



Relationships between parents' use of corporal punishment and their children's endorsement of spanking and hitting other children

Dominique A. Simons*, Sandy K. Wurtele

Department of Psychology, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80933, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To explore the intergenerational cycle of violence, the present study examined the relationship between parental approval and children's approval of corporal punishment (CP) and the subsequent relationship between children's CP experience and preference for hitting to resolve interpersonal conflict.

Method: Participants consisted of 102 families, parents, and children, ages 3–7 years old. Parents were assessed on their reported practices and beliefs about corporal punishment using 3 self-report measures. Fifty-four boys and 48 girls were interviewed by researchers to assess their approval of spanking and hitting.

Results: Children whose parents approved of and used CP were more likely to endorse hitting as a strategy for resolving interpersonal conflicts with peers and siblings. Frequent spanking was the strongest predictor of children's acceptance of aggressive problem solving, above and beyond parental acceptance, parental experience of CP, and familial demographics.

Conclusions: Findings supported an intergenerational cycle of violence; parents who experienced frequent corporal punishment during childhood perceived its use as acceptable and frequently spanked their children. These children, in turn, advocated that spanking be used as a disciplinary method and preferred aggressive conflict resolution strategies with peers and siblings. These findings support an additional "side effect of spanking;" when parents use CP it teaches their children that hitting is an acceptable means of dealing with conflict.

Practice implications: Practitioners should encourage parents to avoid using CP as a disciplinary method which could lead to a change in the attitudes and behaviors of the next generation of parents.

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Introduction

According to Straus (1994a), "corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior" (p. 4). The majority of American parents use corporal punishment (CP; including spanking and hitting) to correct their children's misbehavior.

Straus and Stewart (1999) presented data obtained from a nationally representative sample of 991 American parents and found overall prevalence rates (i.e., the percentage of parents using any type of CP during the previous year) varied according to the age of the child. These rates were reported as 35% for infants (0–12 months), 94% for preschool-aged children (3- and 4-year-old), and 13% for older adolescents (age 17). They concluded that CP appears to be a nearly universal aspect of the

* Corresponding author.

socialization experience of American children, although the frequency and severity of its use varied according to several child and family characteristics.

Researchers have found certain characteristics of parents who tend to use CP. Studies have found that parents in more stressful situations are more likely to use CP (Dietz, 2000; Gershoff, 2002). Specifically, these parents were more likely to be young and unmarried, to have more children and fewer financial resources, and to report lower educational attainment. CP has also been found to be associated with ethnicity and religious affiliation. Studies report more frequent CP use among African American parents (Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004; Straus & Stewart, 1999) and Conservative Protestant parents (Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999). In addition, CP use has been shown to be more prevalent among parents of male and preschool-aged children and by mothers as compared to fathers (Gershoff, 2002; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Thus, parental characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, education, marital status, and income) and child characteristics (e.g., age and gender) have been shown to influence CP use.

CP use also depends on the type of misbehavior of the child (Catron & Masters, 1993; Socolar & Stein, 1995). Parents report they are more likely to spank for prudential transgressions or when the misbehavior results in a threat to the child's safety (e.g., running into a busy street, lighting matches) as compared to moral transgressions, which include violating others' rights (e.g., stealing, hitting a friend or sibling). Fewer parents approve of using CP for violating social norms or family rules (e.g., disobeying a parent, eating with fingers, interrupting a parent on the phone; Gershoff et al., 1999).

Along with the type of misbehavior, parents' use of CP also depends upon their own experiences with being spanked or hit as a child. Numerous studies have found that the use of CP appears to be intergenerational; parents who were physically punished as children approve of its use, and are more likely to physically punish their own children (e.g., Ateah & Parkin, 2002; Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, & Babonis, 1994; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991; Socolar & Stein, 1995; Straus & Moynihan, 1994).

What accounts for this intergenerational transmission of physical punishment? Recently, theorists have emphasized the importance of considering children's social cognitions, including their attitudes, when attempting to explain the relationship between past experience and subsequent behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). A few studies have examined children's attitudes toward physical punishment. Catron and Masters (1993) asked children if they would recommend CP for various types of transgressions, and found that older children (8–14 years of age) differentiated among misbehaviors deserving CP and only recommended its use for moral and prudential transgressions, consistent with maternal beliefs. In contrast, younger children (4- and 5-year-old) did not differentiate among situations; they regarded all of the transgressions as serious and recommended spanking more frequently than older children. Other researchers have explored possible links between children's spanking experiences and their current attitudes toward spanking. Holden and Zabarano (1992) reported that children's positive attitudes were consistent with their own childrearing experiences of being spanked. Specifically, they found that children who had experienced frequent CP were more likely to report that they would spank, when presented with hypothetical vignettes. More recently, Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (2003) found that young adolescents who received higher amounts of CP were more approving of CP compared to teens who had not experienced physical punishment. These authors concluded that "the development of attitudes about the appropriateness and effectiveness of physical forms of punishment is an important component of the social cognitions underlying the intergenerational transmission of physical discipline" (p. 357).

It is possible that through frequent experiences of CP, children may not only develop attitudes about the appropriateness of CP, but also develop attitudes in support of aggressive strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict. When Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994) examined the relationship between the reported disciplinary practices of the parents of preschoolers and the children's aggressive behavior toward their peers, they found that children who were spanked behaved significantly more aggressively with their peers than children who were not spanked. This finding suggests that by observing their parents, spanked children may be learning that hitting is an acceptable means of resolving interpersonal conflicts. The potential for this "side effect of spanking" (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003) needs further exploration.

The present study investigated the side effect of spanking by examining the relationship between parental approval and children's approval of the use of CP and the relationship between parental use of CP and children's preference for aggressive conflict resolution strategies. We hypothesized that children who had been frequently spanked in the home would be more likely to endorse CP as a means of punishment for transgressions, and that these children would also be more likely to recommend hitting to resolve social disagreements with both peers and siblings. As parent and child characteristics have been shown to covary with CP, these factors were included and controlled for in the examination of the relationship between children's approval of spanking and aggressive problem solving. It was expected that CP frequency would predict children's acceptance of spanking and willingness to hit to resolve interpersonal conflict, above and beyond parental acceptance and parents' experience of CP during childhood.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 102 families recruited from a southwestern university (61%) and from the community (39%). Participants solicited from the university consisted primarily of psychology undergraduates who received extra credit for their participation; community participants were recruited from newspaper advertisements and received parenting information

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