Childrearing and child participation in Jamaican families
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Existing research in Jamaica on children and families has focused on family structure and function. The recent worldwide focus on the rights of children, particularly young children, has highlighted the absence of research on child rights in Jamaica. This article explores the implementation of protection and participation rights within the family, with a specific focus on protection from harsh punishment and abuse, including harsh work.

Six child focus groups with 60 children and eight parent focus groups with 44 adults were held, with focus groups being socio-demographically representative of urban inner-city, urban middle-class and rural groups. Children were between 7 and 12 years and parents between 24 and 45 years.

The children described a wide range of family structures. Harsh discipline was more common than demonstrated affection and approval, and levels of meaningful child participation were low across classes. The majority of parents believed in exercising strong authority, valued obedience and manners in their children, and defended the use of corporal punishment. Many parents described the interventions to amend their own life scripts in the ways they raised their children. This resulted in parental attention to children’s education and economic advancement, provision of physical comforts and emotional support, altered approaches to corporal punishment and guidance on relationships.

Using reflections of their own childhood, the development of amended scripts for parents is recommended as a powerful tool to encourage greater participatory rights for children and improve protection rights by reducing the use of harsh disciplinary measures and requirements for adult forms of work.

Keywords: Caribbean; parenting styles; parenting practices; child rights

Introduction
There has been much research in Jamaica on children and families over the last few decades. Research in the 1950s and 1960s was primarily qualitative and described the family structures in which the majority of Jamaican children lived and the interactions between children and family members. This research was important as it changed the views of Jamaican families as dysfunctional or pathological when viewed through the normative lens of the western/European middle class which saw ‘family’ as father-mother-children under one roof, usually married (Clarke 1999). In Jamaica, marriage has historically been the norm for the minority middle and upper classes, and occasionally for other groups as a step that is taken later in life as one’s financial conditions improve. Child-bearing and childrearing most often begin within ‘visiting’ relationships, where the mother is young and often still living at home with her family, while the child’s father visits.

Research from 2000 onwards, using information from longitudinal cohort studies of children, quantified these family structures and their changes throughout the lives of children. The studies
J. Brown and S. Johnson reported that at birth, 50% of biological parents were in a visiting relationship, 35% in a common-law relationship and 15% were married (Samms-Vaughan 2000, 2004, 2006). By the time the children were six, 40% of their parents had no relationship, common-law relationships had dropped to 28%, 6% were in a visiting relationship, while a few more married (22%). By age 16, parents with no relationship rose to 63%, common-law relationships were down to 10%, and marriage rose to 26%, with few visiting relationships remaining. For almost 17%, the father figure was now a stepfather or mother’s partner. Grandparents and other relatives served as mother figure for nearly 10% and father figure for almost 6%.

Research on child-rearing practices and parenting had its genesis in a few studies in the 1980s, but saw a rapid increase in the 1990s and 2000s (Grantham-McGregor, Landmann, and Desai 1983; Evans 1989; Leo-Rhynie 1993; Brown and Chevannes 1998; Samms-Vaughan 2000, 2004; Bailey, Branche, and Henry-Lee 2002; Anderson 2007). Important findings from these research projects included the high value placed on children in their own right and on children’s education as a means of upward social and financial mobility, the authoritarian nature of parenting and the associated use of harsh disciplinary practices, high levels of parenting stress, the restriction of the father’s role in parenting to financial support and the limited interaction between parents and children in play and other activities that promote cognitive and socio-emotional development. Limited access to parenting support and education services was also identified. The impact of these factors on child outcomes was also investigated. Socio-economic status, parental education, parenting stress and the quality of the home learning environment were identified as those factors that had the most significant and global impact affecting children’s cognitive development, academic performance and behaviour (Samms-Vaughan 2004).

The concept of entitlements as children gained ground worldwide within the past few decades, and was confirmed in Jamaica with the early ratification of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC included participation and protection rights alongside those rights more readily understood and accepted, such as the right to a name, shelter and food. With the acceptance of child rights within the government of Jamaica’s legislative framework, there emerged the need to define and study the understanding and implementation of these rights, particularly in the context of child rearing. There have been few studies on child participation and protection within families in Jamaica. One qualitative report (Brown 2003) suggested that participation rights were the least recognised or valued of the range of children’s rights.

This article aims to fill some of the existing gaps in research on child rights by investigating child participation and protection within families from the perspective of parents and children.

**Methodology**

The study was qualitative in nature. Separate focus group sessions were conducted for parents and children during the period June–July 2006. All children were between seven and twelve years old. Focus group participants were selected to ensure adequate geographical (urban/rural) and social class representation; three groups were identified: urban inner city, urban middle class and rural.

**Child focus groups**

School principals facilitated the selection of child participants based on the child’s ability to participate and the likelihood of obtaining parental consent. School principals also released children from classes for a day to allow participation and allowed the use of school libraries for focus groups. A familiar setting was preferred to reduce anxiety.

All child focus groups were conducted with the same facilitator and recorder. The facilitator first explained the purpose of the group, obtained assent from the children and established rules.
for participation (e.g. ‘only you can tell your story’, and ‘only one person speaking at a time). Children were also advised that they were free to withdraw from the discussions at any time. Activities used to encourage participation and discussion included reading stories, drawing pictures, miming and action games.

Focus group activities were designed to explore the meaning of family; the methods used to display affection; the right to protection from abuse within families as determined by conflict resolution and punishment methods; the right to protection from exploitation as defined by the nature of work that children performed; and the right to participation in the home and family as determined by the degree to which children’s views are heard and respected.

Parent focus groups

Parent focus groups were conducted in community settings. The same facilitator and recorder were present at all sessions. Parent focus groups explored all the themes that were included in the child focus groups, but additionally included the meaning of parenthood and the attendant responsibilities.

To better understand the roles parents assume and why, in-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen of the participants, selected to provide gender and socio-economic representation of the parent group, as well as a range of perspectives as suggested by responses in focus group discussions. An important aspect of these interviews was the parents’ reflections on their own upbringing.

Results

In total, 14 focus groups were held, eight with parents and six with children. The parents and children in the focus groups were not related.

Child focus groups

Some 60 children participated, 27 males (45.0 %) and 33 females (55.0 %). The six child focus groups consisted of two focus groups in each socio-demographic category stratified by two age-group bands: 7–9 years ($n=31$) and 10–12 years ($n=29$). There was an over-representation of children from the urban inner-city group ($n=28$, 46.7%), with children from the urban middle class comprising 23.3% ($n=14$) and those from rural settings comprising 30.0% ($n=18$).

Children participated actively, enjoying the opportunity to discuss their ideas and feelings with the adults present. Only three children opted to leave the sessions briefly, but a few were quiet throughout without leaving and a few seemed subdued by specific discussions.

Occasionally, children expressed their wish to share their ideas privately; they were given the opportunity to speak with a single individual.

Family structure and functioning

The children described a variety of family structures. Rural children indicated a larger family size than urban children, often consisting of siblings with different maternity or paternity who did not live in the same home. Urban inner-city children described living with their mothers and visiting their fathers; some included their mother’s current partner as stepfathers. Several of these children drew their families in multiple houses. For example, one child drew eight houses for (a) himself with mother and brother; (b) father with three children in another; (c) other siblings and partners with children in four others; and (d) two aunts and their children in two more. Urban middle-class children reported siblings elsewhere in Jamaica, and parents and other relatives in
the United States, China, Ireland, Japan, and Canada. Most of these children had fathers present in their home.

Children in all groups spoke of families as important for providing food, shelter and clothing, and school supplies. Children from the urban middle-class group generally spoke positively about the family’s role in ensuring happiness (‘goes to work for you’, ‘buys you presents’). Inner-city children’s responses, however, also identified some negative qualities among families (e.g. ‘some live bad, some live good’, ‘some are mean’). The older inner-city children recognised that mothers (and sometimes fathers) sacrificed for them and provided for children as best they could. One child said, ‘No matter how many bad things you do, they still love you.’

**Parent–child interaction and expressions of affection**

All groups of children reported smiles, hugs and praise as expressions of affection; inner-city and rural children additionally reported being ‘treated like a baby’. Urban middle-class children also mentioned presents or monetary rewards for chores or school achievement. Some inner-city children indicated the absence of disapproval (‘they don’t curse’, ‘they don’t beat’) as indications of affection.

The middle-class children were able to cite more experiences of sustained positive interaction than the other two groups, including playing games, doing chores together, helping with homework, watching TV and going out to eat, to the beach, the movies, or shopping.

The rural and inner-city children’s positive experiences of parent–child interaction were limited to activities such as a parent buying or cooking something they liked, telling them to ‘go take up your book’ or ‘go and play’, and receiving money. The absence of disapproval and being treated like a baby were also cited. Some children reported their parents as not having time for them and not having fun with them.

**Conflict resolution and punishment**

Children from all groups were more expressive about negative interactions than positive, but also reported parental disapproval or punishment for similar behaviours: conflict with a sibling or peer, ‘talking back’ to parents or other adults, failure to perform chores, coming home late from school, and not finishing homework. The middle-class children added running up the phone bill and staying on the computer too long and an inner-city child reported being beaten when he asked for money.

All groups of children described harsh disciplinary measures, including beatings with objects such as belts, rulers, garden hose and boards. Two children from the inner-city group demonstrated scars from beatings. Rural children, in particular, mentioned emotional abuse (cursing and shouting) and being made to stand in the sun or in uncomfortable positions for prolonged periods. Some of the older middle-class children reported different forms of emotional abuse: fear of their parents, ignoring, and being made to feel guilty.

Many of the children in the groups described anger and hurt at physical punishments, and recommended discussion and withdrawal of privileges of various forms as alternatives. A smaller number of children, however, particularly from the inner-city group, reported a preference for beatings because of their short duration (‘it wears off in a little bit’) or because beatings were necessary for children to learn. In discussions children revealed their struggle to understand the dichotomy of harsh punishments through the use of phrases such as ‘beating because of love’, ‘beating so you learn and behave’, ‘they beat you then dress your hurts’. The most sad and angry children no longer believed any of these phrases.

When children were asked about their response to children’s misbehaviour as parents of the future, some spoke of using more democratic or flexible discipline, while others projected their
present anger and hurt: ‘I would give them everything they do to us; I would tape their hands; I would beat them so hard they can’t talk; I would slap the living daylights out of them; I would tie them to the bed, and thump them in their mouth …’

Children also spoke of specific causes of distress, such as witnessing fighting between their parents, being left alone at home for security purposes, and being asked to leave home when various persons visit their mothers.

**Children’s work**

The list of home-based chores was long for all groups, but the weight of child tasks was greatest for rural children. Both boys and girls did extensive chores, including washing their own clothes and those of family members and housekeeping chores. Other tasks were more gender defined. Boys were particularly involved in heavy labour (assisting with construction and agriculture, carrying water) and girls with cooking. Children from the inner-city group were primarily involved in housekeeping tasks and caring for younger siblings. Middle-class children’s chores were also chiefly housekeeping and caring for younger siblings, but as many middle-class households have hired domestic help, these children often do chores ‘when the helper is not there’, or ‘on the weekend’.

A few middle-class children received an allowance or occasional money for small chores, but in other groups this was rare. Girls from the middle class were the only ones reporting working outside the home. Some received pay for work linked to family businesses, babysitting or pet minding in the neighbourhood. No boys reported outside work.

Middle-class children expressed concern that their fathers did little work in the home and rural children seemed worried and overwhelmed with the level of responsibility assigned to them in caring for younger siblings. Several complained of gender and age bias in assigned chores; older and male siblings had fewer chores to perform.

**Children’s voices and participation**

Apart from two girls in the middle-class group who described otherwise, children reported that their parents were not interested in hearing their thoughts or feelings. The children stated that they do not usually have discussions with their parents because they didn’t believe it would make any difference (‘She wouldn’t do anything, so I don’t tell her’), or would lead to long lectures or punishment. For some children, discussing their feelings with their parents seemed a strange concept.

Children in all groups reported little participation in decision making, limited to opportunities to choose leisure-time activities, clothing and food. Only some of the middle-class children spoke of parents sometimes taking their feelings or preferences into account in other family activities. Many expressed both sadness and anger at their parents’ resistance to acknowledge or to give sufficient attention to their feelings.

**Parent focus groups**

There was a total of 44 adult participants – 18 male (40.9%) and 26 female. A total of 60 children participated, 27 males (45.0%) and 33 females (55.0%). The eight parent focus groups consisted of three urban inner-city groups \((n=17, 38.6\%)\), two urban middle-class groups \((n=10, 22.7\%)\) and three rural groups \((n=17, 38.6\%)\). The mean number of participants per group was 5.5. Group participants ranged in age from 24 to 45 years. The number of children ranged from 2 to 11, with a mean of 2.5. Fifteen participants were married (34.9%), 14 were single (32.6%), 11 were in
common-law relationships (25.0%), 2 were divorced and one was in a visiting relationship. The union status of one participant was not determined.

Participants from the urban middle-class and rural groups were more likely to be married; participants from the urban middle class had fewer children (one or two).

The parent focus group discussions confirmed children’s reports of harsh emotional and physical punishment and the lack of participation of children in decision making. Parents reported the high value of obedience and the consequent absence of discussion and negotiation. Parents also confirmed the limited discussion and inclusion of children’s feelings in decision making in the family. Academic achievement was highly prized and parental sacrifice for educational needs was reported from all groups.

Parent in-depth interviews
The seventeen participants who provided in-depth interviews included 3 men and 3 women from the urban inner-city group, 2 women and 2 men from the urban middle-class group and 2 men and 5 women from the rural group. The rural interviewees spanned the poorest representatives of the entire sample, though some represented the rural lower middle class. The majority of the parents interviewed reported that their parents were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including the middle-class representatives.

Most of the rural group graduated from secondary schools, considered inferior in offerings to the urban private high schools. The inner-city group of parents had either completed school to Grade 9 or were secondary school dropouts. The middle-class parents were mostly persons with a first degree, considerable professional experience beyond their high school education, and/or participants in continuing education programmes.

There were common parenting practices noted among the groups of interviewees. Parents reported their pleasure at parenting, particularly when children were younger. All parents stated that they wanted their children to have more opportunities and a less harsh upbringing than they had. Several of the parents expressed the intention ‘to be there’ for their children emotionally, for their children to know they can count on them despite economic difficulties or geographic distance. This was often stated as different from what they experienced in their own childhood. They also reported their commitment to their children’s education as a critical route to future success and opportunities. The surveillance and protection of their children, especially girls, from unhealthy peer influences, from sexual predators, and from community violence was recognised as an important aspect of parenting. Male children were afforded greater freedom, but also received more harsh punishment. Virtually all parents placed a high value on their children’s obedience, mannerliness, and respect for adults and their authority.

Almost all parents defended the use of corporal punishment (‘beating’) as a justified mode of disciplining children, but most described using mild forms. Some inner-city and rural parents admitted to resorting to severe beating and other harsh measures of punishment, while others used corporal punishment only rarely or not at all, as a result of harsh experiences in childhood. Only few parents described harsh disciplinary measures in association with non-negotiable authority. The majority described using ‘reasoning and beating’; they warn or discuss, then use physical punishment that can be either severe or mild. These parents felt that reasoning was absent in their childhood. In this grouping there is somewhat more and varied communication between partners and between parents and children, and non-physical alternatives to modes of discipline appear more frequently. Mothers generally meted out more punishment than fathers.

Parents gave very limited reflections or observations of their children’s emotional/social needs or their expressed likes and dislikes. Those parents who did were from the middle-class
group. The stress of parenting was mentioned by all participants; some reported experiencing stress almost incessantly.

Characteristics which are more typical of one group than the other two, though not exclusive to each group, are reported below by group.

**Urban inner-city parents**

The matrifocal nature of families was reflected in parents’ current family structures and in their own experiences as children. Two of the interviewed women reflected on their dependence on serial partners as a weakness, admitting that they ‘escaped’ unhappy families of origin via pregnancies in first relationships, then repeated the same story over and over. All mothers hoped that their daughters would not enter this spiral, and sometimes express this concern harshly and with little consideration for children’s feelings. However, they also recognised their own mothers’ sacrifices, and were often forgiving of impoverished parenting, vowing to do better than their own mothers or grandmothers.

Fathers enjoyed speaking about their children and sharing their stories, wishing their own financial and emotional investments recognised. Fathers in all groups described participation in parenting activities, such as overseeing homework, attending PTA and school events, and disciplining and protecting their children, whether they lived with them or not. Fathers also shared stories of personal sacrifice in order to undertake their fathering role. However, fathers also described the pain and anger they feel at their relative invisibility as fathers. They also expressed an underlying sense of helplessness as a result of their often severely constrained economic circumstances (un- or under-employment), physical distance from their children who lived elsewhere with their mothers and the pressures of managing the demands and constraints of partner relationships.

This range of experiences was also reflected in participants’ memories of their own fathers. Several interviewees of both genders had strong positive memories of their own fathers, while many others recalled negative and hurtful examples of Jamaican fatherhood, including absentee fathers, fathers with children by multiple partners and severe physical abuse.

Inner-city parents purposely promoted resilience in their children, who must ‘grow up tough’, in order to survive the harsh experiences of their environment, including poverty and violence. Some of these parents see their primary role as helping their children understand and negotiate their way through and out of the worst of these influences and on to better opportunities. While some parents report the importance of their own resilience and ‘street-wise authority’ in guiding their children, others feel victimised by the environment and unable to ensure their children’s protection and access to opportunities.

Parents manifest their intentions through active participation in PTAs, strong warnings to children about negative influences, confining children within their homes or immediate community and training children in a range of self-help and self-defence skills, and sometimes coaching them in self-defence. They report little else that they can do to protect their children.

**Rural parents**

Jamaican traditional family values were most exemplified by this group; many children lived with both mothers and fathers. Church attendance and personal religious faith figure prominently in the lives of most of these parents. There was also a common view that parents must oversee all children within the community, not just their own.

Children’s upbringing was described as strict; this was often accompanied by harsh physical punishment as with other groups. However, the rural families represented here had mediating
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factors not always present for some of the inner-city interviewees. Large extended families provided other relatives who assisted in parenting, sometimes softening the harsher treatment of stressed parents. Additionally, community mentors, such as the local teacher or nurse, also took an interest in children. More of these parents discussed strict upbringing being balanced with caring attention, and with fairness in the meting out of punishments that were seen as deserved.

Children of these rural parents were also taught self-help skills early in order to help in the running of the family. While tasks tended to be gendered ‘in principle’ (boys to be given more outside work, girls more inside), in reality many boys learn to cook, sweep and clean the house, care for siblings, iron clothes, etc. alongside their sisters, and take pride in these skills as adults. It was notable, though, that these self-help skills were recognised particularly among the rural parents as ‘natural’ for young children, eager to help their parents, but as sons became older, they were either allowed to do less or parents were unable to obtain their compliance.

Urban middle-class parents

Most of these parents were married or engaged to be married. While more equitable division of household chores among parents was reported, there was also fewer extended family supports. Several parents also had hired domestic help. Father–child interaction was reported more in these families, including activities such as playing with children, outings and holidays, and helping with homework. Mothers were still considered primarily responsible for disciplinary action, nutritional support, and domestic organisation.

Middle-class parents were more articulate in telling their stories, but also more guarded. Their ‘success’ as parents was perceived to be under a research team microscope more acutely than in the other groups. As most participants were only one generation away from poorer origins; there was both an expressed and implicit desire to maintain some of the principles gained from this upbringing. In addition, they wished to preserve for their children the benefits of higher education and opportunities. There was an assumption of positive outcomes guaranteed by position and economic security. Private school education was therefore a critical route chosen for children so that they can exceed their parents’ achievements. Middle-class parents often defer children’s chores in favour of their studies, particularly as they approach the defining exams at the end of the primary school years which determine high school placement. The schools children attend are considered important markers for their expected future options.

The type of parental stress most described by middle-class parents was related to the hard work and long hours necessary to achieve the level of economic and material support for their children, often at the expense of spending quality time with them. Parents also reported anxiety-related stress over children’s school performance, especially for boys, who are more often perceived as ‘lazy’ or under-achieving.

Many of these parents reported communication with their children as valuable; some expressed pleasure at having outspoken children who expressed their feelings and ideas. Children were reported to be engaged in family decision making, but as with the other groups, this was rarely at the expense of parental authority, or expected levels of obedience and manners. These remain strong values within the middle class as well, and define the limits of ‘democratic’ parenting.

Conclusions and recommendations

This article, as with many other publications on the Jamaican family, has identified the varying concept of family, from the typical two-parent model more common in western societies to the more common extended family of Caribbean people. Each family type has its own characteristics,
with the western model offering more consistent involvement of mothers and fathers, but the extended family offering additional support for parenting.

Regardless of the family structure and socio-demographic differences between the urban inner-city, urban middle-class and rural groups, focus groups with children and parents have demonstrated limited appreciation of the rights of children to protection from abuse in the home manifested by the use of corporal punishment and the rights of children to participation, manifested by the absence of children’s voices in discussion and decision making. Children’s work varied more among the socio-demographic groups, with inner-city and rural children actively participating in household chores and rural children in particular often participating in tasks meant for adults. The role of children in caring for younger siblings, often considered a routine part of childhood in Jamaica, raises concerns as to the weight of adult responsibility thrust upon young children, and the rights of protection of the children being cared for. Children understand this adultification, as they report being treated like a baby as a positive display of affection.

The contributions from children across groups, however, suggest that they would welcome inclusion and participation in decision making and family activities and would prefer discipline and other parental demands to be justly and moderately delivered.

In-depth interviews with parents across the class and geographic spectrum revealed what is perhaps a universal and powerful aspiration, the desire to amend the most negative patterns of one’s own childhood when providing for one’s children. Amending behaviours, however, took different forms. Using corporal punishment as the example, some parents responded to their own harsh experience by using this rarely or not at all, though still being accepting of it as a prescribed norm. Other parents perpetuated the type of beatings used by their parents, but modified the experience by adding reasoning, which was absent in their childhood.

Many parents feel the need to ‘be there for their children’, a response to their childhood experience of relative emotional absence. The importance of children’s socio-demographic and economic advancement above the level of their parents was manifested by parents’ attention to children’s education, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. In the middle-class groups, experiences of material deprivation as children motivated parents to amend the economic scripts for their children, sometimes resulting in limited parent–child interaction time.

In these amending scripts of parents, however, there are concerns about children’s rights. There remain for the most part few opportunities for most of their children to add dialogue of their own, to influence courses of action, or simply to be heard. Respectful obedience of children earns respectability for parents in the wider community, protects children from imminent dangers, and ensures compliance with school demands. ‘Talking back’ to parents and attempts to negotiate are generally defined as disrespect or rudeness. Thus child participation in family decisions, in choices of personal activities, or in affective or creative expression are not widely practiced or promoted. In these beliefs and practices, as well as in disciplinary practices, this sample confirmed common patterns described in the literature.

In considering methods to improve the understanding and appreciation of the concept of child rights to protection from abuse and participation, it is therefore not too far-fetched to recommend programmes for parents in which these needs and rights of their children are recalled from their own childhoods, in which their amending scripts are more consciously adjusted to take their children’s ideas and feelings into account, and within which children are helped to respectfully convey these ideas and feelings in ways their parents can comfortably accept without compromising their parental authority.

This becomes the challenge for the design of culturally sensitive interventions to strengthen parenting practices within Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. While this small sample of children and parents cannot claim to fully represent the wider Jamaican population, the issues presented echo much of what the literature review describes as common practices. It is envisaged that these
issues can be carried into many different contexts for further public/parental discourse for the purpose of deepening dialogue between parents and their children, and among parents, as they search for more effective, satisfying and confident approaches for guiding their children away from perceived dangers and towards positive outcomes. This study has therefore highlighted the need for larger studies to confirm and/or extend our understanding of the cultural meanings and practices of Jamaican parenting. Additionally, children’s own voices, aspirations and ideas, so often unheard or ignored, must become increasingly central to these studies as well as to ongoing public discourses.

Limitations
In an article of this length the lively flavour and emotional import of the children’s and parents’ words are regrettably sacrificed. Due to the small sample size, this article does not purport to represent the views and practices of all Jamaican parents and children.

Acknowledgements
This project was made possible with the support of the Instituto Promundo of Brazil, who invited Jamaica to be among six countries participating in a qualitative examination of parenting styles.

References