beating, getting angry, raising her voice, yelling, and speaking harshly to children. The results of the study were discussed within the framework of the literature and recommendations were made.

**Keywords:** Mother, discipline, punishment, punishment style

### Introduction

Parent-child interactions during early development exert a profound influence on a child's future relationships, mental well-being, and self-perception, a premise extensively explored within numerous theoretical frameworks and extensive empirical research. Notably, attachment theory, schema theory, and object relations theory have collectively contributed to our understanding of this phenomenon. A substantial body of research underscores the pivotal role of early maternal (or caregiver) interactions in shaping a child's trajectory. Attachment theorists contend that the parent-child relationship bears enduring implications for a child's capacity to forge future interpersonal bonds. As Bowlby (1973) articulated, "An undesired child not only experiences rejection from their parental figures but also internalizes a sense of unworthiness in the eyes of others." Conversely, a child who receives abundant affection tends to grow up not only feeling secure in their parents' love but also harboring the belief that they are inherently lovable. Consequently, our initial encounters with caregivers serve as the cornerstone upon which we construct our future relationship templates. Similarly, object relations theorists posit that children form unconscious representations of significant figures within their environment, with the primary caregiver holding a pivotal role in this process. These internalized parental images transcend mere substitutes for physical presence, profoundly shaping how children perceive and interact with others in subsequent relationships. In essence, the quality of attachment a child forms with their parents significantly influences their capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships with important individuals later in life (Burger, 2019). Additionally, schema theory postulates that adverse childhood experiences during parent-child interactions give rise to early maladaptive schemas. Typically originating within the nuclear family unit, these schemas exert a potent influence on an individual's behavior in adulthood. Adults often perceive their schemas as veritable truths, consequently guiding their interpretation of subsequent life events. This, in turn, impacts an individual's thoughts, emotions, actions, and interpersonal dynamics, often leading them to inadvertently replicate the detrimental conditions experienced during their formative years (Young et al., 2003).

Empirical studies consistently affirm the theoretical propositions concerning the profound impact of parent/caregiver-child interactions on various facets of a child's development. Research has unveiled a multifaceted relationship between the quality of this interaction and several key domains, including personality (Brand et al., 2009), emotional intelligence (Alegre, 2011), psychopathology (Kopala-Sibley et al., 2017), peer

\* A part of this study was presented as an oral presentation at the "1st Bilsele International World Science and Research Congress."

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relationships (Deković & Meeus, 1997), and engagement in risky behaviors (Liu, 2020). Notably, the presence of positive parent/caregiver-child interaction serves as a protective factor against adverse outcomes, encompassing issues like suicide (Donath et al., 2014) and substance use (O'Byrne et al., 2002). Consequently, the parent/caregiver-child relationship emerges as a pivotal predictor, with the potential to yield both advantageous and disadvantageous consequences for the child's future well-being.

According to Bowlby, an infant needs a warm and loving mother early in life, and the mother is an important attachment figure for the infant. The presence of a nurturing mother figure, or a suitable substitute, is crucial for the emotional development of an infant, and even small separations at a young age can potentially hinder this development (van der Horst & van der Veer, 2010). The quality of interaction between a mother and child has a significant impact on the child's development in many ways. According to widely accepted research, mothers who have accepting and democratic attitudes tend to have a positive influence on their children, while mothers who are authoritarian and rely heavily on punishment tend to have a negative impact on their children (Baumrind, 1966, Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Lamborn et al., 1991; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). Punishment, in particular, has attracted significant attention as one of the maternal behaviors that negatively affect children (Gershoff, 2002a).

Punitive behaviors administered by parents are regarded as a means of disciplining children across many cultures (Gershoff et al., 2010). However, such punitive actions can also lead to child abuse (Zolotor et al., 2011). Punishment is defined as the application of a negative stimulus to diminish or eradicate a specific behavior. There is near consensus on two primary categories of punishment: verbal and corporal punishment (Abolfotouh et al., 2009; Straus & Mathur, 1996). Various parental behaviors are encompassed within the domain of corporal punishment. Abolfotouh et al. (2009) delineate physical and severe corporal punishment behaviors as follows: Spanking the buttocks with hands, striking the child's buttocks with an object, slapping the face or head, pulling hair, shaking, pinching, twisting ears, and coercing the child to adopt an uncomfortable position are all classified as forms of moderate physical punishment. In contrast, actions such as striking the child with an object on areas other than the buttocks, kicking, burning, beating, threatening with a knife or gun, and choking are all considered severe physical punishment. Additionally, verbal punishment behaviors frequently employed by parents encompass expressions of anger, shouting, yelling, insulting, swearing, and issuing threats (Evans et al., 2012). It is important to note that physical punishment is linked to physical abuse, whereas verbal punishment is associated with emotional abuse.

Parental punishment behaviors are widespread worldwide. For instance, a study revealed that over 90% of toddlers have encountered spanking or other forms of corporal punishment (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994). Another study indicated that slightly more than a third of parents admitted to using physical discipline with their infants (under 1 year old), while 94% reported employing such methods with toddlers aged 3 to 5 (Straus & Stewart, 1999). In a Turkish study, it was observed that all participating mothers resorted to various forms of punishment, with physical punishment being the predominant method employed (Buldukoglu & Kukulu, 2008). Buldukoglu and Kukulu (2008) further noted that, from a traditional Turkish perspective, many parents consider corporal punishment a legitimate and effective means of discipline. Indeed, corporal punishment is often perceived as socially acceptable and normative within Turkish parenting practices. Virtually all children in Turkey experience parental punishment at some point in their lives. An investigation into child punishment by parents across six European countries (Bulgaria, Germany, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Romania, and Turkey) revealed that corporal punishment is most prevalent in Turkey and Lithuania. Notably, these two countries still legally permit the use of corporal punishment unlike the other countries in the study (Durivage et al., 2015).

The act of disciplining children through punishment can potentially result in numerous adverse outcomes for the child. In a meta-analysis study that scrutinized the associations between parental corporal punishment and various aspects of child behaviors and experiences, the following findings emerged: Parental corporal punishment exhibited correlations with multiple dimensions of child development, encompassing heightened immediate compliance and aggression, alongside diminished levels of moral internalization and mental well-being (Gershoff, 2002b). The collective body of research suggests that parental punishment is linked to elevated levels of antisocial conduct (Lansford et al., 2011), psychological challenges (Afifi et al., 2012), and aggressive behavior (Taylor et al., 2010) within the child and adolescent populations.

The cultural acceptance of parental punishment as a norm in Turkey contributes to an increased prevalence of children experiencing punitive actions. Nonetheless, these disciplinary behaviors exert a detrimental impact on children in various dimensions. This study endeavors to elucidate the styles of punishment employed by Turkish mothers, thereby offering a comprehensive exploration of behaviors that, while considered customary, may indeed be characterized as "abusive."

## Method

### Model of the Study

This study investigates the disciplinary approaches employed by mothers in the upbringing of their children, employing a qualitative methodology. Specifically, the research was conducted utilizing a phenomenological design. The investigators gathered and subsequently analyzed qualitative data by means of a semi-structured interview questionnaire that they devised for this purpose.

### Participants

This study encompassed 26 mothers, each having at least one child within the age range of 3 to 11, who met the inclusion criteria of being literate and employing punitive measures as a form of discipline. A convenience sampling method was employed to select participants. Descriptive statistics pertaining to the mothers are detailed in Table 1.

Tablo 1. Descriptive statistics of participants

Variable		n	%
Age	It varies between 27 and 41. ( $\bar{X}_{\text{year}} = 29.33$ ).		
Number of children	1 ile 3 arasında değişmektedir ( $\bar{X}_{\text{children}} = 2.2$ ).		
Perceived socio-economic level	Low	1	.04
	Middle	22	.84
	High	2	.08
	Very high	1	.04
	Total	26	100
Mother's education level	Primary school graduate	5	.19
	Middle school graduate	6	.23
	High school graduate	8	.31
	University graduate	7	.27
	Total	26	100
Spouse's education level	Primary school graduate	2	.08
	Middle school graduate	5	.19
	High school graduate	8	.31
	University graduate	11	.42
	Total	26	100

As depicted in Table 1, the mothers exhibited an average age of 29.33 years, with an average number of 2.2 children per mother. A significant majority of the mothers (84%) self-assessed their socioeconomic status as middle-class. Furthermore, it was noted that mothers and their husbands possessed varying levels of educational attainment.

### Instrument and Process

In this study, a data collection instrument in the form of a semi-structured interview questionnaire, devised by the researchers, was employed. The semi-structured interview questionnaire comprises two distinct sections. The initial section encompasses inquiries related to participants' age, number of children, self-perceived socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and the educational background of their spouses. Meanwhile, the second section comprises a single query concerning the punitive styles employed by mothers during the process of teaching behaviors to their children.

The solitary query within the semi-structured interview questionnaire was augmented by the inclusion of probing questions aimed at gathering more comprehensive data. The primary objective of employing probing questions is to elicit more detailed insights and information. Probing questions, as delineated by Kvale (1994), serve as a means for the researcher to delve deeper into the subject matter.

In the development of the semi-structured interview questions, an extensive literature review was conducted encompassing the disciplinary methods employed by mothers in shaping their children's behavior and the principles of phenomenological research. Subsequently, a semi-structured questionnaire comprising a single query pertaining to mothers' approaches to disciplining their children was formulated. This questionnaire

underwent a review process by three experts, including one professor and two associate professors, who specialize in academic research concerning mother-child interactions. Their insights were solicited to assess the questionnaire's adequacy. Ultimately, it was determined that the single question, "What kinds of punishments do you employ in the process of teaching behavior to your child?" provided a satisfactory level of coverage. Data collection was executed using this questionnaire, with the researchers actively participating in the data-gathering process. Initially, mutually convenient dates and times were established with each participant. Written responses were obtained from all participants, and the interview sessions were observed to typically span 10 to 15 minutes in duration. The data collection process took place in the year 2023.

Following the completion of the interviews, all data were transcribed and subjected to analysis. Initially, a comprehensive reading of all interviews was conducted twice, followed by the coding of interview notes. Subsequently, related codes were aggregated to establish sub-themes. The analytical approach employed in this study was content analysis, which aims to elucidate concepts and relationships capable of elucidating the gathered data. In content analysis, data undergo a process of conceptualization, organization of concepts, and eventual thematic identification. Essentially, content analysis serves the purpose of defining the data and unveiling the inherent truths concealed within (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, an inductive analysis method was utilized within the framework of content analysis. Inductive analysis serves to unearth the underlying concepts and interconnections between these concepts through the coding process, effectively constituting a form of theorization. In this methodology, themes are derived from codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The initial stage of content analysis entails coding the data, which involves assigning labels to segments of the data. In this study, the coding approach of "coding based on concepts derived from the data" was adopted. This coding method strives to analyze the data from an inductive standpoint (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Qualitative data analysis was facilitated using the MAXQDA Package Program.

## Results

Codes and sub-themes were determined based on the data obtained through a semi-structured interview form based on phenomenological research. While presenting the findings, the participants were coded as M(Mother)1, M2, M3.... In this study, two sub-themes were determined as the mothers' punishing style of their children. These sub-themes were named Verbal/Physical Violence and Verbal/Physical Restraint. First, the results for the Verbal/Physical Violence sub-theme and then the findings for the Verbal/Physical Restraint sub-theme were presented. The sub-themes related to mothers' punishing styles of their children are presented in Figure 1 and the codes of the sub-themes are presented in Table 2 with their frequencies.

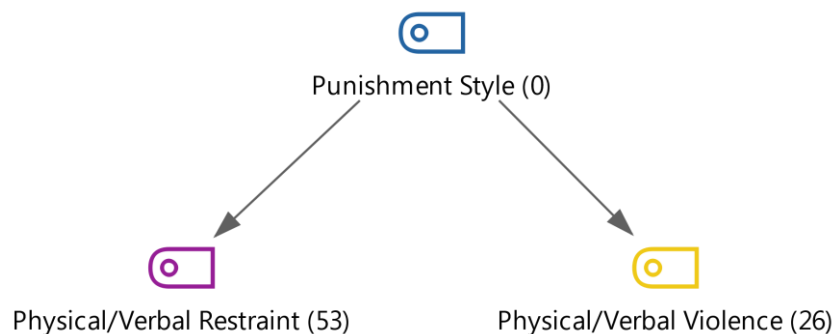


Figure 1. Sub-themes for mothers' punishment styles

Table 2. Sub-themes and codes related to mothers' punishment styles

Physical/Verbal Restraint	53
Banning something he/she likes or wants	24
To be offended/not to speak	13
Staying away physically	8
Ignoring	8
Physical/Verbal Violence	26
Rebuke	7
Threaten	6
Raise voice/yell	4
Angry	4

Beat	2
Speak harshly	2
Grouch	1

As seen in Table 1, mothers use Verbal/Physical Restraint and Verbal/Physical Violence styles when punishing their children, respectively. The codes that make up the Verbal/Physical Restraint sub-theme are restricting children's access to something they like or want, not talking to them at all or talking less, sending them to a different place and making them stay there for a while, and ignoring them audio-visually for a while. The codes of the Verbal/Physical Restraint sub-theme are presented in Figure 2.

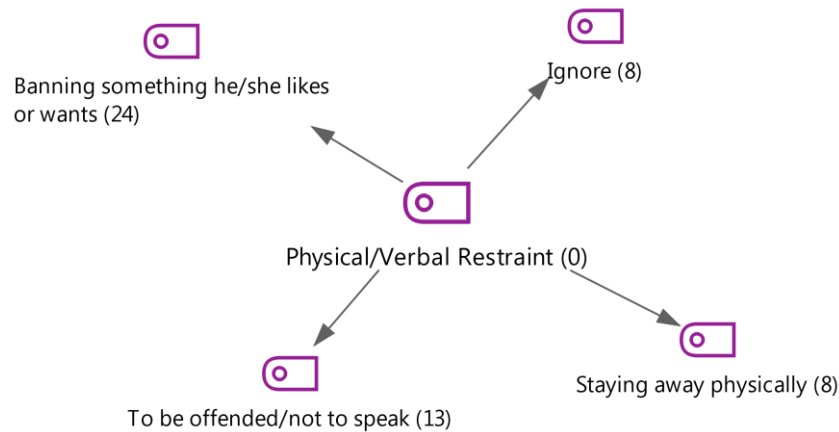


Figure 2. Codes for Verbal/Physical Restraint sub-theme

Some participant views on the sub-theme of Verbal/Physical Restriction are presented below.

I restrict her from playing with toys for a while (M26): Code for banning something he/she likes or wants

I deprive her of something she wants (M24): Code for banning something he/she likes or wants

I do not answer his questions for a while (M16): Code for ignore

If I am very angry, I ignore him/her (around 20 minutes) (M14): Code for ignore

I punish him/her by not talking to him/her, by resenting him/her (M25): Code for to be offended/not to speak

My punishment is not talking to them (M1): Code for to be offended/not to speak

I lock him in the room sometimes (M20): Code for staying away physically

I send him to his room; I don't let him leave the room until he realizes his mistake and apologizes (M18): Code for staying away physically

When the participant views on the Verbal/Physical Restraint sub-theme are examined, it is seen that mothers exhibit behaviors such as restricting their children's access to something they like or want, not talking to them at all or talking less, sending them to a different place and making them stay there for a while, and ignoring them audio-visually for a while in order to punish them. When these views are evaluated as a whole, it can be said that the title Verbal/Physical Restraint is appropriate for these views.

The codes that make up the Verbal/Physical Violence sub-theme are rebuking, threatening, raising voice/yelling, getting angry, beating, speaking harshly, and gouching, respectively. The codes of the Verbal/Physical Violence sub-theme are presented in Figure 3.

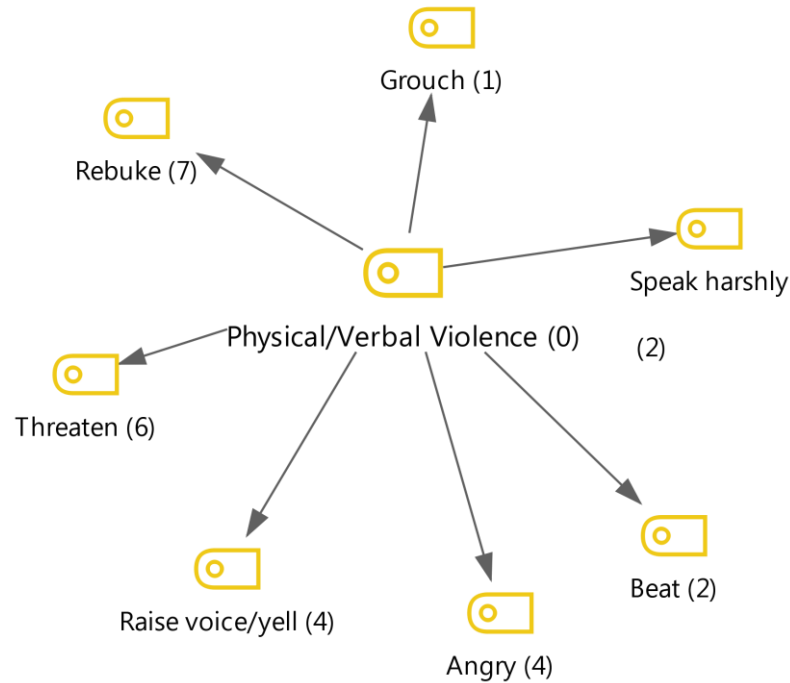


Figure 3. Codes for Verbal/Physical Violence sub-theme

Some participant views on the sub-theme of verbal/physical violence are presented below.

I rebuke him when he does something very bad (M23): Code for rebuke

I say threatening words like "Look, I won't send him there, I won't give him away" (M21): code for threatening

I raise my voice and talk about behaviors I do not like (M9): Code for raising voice/yelling

When I shout, they disappear (M4): Code for raising voice/yelling

I usually speak harshly (M5): Code for speaking harshly

I reproach them (M13): Code of grouch

I use physical violence (M15): Code for beating

I get angry when they misbehave (M17): Code for angry

When the participant views the sub-theme of Verbal/Physical Violence is examined, it is seen that mothers exhibit the behaviors of rebuking, threatening, beating, getting angry, raising their voices, yelling, and speaking harshly to their children in order to punish them. When these views are evaluated as a whole, it can be said that the title Verbal/Physical Violence is appropriate for these views.

Finally, a word cloud of the punishment styles used by mothers towards their children was created. The word cloud is presented in Figure 4.

# Banning something he/she likes or wants

To be offended/not to speak



Figure 4. Word cloud for mothers' punishment styles

When the word cloud is examined, it is seen that the most prominent punishment behaviors are banning something he/she likes or wants, being offended/not speaking, staying away physically, ignoring, and rebuking.

## Discussion and Recommendations

In the present study, it was found that mothers used two different styles of punishment: Verbal/Physical Violence and Verbal/Physical Restraint. Verbal/Physical Restraint includes maternal behaviors such as restricting children's access to something they like or want, not talking to them at all or talking less, sending them to a different place and making them stay there for a while, and ignoring them audio-visually for a while. Verbal/Physical Violence includes maternal behaviors such as rebuking, threatening, beating, getting angry, raising her voice, yelling, and speaking harshly to children.

Atli et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive examination of parental disciplinary styles and motivations, revealing that parents employ punitive measures in response to various behaviors exhibited by their children. These behaviors encompass academic issues, notably low school performance, social transgressions such as disrespect towards elders, arriving home late, and dishonesty, excessive and problematic use of technology (e.g., prolonged engagement with phones, computers, tablets), and neglect of self-care tasks, including disorganization of clothing. Parents utilize an array of punitive techniques to address their children's negative behaviors, encompassing financial measures like withholding allowances and refraining from purchasing toys, activity-based restrictions such as prohibiting outings or television viewing, physical actions including slapping, verbal expressions of displeasure such as anger and yelling, as well as emotional responses like depriving the child of affection. These findings bear a resemblance to the outcomes of our study. In a separate investigation conducted by Atli et al. (2020), it was determined that parents employed disciplinary methods involving response cost, verbal and emotional reprimands, and corporal punishment. Similarly, Buz and Ülküer (1988) identified parents' employment of facial expressions, verbal admonitions, and physical violence as means of punishment. Additionally, Kutlu et al. (2007) delved into the methods employed by mothers in punishing their children, uncovering a range of disciplinary actions such as shouting loudly, confinement within rooms, physical chastisement, reduction of allowances, restrictions on socializing with friends, silent treatment, refusal to purchase desired items, and confinement within bathroom and toilet spaces. The disciplinary approaches adopted by parents in Turkey align closely with the findings of our study.

Similar to Turkey, parents around the world employ punitive measures to discipline their children. For instance, in a study conducted by Straus and Stewart (1999), it was revealed that approximately 94% of American children aged 3 and 4 had experienced at least one instance of parental spanking within the previous year. A recent comprehensive investigation aimed to provide a global perspective on corporal punishment, specifically examining its variations between mothers and fathers in the context of daughters and sons across nine different countries. This research involved interviews with 1,398 mothers, 1,146 fathers, and 1,417 children aged 7 to 10 in China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States. The study's findings indicated that within the surveyed population, approximately 54% of girls and 58% of boys had encountered mild forms of corporal punishment. Furthermore, 13% of girls and 14% of boys had experienced severe corporal punishment within the past month, administered by their parents or other household members. Additionally, 17% of parents believed that the application of corporal punishment was essential for effectively raising their children. Notably, boys experienced corporal punishment more frequently than girls, and mothers tended to employ corporal punishment more frequently than fathers. The research also unveiled significant disparities among countries, with Sweden reporting the lowest incidence of corporal punishment and Kenya the



highest (Lansford et al., 2010). It is crucial to acknowledge that physical punishment can be associated with child abuse. A decade-long study analyzing emergency room visits in the United States discovered that over 10% of blunt trauma injuries sustained by young children were attributed to abuse (DiScala et al., 2000). This underscores the potential connection between physical punishment and the occurrence of child abuse.

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the methods employed by mothers in disciplining their children. While qualitative research, by its very nature, has inherent limitations in terms of generalizability, it offers the advantage of yielding in-depth insights. Specifically, this study delves into the various disciplinary techniques adopted by mothers. Future research endeavors could explore additional dimensions of this topic, including the underlying motivations driving mothers to discipline their children, the consequences stemming from specific punishment styles, and the potential correlations between these styles and the mental well-being of children. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there is currently no established scale in the Turkish context that assesses parents' disciplinary styles with regard to their children. The insights garnered from this study could serve as a foundation for the development of such a scale. Finally, it is recommended that future research endeavors employ quantitative methodologies characterized by a higher degree of generalizability to investigate the disciplinary approaches employed by mothers in relation to their children.

### Acknowledgements or Notes

The authors declare that they have no personal and financial conflict of interest associated with this publication to disclose. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Author (s) Contribution Rate

The authors contributed equally to the paper.

### Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Approval

Ethical permission was obtained from Dokuz Eylul University Social for this research.

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