



Corporal punishment and youth externalizing behavior in Santiago, Chile

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 September 2010

Received in revised form 2 March 2012

Accepted 23 March 2012

Available online 4 July 2012

Keywords:

Chile

Corporal punishment

Externalizing behavior

Youth

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Corporal punishment is still widely practiced around the globe, despite the large body of child development research that substantiates its short- and long-term consequences. Within this context, this paper examined the relationship between parental use of corporal punishment and youth externalizing behavior with a Chilean sample to add to the growing empirical evidence concerning the potential relationship between increased corporal punishment and undesirable youth outcomes across cultures.

Methods: Analysis was based on 919 adolescents in Santiago, Chile. Descriptive and multivariate analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which parents' use of corporal punishment and positive family measures were associated with youth externalizing behavior. Furthermore, the associations between self-reported externalizing behavior and infrequent, as well as frequent, use of corporal punishment were investigated to understand how varying levels of parental use of corporal punishment were differently related to youth outcomes.

Results: Both mothers' and fathers' use of corporal punishment were associated with greater youth externalizing behavior. Additionally, increases in positive parenting practices, such as parental warmth and family involvement, were met with decreases in youth externalizing behavior when controlling for youth demographics, family socioeconomic status, and parents' use of corporal punishment. Finally, both infrequent and frequent use of corporal punishment were positively associated with higher youth problem behaviors, though frequent corporal punishment had a stronger relationship with externalizing behavior than did infrequent corporal punishment.

Conclusions: Parental use of corporal punishment, even on an occasional basis, is associated with greater externalizing behavior for youth while a warm and involving family environment may protect youth from serious problem behaviors. Therefore, findings of this study add to the growing evidence concerning the negative consequences of corporal punishment for youth outcomes.

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Introduction

Corporal punishment has been a widely practiced method of child discipline in many parts of the globe including the United States (Gershoff et al., 2010). However, a large corpus of child development research supports the idea that there is an association between increased parental use of corporal punishment and undesirable children's outcomes (Gershoff,

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2002). The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 8 explicitly stated that "...corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence and States must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate them" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, p. 6). With increased public attention to the harmful effects of corporal punishment, and growing conversations highlighting children's universal right to be respected and protected, the number of countries that prohibit corporal punishment at home has been increasing (Zolotor, Theodore, Runyan, Chang, & Laskey, 2010; Bitensky, 1998).

However, the US (along with Somalia) remains one of the two countries that has not ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Children's Fund, 2006). The use of corporal punishment in the home is legal in all US states, as of 2008 (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2011a). Parental use of corporal punishment remains high in the US, despite controversial public opinion concerning its positive and negative relationship with children's development (Bitensky, 1998; Gershoff, 2002). Within the United States, over the past two decades, more than 70% of US respondents have agreed that spanking is necessary to discipline children (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2009). Furthermore, studies have reported that over 90% of toddlers have experienced spanking or other forms of corporal punishment (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994). Approximately 45% of parents have used corporal punishment with their 13 year-old adolescents, with a steady decrease to around 25% by the time their children reach age 17 (Straus & Stewart, 1999). Although support for, and usage of corporal punishment in the US have demonstrated a decreasing trend (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Zolotor et al., 2010), corporal punishment is still a widely used and endorsed method of discipline (Davis et al., 2009; Harper, Brown, Arias, & Brody, 2006) that is employed by parents to encourage compliance of children in American families.

Implications of parental corporal punishment for youth outcomes can be drawn on a theoretical basis. Social learning theory (or observational learning theory) suggests that, to motivate children to engage in positive behavior, but to avoid undesirable behavior and negative consequences, positive and desirable behavior should be reinforced by parents (Bandura, 1973; Bandura & Walters, 1959). Specifically, social learning theory would suggest that corporal punishment delivers the message to children that violence is an acceptable form of behavior. Thus, the use of corporal punishment may generate a household environment in which parental violence and aggression towards children is seen as legitimate. Furthermore, observing parental use of corporal punishment may teach children that physical violence is an appropriate and socially acceptable means of correcting misbehavior, and may have detrimental consequences that carry on into adulthood (Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997).

In fact, evidence of the adverse relationship of corporal punishment with a child's developmental outcomes, both short term and long term, is substantial. Empirical research has indicated that corporal punishment results in greater externalizing behaviors such as aggression (Cohen, Brook, Cohen, Velez, & Garcia, 1990; Eron, Huesman, & Zelli, 1991; Welsh, 1978) and antisocial behavior (Gershoff et al., 2010; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Straus et al., 1997) across a wide age range. Furthermore, research has found that when children with prior experience of corporal punishment become adults, they are more likely to spank their own children, and to engage in domestic violence, because they have learned to think that violence is socially appropriate (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1994).

Although a large tradition of literature has reported the deleterious association between corporal punishment and youth's development, only a limited number of studies have examined the effects of varying frequencies of corporal punishment on child outcomes (Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010). Measures of the frequency of parental discipline provide a potentially more detailed account of a youth's interaction with parents, and allow one to test the question of whether the harmful relationship between corporal punishment and youth well-being persists even at the lowest levels. For example, Grogan-Kaylor (2004) examined the relationship of different levels (never, once, more than once) of corporal punishment with children's antisocial behavior, and found that even infrequent use of corporal punishment predicted increased levels of child antisocial behavior.

Further, it is important to simultaneously consider other aspects of parenting as parental use of corporal punishment is likely to be nested within an overall context of parenting. Prior literature has suggested that positive parenting is associated with reductions in externalizing behavior. In detail, parental support and positive family relationships have been considered as potential protective factors that may protect children from negative outcomes in the research on parenting (Harper et al., 2006; Simons, Johnson, & Conger, 1994). Relatedly, Lansford (2010) suggested that parental warmth may offset the deleterious effects of corporal punishment.

As seen in the literature cited above, the vast majority of the literature concerning corporal punishment with some exceptions is based in the US and Canada, with a particular focus on European American and African American samples (Dasen & Mishra, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Lansford, 2010). However, because parenting practices are highly affected by cultural and societal norms, reliance on studies conducted mainly in North America is likely to constrain our cross-cultural understanding of the consequences of corporal punishment (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford, 2010). Acknowledging possible cultural variations in parent-youth relationships, recent multi-country studies on corporal punishment have examined associations between corporal punishment and children's outcomes (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford, 2010; Runyan et al., 2010). Yet, Latin American populations still remain understudied in this area of research. The availability of data from a Latin American sample may represent an opportunity to study corporal punishment in a global context where investigation is still needed.

Of the 16 Latin American countries in which the use of corporal punishment is legally allowed (only Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Venezuela legally prohibit the use of corporal punishment as of 2011; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2011b), Chile may be a particularly important country to examine because of the following reasons. First, not only

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