



Sex differences in the reciprocal relationships between mild and severe corporal punishment and children's internalizing problem behavior in a Chinese sample

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the sex differences in the reciprocal relations between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior in China. Four hundred fifty-four Chinese elementary school-age children completed measures of their parental corporal punishment toward them and their own internalizing problem behavior at two time points, 6 months apart. Structural equation modeling revealed that both parental mild and severe corporal punishment significantly predicted child internalizing problem behavior for girls, but only parental severe corporal punishment marginally predicted child internalizing problem behavior for boys; child internalizing problem behavior predicted both mild and severe corporal punishment for boys but not for girls. The findings highlight the important role of severity of corporal punishment and child sex in understanding the relations between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior and have implications for the intervention efforts aimed at reducing child internalizing symptoms or parental corporal punishment in China.

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Corporal punishment (i.e., spanking the bottom with the bare hand or hitting with a hard object) is a commonly used strategy of disciplining children by parents (Straus & Stewart 1999; Tang, 2006). A large body of research indicates that corporal punishment is associated with subsequent negative child outcomes. Yet most of the research has concentrated on child externalizing issues, suggesting that corporal punishment leads to aggressive and delinquent behavior (Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006; Fine, Trentacosta, Izard, Mostow, & Campbell, 2004; Harper, Brown, Arias, & Brody, 2006; Lansford et al., 2005), whereas the association of corporal punishment with child internalizing problem behavior or emotional difficulties remains less apparent in the literature. Although less researched, several studies have linked parental corporal punishment to depression (Mulvaney & Mebert, 2010; Rodriguez, 2003, 2006; Turner & Muller, 2004) and poor mental health (Gershoff, 2002, for a review and meta-analysis; Miller-Perrina, Perrina, & Kocurb, 2009). For instance, findings from Mulvaney and Mebert (2010), based on adolescent samples, indicated that maternal corporal punishment during childhood was associated with later increased depression. Likewise, Rubin and Mills (1990) presented 121 mothers of 4-year olds with descriptions of hypothetical incidents of peer-directed social withdrawal and asked what they would do about these behaviors. Results indicated that mothers of withdrawn-internalizing children would react to

such maladaptive behavior more often in coercive, high power assertive ways than mothers of normal children. Taken together, these studies reviewed above provided the evidence for unidirectional influence between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior.

It is important to note, however, several theoretical models on parent-child interaction posit that children and their parents mutually influence one another across time (Bell, 1980; Patterson, 1982; Sameroff, 1975), and the bidirectional nature of parent-child relationships has received empirical support from a growing body of research, particularly in regard to parental harsh discipline (i.e., corporal punishment) and child externalizing problem behavior (Lansford et al., 2011; Pardini, Fite, & Burke, 2008; Sheehan & Watson, 2008; Verhoeven, Junger, van Aken, Deković, & van Aken, 2010). For example, Lansford et al. (2011) used data from the longitudinal Child Development Project and found that parental physical discipline could lead children to become more aggressive, and aggressive children could also elicit more physical discipline from their parents. Unfortunately, little research has examined mutual influences between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior. Therefore, the primary aim of the current study is to extend the notion of reciprocity in parent-child relationships to parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior.

The second aim was to identify whether the relations between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior are similar among boys and girls. It has been suggested that girls tend to be more oriented towards relationships and gaining social

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approval compared with boys (e.g., Gabriel & Gardner 1999; Maccoby 1990), and therefore they may be especially vulnerable to the effects of family conflict or harsh parenting and experience greater psychological distress in the context of parent–child conflict (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009; Crawford, Cohen, Midlarsky, & Brook, 2001; DeVet, 1997; Flook, 2011; Hipwell et al., 2008). Indeed, there is evidence that girls who experienced family violence are at greater risk of manifesting internalizing behavior problems than boys (Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman, & Abbott, 2006). In addition, it has been found that there are gender differences in attitudes toward corporal punishment, with boys being more accepting of this discipline than girls (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003). Given that Grusec and Goodnow (1994) argued that the extent to which children accept their parents' disciplinary messages contributes to the impact of this discipline, we expected that the effects of parental corporal punishment on children's internalizing problem behavior would be stronger for girls than for boys.

It is also noteworthy that, despite the evidence suggestive of the effects of children's internalizing behavior on parents' harsh discipline (Rubin & Mills, 1990), research looking at the sex differences in such effects is scarce. Given that there are obvious differences in parental expectations for boys and girls in Chinese societies, it is possible that Chinese parents may interpret and react to the internalizing behavior in boys and girls in a qualitatively different way. In most Chinese families, boys are generally expected and socialized to be independent and assertive to enable them to carry the family name and care for their aged parents (Tang, 1998; Wu, 1996). Thus, internalizing problem behavior, which indicates anxiety and a lack of self-confidence, is considered inconsistent with the socialization goal for Chinese boys. As Chinese parents often believe that the infliction of physical pain is necessary to train children's strength and tough personality (Tang, 2006), they may respond physically to boys' internalizing problem behavior to achieve their high expectation and socialization goal for boys. Unlike boys, however, it has been argued that Chinese girls are often socialized to be submissive, obedient, and dependent (Tang, 1998). Mild expressions of anxiety and dependency by girls are generally accepted as normative and encouraged in Chinese culture (Ho, 1986). Therefore, it is possible that Chinese parents would be less likely to respond physically to internalizing problem behavior in girls than in boys.

Another concern in the present study involves the conceptual limitation of previous research. Most earlier research related to parental corporal punishment has examined corporal punishment as a general construct, without making a clear distinction between two different types of corporal punishment: mild corporal punishment and severe corporal punishment (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Conflating mild corporal punishment with severe forms of corporal punishment makes it impossible to assess differences in the reciprocal relations between these two types of corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior. Nevertheless, a growing body of research on child externalizing problems has provided the empirical evidence that the relations between corporal punishment and children's externalizing problem behavior vary by the severity of parental corporal punishment (e.g., Lynch et al., 2006; Xing, Wang, Zhang, He, & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, examining potential differences in the relationships between mild or severe forms of parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior will both provide valuable information for future research and have implications for practice.

In summary, the current study examined sex differences in the reciprocal relations between two types of parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior using a longitudinal sample of Chinese elementary school-age children. We anticipated reciprocal relations between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior, with such relations varying by severity of parental corporal punishment and child sex.

Method

Samples

The children in this study were participants from an ongoing longitudinal study of parental discipline and child adjustment (Xing et al., 2011). Four hundred and eighty-six Grade 3 through Grade 5 children (241 boys; 245 girls) were recruited from one public elementary school located in an eastern Chinese city. We chose to study this group for two reasons. First, it has been found that discipline techniques change with the age of the child and the reciprocal relationships between corporal punishment and child outcomes are likely to be age-dependent (Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Hartup, 1978; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Second, Chinese parents are found to use corporal punishment with greater frequency when children are well into primary education (Tang, 1998), but few studies have examined the reciprocal relationships between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior in middle childhood. Thus, we restricted our sample to the target age group of middle childhood.

In addition, data collection of this longitudinal study initially took place every 6 months, and then switched to annual assessments. Because the current study was interested in examining the reciprocal relationships between parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior in relatively brief periods of time, only 6 month assessments were used in the current paper. Thus, the data reported in this study were collected at initial two assessments six months apart (Time 1 and Time 2).

At Time 1 (T1; summer 2009), the mean age of the children was 10.20 years ($SD = 0.96$). Because of the "one-child" policy, 86% of the children were the only children in their families. Sixty percent of the children came from two-parent families, 35% from extended families, 4% from single-parent families, and 1% from remarried families. Educational accomplishment of fathers and mothers (respectively) was as follows: 11% and 17% had completed middle school education or less, 34% and 31% were high school graduates, 55% and 52% were college graduates. Twenty-two percent of the children were from families in which both parents were non-professional workers; nearly half of the children were from families in which one or both of the parents were teachers, doctors, or civil officials. The sample was in large part a working and middle class sample.

At Time 2 (T2), thirty-two of those children elected not to participate. Attrition analyses showed that at Time 2 the younger children dropped out from the study more often than the older ones, $t(39) = 3.29, p < .01$. No other significant differences were found on any parental corporal punishment and child internalizing problem behavior variables at Time 1.

Procedure

We sought the help of the elementary school institutions for access to both the children and their parents. Through the school, we distributed consent forms to all Grade 3 through Grade 5 children and asked parents to consent to their children's participation. Also, the children were assured of the voluntary and confidential nature of this research. After the children returned the signed parent consent forms, we contacted school principals to schedule appointments for collecting data from the children. At each assessment, surveys were group-administrated to children by two trained research assistants in the separate classrooms and the children independently completed the Parent–child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC) and the Youth Self-Report (YSR) during classroom hours or immediately after school. The study was conducted under the approval and direction of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Shandong Normal University at both assessments.

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