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# DISCIPLINING CHILDREN: CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To evaluate the Social Situational Model of Family Violence through an examination of characteristics associated with the use of ordinary and severe corporal punishment as measured by the Parents-Child Conflict Tactics Scales.

**Method:** Logistic Regression used to examine the validity of the model using data from a national sample conducted by the Gallup Organizations.

**Results:** Those with fewer resources (lower income, lower educational attainment) were more likely to use severe corporal punishment. In addition, those who had been more likely to be socialized into the use of violence were also more likely to use severe corporal punishment.

**Conclusions:** The social situational model of family violence was supported suggesting that increased efforts be made to give these parents the resources they need to implement alternative discipline strategies. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

*Key Words*—Corporal punishment, Discipline, Spanking.

## INTRODUCTION

THE USE OF corporal punishment to curtail a child's bad behavior is widely accepted by Americans and according to Straus (1994), most believe that at least in moderation, the use of corporal punishment has few, if any, harmful effects. Consequently, most American parents use corporal punishment as an integral component of child rearing. In fact, Straus (1994) found that more than 90% of American parents hit their young children and nearly half of all adolescents are hit by their parents. Moreover, the use of physical punishment by parents is common with Holden, Coleman, and Schmidt (1995) reporting that the college-educated respondents in their sample spanked their children an average of 2.5 times per week. At the same time, many parents incorporate the use of non-violent forms of discipline such as time-out and the taking away of privileges as well. The purpose of this paper is to apply structural strain theory to explaining the use of legally correct and socially approved corporal punishment.

The use of corporal punishment as a discipline technique by parents and other adults in the

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United States has been legally and socially sanctioned for quite some time. In fact, legislation, such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, has been introduced in the federal government as well as in many states that protects parental rights to use force in child rearing. The roots for the use of force as a discipline technique are found throughout our religious and legal institutions as well as ingrained in the socio-cultural foundations of American society (Greven, 1991).

Most parents agree that the use of spanking as a discipline technique is necessary, most authors of books on child rearing support the use of corporal punishment as well (Straus, 1994). In fact, Straus (1994) found that of 10 widely used textbooks on child development, only one argued against the use of corporal punishment. Moreover, Carson (1986) examined 31 of the most popular child rearing advice books, finding that while 35% advised against the use of corporal punishment and 35% ignored the subject altogether, 30% encouraged the use of corporal punishment. However, many of the latter provided disclaimers indicating that corporal punishment was permissible under certain circumstances (Carson, 1986). Although there is a great deal of social support for the use of spanking as a discipline technique, a growing body of literature indicates that the use of such, even in moderation, may have deleterious effects upon children (cf. DuRant et al., 1995; Kandel, 1991; McCord, 1988; Muller, Hunter, & Stollak, 1995; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Straus, 1994; Straus & Gimpel, 1992).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A number of theories have been introduced to explain the occurrence of violence within society. One such theory, the social situational model (Gelles & Cornell, 1985), discussed in Gelles and Straus (1979) as the structural strain model, assumes that the use of violence is unevenly distributed within society and that it is related to differential occurrences of stress and to differences in socialization. The theory proposes that deviance, and hence, violence, is unevenly distributed throughout the population. It is assumed that violence within the family results from two main factors. The first factor is structural stress. Thus, it is assumed that people in certain positions within society (such as in the lower socioeconomic strata) suffer from more frustration and stress. The second factor is a cultural norm that encourages the use of force and violence as a common response to this frustration and stress is the use of violence (Coser, 1967). Furthermore, Coser (1967) argues that because the use of violence is so frequently used by individuals in these environments, children are then socialized to use these same methods to deal with stress and frustration. Thus, the inequitable distribution of the causes of violence among certain groups in the population, combined with the socialization of those within these groups to use violence, should theoretically increase the likelihood that individuals who belong to certain populations will engage in violence. This includes an increased likelihood to resort to spanking and other forms of corporal punishment in child rearing.

### *Characteristics Related to the Use of Corporal Punishment*

It has been argued that the use of these techniques differs across sub-groups of the population. Knudsen (1992) notes that historical events such as the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War significantly changed communities and families. He further claims that these affected different sub-groups of the population differently and that various patterns of child rearing emerged within these populations. Thus, different practices emerged among ethnic, religious, and economic groups. And while Straus (1994) shows that many minority social scientists believe that any effort to end the use of corporal punishment represents an infringement upon the culture of that group, it is important to understand the potential negative effects of corporal punishment on children.

Research that examines the relationship between ethnic group membership and the use of

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