



Parental spanking and subsequent risk for child aggression in father-involved families of young children [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 October 2012

Received in revised form 27 May 2013

Accepted 28 May 2013

Available online 7 June 2013

Keywords:

Corporal punishment

Physical aggression

Physical discipline

Fragile families

Child Behavior Checklist

Child maltreatment

ABSTRACT

This study examined separate and combined maternal and paternal use of spanking with children at age 3 and children's subsequent aggressive behavior at age 5. The sample was derived from a birth cohort study and included families ($n = 923$) in which both parents lived with the child at age 3. In this sample, 44% of 3-year-olds were spanked 2 times or more in the past month by either parent or both parents. In separate analyses, being spanked more than twice in the prior month at age 3, by either mother or father, was associated with increased child aggression at 5 years. In combined analyses, there was a dose–response association; the greatest risk for child aggression was reported when both parents spanked more than twice in the prior month (adjusted odds ratio: 2.01; [confidence interval: 1.03–3.94]). Violence prevention initiatives should target and engage mothers and fathers in anticipatory guidance efforts aimed at increasing the use of effective and non-aggressive child discipline techniques and reducing the use of spanking.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have linked spanking to increased child aggression, antisocial behavior, and mental health problems (e.g., Berlin, Ispa, Fine, et al., 2009; Gershoff, 2002; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010). Other studies, however, have raised questions about the magnitude of spanking's impact on children (e.g., Ferguson, 2012; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005; Morris & Gibson, 2011). Spanking remains among parents' most common disciplinary practices. Earlier studies suggested that about 94% of parents had used some form of spanking to discipline their 4 year old children, and approximately one-third have spanked their infants (Straus & Stewart, 1999). More recently, in a large, urban, population-based study, two-thirds of 3-year-old children had been

spanked by one or both parents in the past month (Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010). Reports from both mothers and children indicate that over 80% of children have been spanked by the time they reach 9 or 10 years of age (Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

A notable gap in understanding parental use of spanking and, by extension, changing it, exists because the majority of research has focused only on mothers' use of spanking (e.g., Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005; Kandel & Wu, 1995; Lansford et al., 2009; Scholer, Walkowski, & Bickman, 2008; Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984; Taylor, Manganello, et al., 2010). Parenting education and intervention efforts in social work and primary care settings also tend to recruit mothers (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008; Scholer, Hudnut-Beumler, & Dietrich, 2010). The influence that fathers' use of spanking has on child outcomes is not clear. The information gap regarding fathers' use of spanking is problematic, since children in two-parent households receive discipline from, and thus are influenced by, mothers *and* fathers. For example, in the previously cited study, 65% of 3-year-old children had been spanked by one or both parents in the previous month: 12.7% by fathers only, 23.5% by mothers only, and 29.1% by both parents (Taylor, Lee, et al., 2010).

Even though in two-parent households mothers assume most of the responsibility for day-to-day care for young children, evidence indicates that fathers may engage in relatively more punishment and harsh discipline of children (Straus & Stewart, 1999). The limited evidence that does exist suggests that paternal spanking outcomes may

Abbreviations: FFCWS, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; CTSPC, Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scale; CIDI-SF, Composite International Diagnostic Interview – Short Form; US, United States; AOR, adjusted odds ratios; CI, 95% confidence interval.

[☆] Funding: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is funded by NICHD grant numbers R01HD36916, R01HD39135, and R01HD40421, as well as a consortium of private foundations and other government agencies. The research reported in this study was also partially supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (5K01HD058733) to Taylor.

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be similar to maternal spanking effects. For example, similar to research among mothers who spank (Maguire-Jack et al., 2012) paternal spanking was associated with increased child aggression in adolescence (Prinzle, Ongheana, & Hellinckx, 2006). However, this study did not examine paternal spanking in early childhood (Prinzle et al., 2006). A more thorough examination and clearer understanding of the influence of fathers is important, especially in early childhood, since both spanking and levels of child aggression peak during these years (Straus & Stewart, 1999) and consistent reliance on spanking that begins at very early ages may contribute to less optimal outcomes for children (Lansford, Criss, Dodge, Shaw, Pettit & Bates, 2009).

Furthermore, it is important to assess mothers' and fathers' influences independently and conjointly because, although mothers and fathers use positive and negative parenting behaviors with similar frequencies (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004), parenting styles do not necessarily overlap within couples (Martin, Ryan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Ryan, Martin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Winsler, Madigan, & Aquilino, 2005). For example, one parent may discipline the child more frequently because the other parent does not. Alternatively, mothers' and fathers' behaviors may reinforce each other, a pattern which compounds the positive or negative effects on children when the influence of mothers' and fathers' behaviors are considered simultaneously (Ryan et al., 2006). Therefore, analyses that rely solely on reports of maternal spanking may underestimate the child's exposure to discipline. This study, which seeks to extend knowledge on how fathers' parenting behaviors influence the development of their young children, will provide information on how to better design intervention and education programs that reach fathers.

1.1. The current study

This study examines the separate and combined influence of maternal and paternal spanking on the children's subsequent aggressive behavior at age 5, using data from families where both parents resided in the home when their child was 3 years old. The study families were defined as *father-involved*, because all fathers were living in the household at the time of the assessment of spanking. Further, all fathers self-identified as the biological parent of the study target child at the child's birth. Our first research goal examined whether fathers' spanking influences the development of child aggressive behavior, while controlling for such important confounds as child's exposure to more serious forms of maltreatment. Our second research goal examined the additive effect of both maternal and paternal spanking and considered whether combined parental spanking influences child aggression in a manner resembling patterns observed when each parent is examined separately.

This study addressed important methodological limitations inherent in prior studies that have examined the influence of maternal spanking on children, as reviewed elsewhere (Taylor, Manganello, et al., 2010). First, many prior studies examining the influence of spanking on child wellbeing relied on clinical or child protective services (CPS) samples, which may introduce selection bias when interpreting study results. We conducted prospective analysis of a community-based sample of diverse urban families. Second, children who are more difficult to parent may elicit harsher parental discipline (Beauchaine, Webster Stratton, & Reid, 2005; Belsky, 1984; Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998); therefore, it is important to control for the child's level of aggressive behavior (Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). In this study, we controlled for the child's baseline level of aggression at age 3 and examined whether parental spanking was associated with a subsequent increase in child aggression measured at age 5. We also used longitudinal data to account for the sequencing of the association between spanking, measured at age 3, and children's outcomes, measured at age 5. Fourth, factors such as physical and psychological maltreatment of the child (Smith, 2012); intimate partner aggression and violence; parental stress; and alcohol use have

been linked to spanking (Black, Heyman, & Smith, 2001; Lee, Perron, Taylor, & Guterman, 2011; Slep & O'Leary, 2005; Taylor, Lee, et al., 2010; Taylor, Manganello, et al., 2010; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008) and to childhood aggression. The presence of these factors may confound the association between spanking and aggressive behavior (Brennan, Hall, Bor, Najman, & Williams, 2003; Koblinsky, Kovalanka, & Randolph, 2006; McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, & Watson, 2003; Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Owens & Shaw, 2003). In this study, we controlled for both such factors in our final models and for the child's daily television viewing, given that exposure to media is also associated with increased risk of child aggression (Manganello & Taylor, 2009). Finally, we controlled for each father's self-report of involvement in daily care of the child, because fathers' levels of involvement vary considerably, even among in-residence, biological fathers.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This sample was obtained from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal cohort study of families. The original cohort ($N = 4898$) was obtained between 1998 and 2000 by sampling new births within hospitals from cities with populations over 200,000. Non-marital births were oversampled relative to marital births, because parents in non-marital unions are at greater risk for poverty and relationship instability (participants whose relationships are characterized by these dynamics are termed *fragile families*). The institutional review boards at Columbia University and Princeton University approved participant recruitment procedures (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Responding fathers were recruited at hospitals and by telephone. Fathers were identified as the biological father of the target child. Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from participants at each interview, and participants were compensated for their involvement in the study. Detailed description of the study design was published previously (Reichman et al., 2001).

Core interviews with mothers and fathers were conducted across multiple waves: baseline (at index children's birth) and when children were 1, 3, and 5 years of age. The add-on In-Home Longitudinal Study of Pre-School Aged Children was conducted with mothers only when children were 3 and 5 years of age.

The sample for this study was selected based on whether the biological father was residing in the home at the time of the 3-year In-Home interview ($n = 1414$). Families were excluded from analyses if the father did not provide key demographic information at baseline ($n = 120$); the father did not provide psychosocial information (e.g., depression, substance use, and father involvement) at 3 years ($n = 73$); the mother did not provide information on measures of child maltreatment at 3 years ($n = 30$); and the mother did not provide information on child aggression at 5 years ($n = 234$) – commonly because she did not participate in this wave of data collection. Missing data on other study variables ($n = 34$) resulted in a final sample of 923 families. Because non-marital births were oversampled at baseline, many fathers were not living in the home when the child was 3 years old. Therefore, when analyzing data from mothers and fathers together, a substantial decline is visible from the original cohort to the year-3 interview (Reichman et al., 2001).

2.2. Measures

Mothers and fathers reported on their own use of spanking. Maternal reports provided data for instances of both maternal and paternal psychological and physical child maltreatment (besides spanking) and the children's aggressive behavior. Although fathers self-reported their own use of spanking, fathers were not asked questions about

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