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NORMATIVE SUPPORT FOR CORPORAL PUNISHMENT: ATTITUDES, CORRELATES, AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT. *Corporal punishment enjoys strong normative support in American society, even in the face of growing evidence suggesting that it may be potentially harmful. This article examines Americans' attitudes toward the physical punishment of children. Support for spanking varies along such social categories as race, education, religion, and region. The article concludes by discussing the implications of corporal punishment attitudes for scholars, professionals, and families.*

THE PHYSICAL punishment of children has always been an accepted, even expected, aspect of American families. Cultural norms, influenced by legal and religious traditions, support corporal punishment by parents, and to a lesser degree, by school officials (Graziano & Kunce, 1992; Greven, 1990; Straus, 1991). Within the last three decades, the normative support of spanking has been reinforced by several events. According to Straus (1991), "the child abuse legislation which swept through all 50 states in the late 1960s often reaffirmed cultural support for physical punishment by declaring that nothing in the statute should be construed as interfering with the rights of parents to use physical punishment" (p. 140). Also, in 1977, the Supreme Court in *Ingraham v. Wright* upheld the right of school officials to employ corporal punishment (Graziano & Namaste, 1990). As Graziano and Namaste (1990) have stated: "With the exception of warfare, self-defense, and the often necessary use of physical force by the police, no human interactions other than adult-child interactions carry such clear social supports for the unilateral use of physical punishment by one party on another" (p. 450).

This powerful normative endorsement undoubtedly contributes to the virtual universal use of corporal punishment by American parents. According to several recent studies that relied on national, representative samples, over 90% of parents have physically punished their children (Straus, 1983; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Wauchope & Straus, 1990). Other studies using convenience samples of college students have reached similar conclusions,

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with over 90% reporting receiving some form of corporal punishment (Bryan & Freed, 1982; Graziano & Namaste, 1990).

Physical punishment is not reserved just for younger children. Although children are most likely to be hit at age 3 or 4, studies have found that about half are still being hit by their parents when they are teenagers (Graziano & Namaste, 1990; Straus & Donnelly, 1993; Straus & Lauer, 1992).

Recently, the value of physical punishment by well-meaning parents has been seriously challenged. Initially, the debate focused on the relationship of spanking to child abuse (Deley, 1988; Graziano & Kuncie, 1992; Straus et al., 1980). However, several studies have found that an array of short- and long-term negative consequences may result from "ordinary" spanking (McCord, 1988; Straus, 1991). Researchers have discovered a positive relationship between physical punishment and numerous undesirable outcomes, including aggression, behavioral deviance, substance abuse and criminal activity, low economic achievement, and depression and thoughts of suicide (Straus, 1987, 1991, 1995; Straus & Gimpel, 1992; Straus & Lauer, 1992; Weller, Romney, & Orr, 1987). These negative effects have been observed even at moderate levels of spanking (Larzelere, 1986), and in cultures where normative support for corporal punishment is even stronger than the United States (Rohner, Kean, & Cournoyer, 1991).

Despite increasing evidence that "normal" spanking can have harmful effects, belief in the value and effectiveness of corporal punishment remains strong in American society. Given such overwhelming normative support, spanking, at least for the foreseeable future, will continue to be a nearly universal experience for children. If future research confirms the negative consequences that appear to be related to normal physical punishment, then literally millions of children will be placed at risk. (For an excellent scholarly debate between a proponent and an opponent of spanking, see Larzelere, 1994; Straus, 1994b; for a debate between scholars with a religious foundation, see Larzelere, 1993; Oosterhuis, 1993.)

Already we know that as parents' support for corporal punishment increases, so does the frequency and severity of its use (Straus, 1991). Consequently, understanding Americans' beliefs about spanking and the factors that influence those beliefs is crucial if we are to consider strategies that reduce and eventually eliminate spanking's harmful effects and possibly spanking itself. This article will examine individuals' attitudes toward corporal punishment, the factors that influence their attitudes, and the implications of these beliefs for parents, children, and family professionals. We will adopt Straus' (1994a) conceptual definition of corporal punishment: "The use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior" (p. 4).

BELIEFS ABOUT SPANKING CHILDREN

Americans overwhelmingly favor the physical punishment of children. In 1988, a National Opinion Research Center survey found that 80% of Americans either agreed or strongly agreed that "It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking" (Flynn, 1994).

Favorable attitudes are not limited to spanking young children. In the First National Family Violence Survey, Straus et al. (1980) found that between 70% and 77% of respondents believed that spanking or slapping a 12-year-old child was at least somewhat necessary, normal, and good.

Most individuals develop favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment well before they become parents themselves. One study examining the acceptability of spanking as a punishment as viewed by preschoolers, fifth graders, and their mothers found that preschool children were more likely to support spanking, and to do so across a broader range of circumstances than the other children and both groups of mothers (Catron & Masters, 1993).

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