

### “The rod of discipline”: Religious discourses that defend physical punishment in the education of children and adolescents

“A vara da disciplina”: discursos de religiosos em defesa de castigos físicos para a educação de crianças e adolescentes (resumo: p. 16)

“La vara de la disciplina”: discursos de religiosos en defensa de castigos físicos para la educación de niños y adolescentes (resumen: p. 16)

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The Menino Bernardo Law prohibits the use of physical punishment and, since its enactment, has generated resistance from conservatives, especially religious groups, who consider it an intervention of the State in “family matters”. We analyzed pro-physical punishment discourses disseminated on the Internet, identifying their arguments and discursive contexts. Forty-three videos were examined and transcribed, and peer coding was performed using Atlas.ti, followed by critical discourse analysis. Recognizing the diversity of the “evangelical world” and its political positions, we identified conservative discourses about the opposition between the “Family of God” and the “State of the Devil”. Physical punishment is translated by the biblical concept of “rod” to be applied by parents, who are the authorities instituted by God. The Menino Bernardo Law is associated with chaos, loss of Christian values, and the State’s action to weaken the family.

**Keywords:** Child abuse. Religion. Internet



## Introduction

This study aims to analyze discourses disseminated on the Internet that defend the practice of physical punishment as a strategy to educate children and adolescents, mostly delivered by evangelical leaders, politicians, and producers of religious content.

Although a legal paradigm for integral protection of children and adolescents has been in force in Brazil since 1990, established in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)<sup>1</sup>, physical punishment continues to be culturally accepted as a disciplinary practice. In 2014, Law no. 13010 (*Lei Menino Bernardo* - LMB) was enacted. It prohibits the use of physical punishment and of cruel or degrading treatment in familial or formal education<sup>2</sup>. However, as expected, the enactment of a law does not replace the gradual work of cultural change<sup>3</sup>. Almost ten years have passed since the approval of LMB, but a great resistance on the part of conservatives remains, as they see the law as an intervention of the State in "family matters". The theme has been present in social media and, with the increase in the political force of conservative religious segments, especially from the 2018 elections onwards, orientations recommending the physical punishment of children and adolescents as a disciplinary resource have gained prominence.

For centuries, the body was the main platform for the imposition of obedience and subjection, with the use of force or other docility techniques targeted at domination and authority - of masters over slaves, of sovereigns over subjects, of bosses over employees, and of parents over children. A large part of Foucault's work shows disciplinary agencies undertaken as modes of management and their intrinsic relationship to power regimes<sup>4,5</sup>. The naturalization and conformity of such punitive practices were also valid for children's bodies, which should be socialized to recognize authority early on, either of the sovereign or of their parents or guardians.

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, some European societies gradually abandoned body torments in favor of other disciplinary and surveillance forms that presented "a certain discretion in the art of inflicting pain, a combination of more subtle, more subdued sufferings, deprived of their visible display"<sup>5</sup> (p. 12). From torment to a morality of "correction", the body starts to act as an intermediary in a "system of coercion and deprivation" of assets and rights. Therefore, punishment shifts "from an art of unbearable sensations to an economy of suspended rights"<sup>5</sup> (p. 15), especially the right to freedom. The "soul" should be touched in a way that "the expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations"<sup>5</sup> (p. 20). Gradually, countless scientific interlocutors (psychiatrists, psychologists, forensic specialists) step in, bringing their knowledge and helping the State to judge, find who is guilty and who is not, and decide the sentence, which would no longer be imposed through corporal punishment. A set of devices to surveil and control behaviors gradually aligns with ways of governing, and the greater reach of norms compared to laws, in the sense of normalizing and disciplining, is recognized<sup>5</sup>.



Thus, corporal punishment gives way to other disciplinary technologies that act in an uninterrupted way, scanning the use of spaces, time and movements, and allowing a thorough control and the promotion of docile bodies<sup>5</sup>. In the case of children, the school gradually assumes the role of inculcating discipline, and delimits the place of the specialists (educators, psychologists, etc.) who will undertake, with the family, in partnerships and disputes, the management of childhood. The management of children's education becomes increasingly shared between the family and the State. Thus, physical punishment is re-signified as an undesired element. Later on, it is classified as violence and violation of rights in some societies.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child<sup>6</sup> brought two powerful notions to the construction of a new view on childhood: children are subjects of rights and childhood is recognized based on a universal conceptualization. However, universal notions are grounded precisely on an overlapping, and they obscure local cultures and references. They act as universes that are almost parallel and need bridges, translations, or a minimally common grammar to enable dialog. And this is exactly what our object imposes as a challenge: a hermeneutic journey towards the understanding of religious cultural logics, of Christian reference, that invoke divine guidance for the good education of children and adolescents, having discipline and obedience as one of their ethical bases and physical punishment as the way to educate. Such guidance and this type of discourse are now disseminated as a media phenomenon, in an unimaginable scale, through digital technologies.

### **The rise of the conservative evangelical agenda**

In Brazil, the "evangelicals" form a heterogeneous religious segment composed of a large plurality of denominational groups (Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, Adventists, Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans, Mennonites, members of continental Reformed churches, among others). In addition, the orientation of the different churches that belong to the same denominational group varies greatly. There are more than 50 types of churches recognized in Brazil. The most important are the Assemblies of God connected with the General Convention (which have the largest number of adherents in the country), the Christian Congregation in Brazil, the Assemblies of God connected with the National Convention, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the Baptist Church connected with the Brazilian Convention ("traditional Baptists"), the Baptist Church connected with the National Baptist Convention ("Pentecostal Baptists"), the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the International Church of the Grace of God, God is Love Pentecostal Church, and the World Church of God's Power, among dozens of others, with prominent disputes between and within these segments.

As for the identity of these religious groups, some are recognized by researchers and/or view themselves as "conservative" regarding customs and values; others are "progressive" when it comes to issues defended in a social and political context<sup>7</sup>. Conservatism is expressed here by an agenda that defends a restrictive ideal of "Christian family", with a cis-heteronormative sexual morality; by the relativization of women's sexual and reproductive rights; and by a "right-wing" political orientation<sup>8,9</sup>.



However, in view of countless narrative disputes and fights for political representation, there are also alternations of positions in the denominational segments: sometimes they tend toward more conservative stances regarding the customs agenda, and sometimes they adopt more inclusive stances. Therefore, there is no homogeneity among the evangelicals.

With an ever-increasing number of followers in the Brazilian population<sup>10</sup>, the evangelical Christian preaching has acquired new contours, with the use of mass communication media to disseminate the message to the faithful and other people interested in receiving ministrations from spiritual authorities who have the gift of being “spokespersons” for God<sup>11,12</sup>. Here, the highlight is the role played by the “Christian family”.

This is reinforced as the neoliberal discourse on the State’s ineffectiveness as a provider of wellbeing is reverberated. The bet on the return of the family as a social protection sphere is a conservative tendency that has gained visibility<sup>13</sup>. In an extreme familial perspective, the family is responsible for social protection (replacing many public policies) and the State should only intervene in the family when it “fails” in this function.

It is important to remember that, after the 1988 Constitutional Convention (a milestone in the Brazilian political scenario in defense of the constitution of a democratic State ruled by law), religious segments that had little public incidence started to dispute and have visibility in the party political arena, as is the case of the Pentecostals<sup>8,14</sup>. Such groups strongly support the cause of “defense of life” and “family’s rights”<sup>12</sup>, leading a “conservative wave”<sup>15</sup>.

In spite of alliances between the Pentecostals and the government of president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva in his first term of office (2003 to 2006), such groups collided with feminists who held important positions within governmental institutions and who, at the time, influenced policies related to health and sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil. The debate on themes considered polemical, like decriminalization of abortion and adoption of children by same-sex couples, generated dissidence for allegedly going against what they defended as Christian principles<sup>9</sup>.

In the 2010 elections, with the advance in the agenda related to gender and sexual and reproductive rights, the tension that already existed between conservative religious groups and the government is amplified, triggering a “conservative religious activism”<sup>16</sup>. These groups start to resort to legal procedures to defend moral and religious values, remodeling sexual and reproductive rights policies and human rights policies. The 2018 elections legitimize the conservative agendas, announcing, as a strategy, a cultural/ideological change based on the appeal to the “traditional family”, as well as the symbolic summoning of the “good citizen” in defense of “morality and good customs”<sup>12,15</sup>. Within this set of ideas, we find the families’ right to educate their children according to their religious principles and based on their personal and cultural experiences, without any interferences from the State.

Therefore, our study does not aim to focus on a specific religious denomination; rather, its objective is to discuss the positions and discursive strategies of evangelical segments that go against a statute that establishes that children and adolescents have the right to be educated without physical punishment or cruel or degrading treatment.

## Methodology

At the end of 2019, we started an exploratory search in the YouTube platform using the initial descriptors “Disciplinar filhos” (Disciplining children) and “Lei da palmada” (Spanking law). Based on successive associations suggested by the platform’s algorithm, we included other search keys: “Disciplina da vara” (Discipline of the rod), “Vara da correção” (Rod of correction), “Lei Menino Bernardo” (Menino Bernardo Law), and “Disciplina dos filhos e a Bíblia” (Children discipline and the Bible). A total of 66 videos was found. The criteria to select the videos were: they must have been posted from 2014 - the year in which LMB was enacted - to the first semester of 2020, and the main characters in the videos should be religious leaders, pastors, or YouTubers/people having channels in the YouTube platform with religious characteristics. Videos made by professionals who portrayed children’s education based on academic theories were excluded. Each video was examined by two independent analysts and the final corpus of analysis was composed of 43 videos. After being downloaded by means of the application *Videodownloader*, the videos were fully transcribed. Thematic peer coding, performed by means of the software *Atlas.ti*, is described in Frame 1.

**Frame 1.** Thematic units and discursive syntheses

Thematic unit	Description	Emic categories – discursive syntheses
State and children’s education	Analyses and criticisms concerning the State’s role in children’s education	State of the devil
Menino Bernardo Law	Analyses and criticisms concerning the Menino Bernardo Law	Fascist law
Education and the Bible	Orientations and precepts on how to handle children’s education according to the biblical orientation	Rod of discipline
The role of physical punishment in child discipline	Interpretations on the disciplinary use of physical punishment	Use of the rod with love

Source: created by the authors

Our analysis was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)<sup>17</sup>, and the main analytical categories were “strength” and “intertextuality”. CDA proposes a tridimensional perspective of discourse that conducts the analysis based on the dimension of the text’s materiality, on inferences about the discursive practices contained in the text, and on the critical understanding of the text’s ideological affiliations. To support the analysis, we used Thompson’s proposition on the rhetorical modes of ideology operation<sup>18</sup>.

The research was analyzed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Instituto Fernandes Figueira - Fiocruz. Although we analyzed a public collection of videos, we did not mention the name of the speakers, nor of their YouTube channel or Church.

## Results and discussion

### The enunciative context

The videos feature religious leaders who call themselves evangelical, and are targeted at people from the same religious affiliation, mainly parents. Religious leader, here, is not defined only by a high post in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It can also refer to individuals who call themselves authorities in the religious context, with no consecration or theological education. According to Machado<sup>19</sup>, these leaders can be “politicians with confessional identity and laypeople who govern religious groups or influence public opinion within them.” (p. 40). The speakers in the videos cultivate an image of themselves associated with authority on the ways of being a “good evangelical”.

In the set of the 46 speakers present in the videos, men predominated (39). The most frequent title with which the speakers introduced themselves was pastors (25) and politicians-pastors (2), followed by YouTubers with evangelical channels (5), bible school teachers (5), congregation members (4), “evangelists” (3), and communicators-broadcasters (2). The enunciative context varied: excerpts of evangelical cults, testimonies, biblical studies, filmed excerpts of a radio program, and interlocution of questions-answers with the channel’s followers. We observed a great variation in the number of visualizations (from 20 to 1,938,344), which means that distinct spheres and levels of influence are involved.

The variety of evangelical denominations found in our sample revealed that there are protagonists of discourses in favor of the corporal punishment of children in many of them. However, as we did not work with a statistical sample, we were not able to analyze which segments are more representative in the defense of these arguments, and this was not the objective of our investigation. Thus, we decided not to identify the denominational origin of each video and considered the group representatives of “conservative strands”, recognizing that these perspectives can be present in the various segments.

The audience of the videos is addressed by the first-person plural and named “Christian mothers or fathers”. The following excerpt is an example: “we, parents, have the duty of correcting our children within love” (video 35). The speakers talk about their personal experiences, resorting to the ideological resource of unification<sup>18</sup>, evoking the notion of group and the common belonging to the “Family of God”.

### “Family of God” versus “State of the Devil”

In a significant group of discourses, the State and the evangelical families are considered antagonists and the theme of disciplining children with the use of physical punishment becomes a field of dispute. The “Family of God”, in the perspective of the analyzed videos, is reduced to the heteronormative union between a man and a woman, with their children. The protection of this familial configuration is, indeed, the banner of many evangelical candidates, who call it “traditional family” - the basis for an education that follows the biblical orientation, defended as a way of guaranteeing the “correct” moral formation for children<sup>20</sup>.



Bearing in mind that some Catholic segments also adopt conservative postures<sup>21</sup> and that the “evangelicals” are composed of different groups, it is important to mention that some evangelical denominations assumed, in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a conservative and fundamentalist identity configuration<sup>12,20</sup>. In this context, we see the dissemination of a warlike theological narrative in which God is represented by the metaphor of a warrior, aligned with a defensive rationality based on the idea of persecution and imminent threat.

The identification of “enemies” of the Christian faith and morality is recurrent in the Brazilian evangelical imaginary. The Catholic Church, Afro-Brazilian religions, even communism and, more recently, the feminist and LGBTQIAPN+ movements are identified as opponents<sup>12,22</sup>. In the analyzed corpus, the State incarnates this enemy and is mostly treated as a vague alterity, referred to by designatives like “they”, “politicians”, and “the government”.

The State is not recognized as a political institution constituted by people and groups that represent different ways of thinking, intentions, and agendas for society. Personified feelings and behaviors are attributed to the “government” (“the government wants, desires etc.”), while the disputes that build each governmental action are left aside. Thus, a homogenous intention is attributed to the State. However, it is paradoxical to say that the State is monolithic, and its objectives oppose the Christian values, when there is a Brazilian evangelical caucus whose relevance has been gradually increasing since the Constitutional Convention - and includes the foundation, in 2003, of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (FPE)<sup>12,23</sup>.

LMB is viewed as an instrument of a government that was called “communist”, as we see in the following excerpt: “Now, with this law, many objectives of the Communist Party will be fulfilled” (video 15). This discourse reaffirms the historical support given to military governments and the endorsement to a “Christian right-wing group”<sup>24</sup>. However, the possible political currents are not discussed, as communism is mentioned as a rhetorical figure that incarnates the common “enemy”, imbued with the demonic figure.

The demonization of left-wing parties is not recent<sup>24</sup>. According to Trevisan<sup>23</sup>, the antagonism between left-wing parties and the interests of the evangelicals has been under construction since 1989. In the first election after the Constitutional Convention, there were rumors that Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, who was a presidential candidate at the time, would persecute the evangelical churches to protect Catholic and “communist” interests. This polarization grew to such a degree that, in 1998, “the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God instructed its faithful not to vote in candidates of the devil” (p. 31).

The videos show narratives in which the State has its own desires and clear goals of action contrary to divine laws: “they preach against the family; as a matter of fact, they frequently preach against the church. They attack the church because it sees the family as a divine institution” (video 23). The State’s actions against the “Family of God” are constructed through the use of textual resources that employ verbs meaning restriction of freedom (“remove”, “prohibit”) and intrusion, like in “to enter my home and say what I have to do with my son...” (video 18); “The State invades a private area” (video 35).

It is stated that the “government” has no legitimacy to say what the “citizen” must “do” or “think”. Another argument is that the State fails to fulfill its basic duties and, therefore, it should not interfere in the private life of the families. The discourse assumes the social action of disqualification of the State and political agents, and the speakers use a vocabulary that takes on the discursive force of accusation: “no politician in Brazil has morals to say how people should behave in their lives” (video 16).

Machado<sup>25</sup> interviewed Pentecostal and Catholic charismatic leaders and observed a similar discourse: “According to the interviewees, the country’s political history is marked by corruption, lack of transparency, and by a weak commitment to the management of public good.” (p. 49-50). The accusation of “corruption” against state institutions and the State incarnated in the “politician without morals” once again reflect a paradoxical position that ignores the strong presence of evangelical segments in the State and the recurrent charges of corruption that the FPE itself has faced since its foundation<sup>23</sup>.

The discursive strategy of differentiation<sup>18</sup> was recurrently used. As Sung<sup>22</sup> points out, the construction of the evangelicals’ identity is deeply marked by the process of differentiation in relation to the “world”, mainly in the field of family and sexual morality. Maintaining “obedience” to God would mean getting away from the “world” and combating “those who do not follow the Word of God in their self-sufficiency of secularized individuals” (p. 48), like same-sex couples or any segment considered “deviant”.

This discourse paves the association of the State with a demonic entity, strengthened by the use of the following designatives: “devil”, “demon”, “Satan”, and “evil”. Thus, an opposition is created: the “Family of God” and the “State of the Devil”; we (obedient to God, defenders of true faith) versus them (corrupt politicians, communists, individuals without morals). In this direction, the State’s actions to prohibit physical punishment in the education of children are understood as a “*totally abusive*” action (video 12) of an evil State.

### **Menino Bernardo Law: Between moral panic and disobedience to the State**

We found that manifested intertextuality was used as the basis for the criticism against LMB in some of the videos, when they mention Sweden’s legislation, which prohibits the physical punishment of children. The Nordic country was the first to enact this type of law, in 1979. Some videos construct a narrative without any factual foundation, stating that, since then, the Swedish society has been living in the midst of social chaos, characterized by an increase in juvenile delinquency, drug use and divorces, as the law caused an incontestable loss of parental authority. Thus, such videos transmit a clearly reductionist and false idea of the Swedish social life and culture.

Maranhão Filho, Coelho and Dias<sup>26</sup> argue that fake news has been widely used to, on the one hand, combat the advance of sexual and reproductive rights and, on the other hand, defend the “traditional family” and Christian morality. Fake news about



the School Without Homophobia Program and the National Education Plan, for example, were disseminated through the construction of an enemy, characterized by early sexualization and eroticization, against which children must be protected.

Machado<sup>25</sup> argues that the discourse of some Neopentecostal leaders assumes that the evangelicals' political participation is a response to the "advance of relativism and secularism" (p.42). In the videos, the speakers aim to warn Christian parents that, with the enactment of LMB, "debauchery" will be established and hierarchy will be overthrown:

This spanking law argues that it protects children but, in fact, this is another onslaught of Satan to pervert the family. Giving freedom to children to live in debauchery! [...] today, Satan uses governments to create laws that make people sin against God. (video 8)

It is not surprising that the symbolic structure of moral panic appears in most videos, bringing the issue of physical punishment into focus. Based on the discussion promoted by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, Miskolci<sup>27</sup> explains that moral panic is linked to the idea of combating institutions or lifestyles by strengthening the social control apparatus: criticism against the existing laws, which would be incapable of controlling the evil that has been spreading, public condemnation, and greater hostility.

Lowenkron<sup>28</sup> analyzed, in a study on the Parliamentary Committee of Investigation into Pedophilia, the political use of moral panic in the way of managing childhood. The author shows that there are discourses of accusation and of awareness-raising, and both establish the rhetoric of the fight between those who are guilty ("they", enemies, pedophiles) and those who are the benefactors ("we", the good men, guardians of childhood). In view of the construction of the political "cause", it is necessary to become indignant at the problem presented, taking a side and attacking the enemy. In our study, the cause was constructed as the impossibility of educating children complying with God's design; therefore, parents with the same religious affiliation are expected to fight against such actions.

LMB is also attacked in its legitimacy through the stratagem of demoralizing the celebrities who defended the approval of the law. In video 14, a pastor talks about the support given by the TV presenter Xuxa Meneghel: "(...) what morals does a person have who goes to Congress to request the approval of the "spanking law" when this person acted in a pornographic movie?"

In short, in the analyzed discourses, LMB incarnates the intention of perverting Christian morality. In this line of thought, the government uses the "prohibition of physical punishment" as a domination strategy to weaken the "good family". The argument is that the State seeks to destroy the familial moral relationship, imposing a legal relationship. It is important to highlight that, when the law was approved, many representatives of conservative religious affiliation (evangelicals and Catholics) invoked the same arguments<sup>16</sup>.



The discourse shows the opposition between LMB and freedom in parenting, like in this fragment of speech: "To me, this law came simply to complicate the good man's life; it came to deprive citizens of the right to educate their children". In this direction, we also observed the use of adjectives and enunciative designations connected with restriction of freedom and democracy by the political order. LMB is associated with fascism, like in video 12, in which the speaker says: "a law that, in fact, is a form of fascism" (video 12).

Clearly, there is a tension concerning what democracy is in relation to faith. The interlocutors are invited to "choose" between following God's laws or "men's laws": "This is the human law and that [pointing at the Bible] is God's law, right? So, look at God's law and see if you want to follow the human law or God's law" (video 24). The videos bring the discursive force of incitement to disobey the State, and evoke expressions of revolt and witness of faith, like video 8: "This abomination that will be judged by God. You can't accept it! Reproach it!" Therefore, there is the discursive construction of what democracy is to this group, that is, acting according to their own interpretation of the Bible, regardless of the instituted laws.

Here we see an exemplary confrontation between what Foucault<sup>29</sup> called "pastoral power" and "Reason of State". The first, which historically came before the very existence of the Modern State, focused on controlling the souls, grounded on the individual management of behaviors, and supported by the principle of unconditional obedience. Adherence to it enabled access to salvation and truth. The second, the basis of governmentality, focuses on the control of men and is supported by rules that aim to maintain peace in the Republic (and, consequently, to maintain the State itself). This art of governing, targeted at the control of populations, with its set of disciplinary apparatuses, will compete with pastoral power. The "pastoral power" that we see here imbues itself with the representation of the State (pastors-politicians) to combat it "from the inside", confronting and deposing its authority, as in the excerpt below:

[...] when the State passes a law that goes beyond its competence and that goes against the law of God, I... I don't feel obliged to obey this law. (video 33)

### **Spanking, using the rod of correction, and hitting: Semantic variations of physical punishment**

According to the videos, the "Holy Bible" is the ultimate reference for the provision of guidance, counseling and indoctrination for parents; in addition, from it emanates the authority of the analyzed discourses. We identified that the resource of explicit intertextuality, either in a generic manner, invoking the "Bible", or with literal quotations of its chapters and passages, increases the symbolic capital of the person who quotes: "Proverbs 19 and 18 say the following: 'punish your child while there is still hope'" (video 8).

The central argument is that the "discipline of the rod" constitutes the disciplinary model to prevent children from embarrassing their parents or being misled into criminal or unwise practices. It shapes the character of these developing subjects. If the "rod of correction" is used from an early age, it would avoid a cycle in which

vices and bad behaviors could compromise the very salvation of the child's soul. Physical punishment is viewed here as a form of discipline, as seen by Foucault<sup>4</sup>, used as a strategy to maintain and expand power in the daily and institutional webs of relationships. Corporal punishment would be in the service of forming people for the "Family of God", that is, obedient to faith. Indeed, there is a way of being a child that is allowed in this frame only if it is based on these adults' biblical interpretation.

Disciplinary power supports the authority given to parents by God. In a gendered and patriarchal hierarchy, the father occupies a prominent place and is described as the "home priest" or the "head of the family": the one that dictates the rules to the other members of the family, including his wife. In this perspective, the figure of the father would be an analogy to the figure of Jesus Christ as the high priest (the "head of the Church"). This representation is recurrently employed by the authors of the discourses, based on certain biblical quotations, like the one according to which "God corrects the child He loves". If God "corrects" the child He loves, then the "true Christian" must also correct their children, out of obedience to the divine precepts and out of love: "A responsibility of parents, as the parents must obey the word of God, should they decide to follow and serve the Lord" (video 2). We notice that obedience is one of the central categories of the analyzed discourses.

Sometimes, the "rod" assumes the figurative meaning of an instrument to guide the flock so that it does not deviate from the path determined by their shepherd; more frequently, it assumes the literal meaning of an instrument of physical punishment.

The use of the rod for "correction" or "discipline" has a rationality and a mode of use considered virtuous. For example, in video 4, the religious leader states that the practice of punishment is necessary only to correct sins, among them those of disobedience and rebellion: "Biblical discipline is not punishing the child's inability (...). It aims to correct the sins of disobedience, rebellion, and other types of sins in the heart of our children".

We observed the use of euphemisms, diminutives, and semantic antagonisms to distinguish violent punishment from "spanking and disciplining": "(...) spanking... no one is saying that you should kill your child... it's the slap that warns the child, on their body, that they're wrong" (video 8).

The speakers provide a series of recommendations related to the practical management of physical punishment to differentiate it from the category of violence. Do not spank the child in front of their friends, as it would be synonymous with humiliation, but do not fail to spank the child, as the parents who do not do it will be reproached in the future by God. Do not spank the child too much or when you are too angry, which could lead to a violent and excessive action. Furthermore, they understand that disciplining by means of the rod has the spiritual function of purifying the children's bad behavior, not of relieving the parents' anger. Therefore, regarding the use of physical punishment, the control not to cross the alleged border between "correcting" and "assaulting" should be governed by the apparently self-evident principle of "common sense". Cleansed from anger, physical punishment is announced as an "act of love" and care. The application of punishment is not targeted at the violation of the body; rather, it is capable of "touching the soul", as Foucault portrayed<sup>5</sup>.



[...] I believe that the law came, and the so-called spanking law came, too. It came to halt parents' domestic violence against their children. I believe in this, and I praise God for it. But we can't let this law prevent us from doing what the Bible says, in a veiled way, in a calm way. With your normal reasoning, not with anger, right? Not with that anger exploding. Wait for the rage to pass and then you go there and talk to the child calmly, explain why he's going to be spanked, so that he learns that it can't be done in the wrong way. (video 23)

In video 19, we have: "Aprenda que usar a varinha da disciplina, a varinha do amor é de Deus, não retires a disciplina da criança" (Learn that using the little rod of discipline, the little rod of love, is a thing of God; do not remove the discipline from the child). In this excerpt, we notice once again the use of the euphemization resource, when the speaker attenuates the word "rod", investing it with positivity by using the diminutive form of the word (in Portuguese, "varinha instead of vara", translated as "little rod") followed by the word "love".

According to the analyzed discourses, despite all the external criticisms made to such disciplinary practices, only the evangelicals know how to educate their children. People are "shielded" from critical analysis and the ideological resource of evoking the powerful enemy is activated again: "It's obvious that the world doesn't understand it, because the world is averse to the gospel, the world goes in the opposite direction of everything that the word of God speaks" (video 22).

## Conclusion

To a part of the evangelical groups the "pedagogy of the rod" is a biblical design that must be obeyed and is an "act of love". Through resources of contrast and semantic opposition, they differentiate it from violence, anger, and mistreatment. Moderation and the good use of physical punishment would be centered on "common sense", which everybody supposedly has in an innate way.

The defense of "education through the rod", in which physical punishment can and should be applied, occurs in a field of political disputes between the conservative evangelical ethos and the secular State, with its laws and "worldliness" - between pastoral power and reason of State. By enunciating the supremacy of the laws of God over the Brazilian legislation, by summoning civil disobedience and invoking a democracy that bows to its own precepts and convictions, this segment shows the political and discursive strength of its leaders. This is about defending an equally normative mode of family, morality and children's education that represents what they consider a divine ordinance. The use of ideological resources of belonging to a community of Christian values which sees itself under a constant "attack of enemies" is the main point of this discursive practice of guidance and counselling of the audience. Therefore, discourses that bring other educational perspectives can be seen as artifacts to convince people to stop following the "correct path".



We believe that discourses like these strengthen and naturalize acts of violence, considered disciplinary and even necessary for a good education. Such logics need to be better understood so that we can address the prevention of violence against children and adolescents within these segments in a culturally adequate way. Developing partnerships with progressive evangelical leaders aligned with the recognition of children's and adolescents' right to an education without violence is a necessary strategy to give credibility to the messages and reach this community of faith.

### Authors' contribution

All authors actively participated in all stages of preparing the manuscript.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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A Lei Menino Bernardo (LMB) proíbe o uso dos castigos físicos e, desde sua promulgação, tem gerado resistência das alas conservadoras, especialmente religiosas, considerando-a uma intervenção do Estado nos “assuntos de família”. Analisamos os discursos pró-castigos físicos disseminados na internet, identificando seus argumentos e contextos discursivos. Examinamos 43 vídeos, que foram transcritos, e sua codificação inter pares foi feita por meio do Atlas.ti, seguida de análise crítica do discurso. Reconhecendo a diversidade do “mundo evangélico” e de suas posturas políticas, identificamos discursos de lideranças conservadoras que enunciam oposição entre a “Família de Deus” e o “Estado do Demônio”. O castigo físico é traduzido pelo conceito bíblico de “vara”, a ser aplicado pelos pais, que são a autoridade instituída por Deus. A LMB é associada ao caos e à perda de valores cristãos; e é considerada um ato do Estado para enfraquecer a família.

**Palavras-chaves:** Violência infantil. Religião. Internet.

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La Ley *Menino Bernardo* prohíbe el uso de los castigos físicos y desde su promulgación ha generado resistencia de las alas conservadoras, especialmente religiosas, considerándola una intervención del Estado en los “asuntos de la familia”. Analizamos los discursos pro-castigos físicos diseminados en Internet, identificando sus argumentos y contextos discursivos. Examinamos 43 videos, transcritos y su codificación inter pares se realizó por medio de Atlas.ti, seguida de análisis crítico del discurso. Reconociendo la diversidad del “mundo evangélico” y de sus posturas políticas, identificamos discursos de liderazgos conservadores que enuncian la oposición entre la “Familia de Dios” x “Estado del Demonio”. El castigo físico se traduce por el concepto bíblico de “vara” a ser aplicado por los padres que son la autoridad instituida por Dios. La LMP se asocia al caos, a la pérdida de valores cristianos y al acto del Estado para debilitar la familia.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia Infantil. Religión. Internet.