



## Research findings can change attitudes about corporal punishment



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### ABSTRACT

Positive attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment (CP) predict subsequent spanking behavior. Given that CP has frequently been associated with behavior problems in children and child maltreatment, this prevention work was designed to test whether adults' attitudes could be changed by informing participants about the research findings on problematic behaviors associated with CP. Two random assignment studies are reported. In Study 1, we tested whether an active reading condition would result in more attitude change than a passive condition. With a sample of 118 non-parent adults, we found that after reading very brief research summaries on the problems associated with CP, there was a significant decrease in favorable attitudes toward CP. Contrary to expectations, the magnitude of the change was comparable for active and passive processing conditions. In Study 2, we extended our approach to a sample of 520 parents and included a control group. A significant decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking was observed in the intervention group, but no change for the control group. Parents who were unaware of the research showed more change after reading the summaries. Thus, these studies demonstrate that a brief and cost-effective approach to raise awareness of research findings can reduce positive attitudes toward CP. Implications for prevention and intervention are discussed.

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According to Straus (e.g., 1996), corporal punishment (CP) by parents is a key contributor to the perpetuation of violence in societies. In the United States, national surveys indicate the continuing popularity of the disciplinary technique. For example, nearly 75% of adults believe that a “good hard spanking” is an appropriate and sometimes necessary disciplinary practice (Child Trends, 2009). These types of beliefs have been labeled *abuse-prone attitudes* (Jackson et al., 1999). In support of that label, mothers who spank have been found to be more likely to report physical abuse of their children than mothers who do not spank (Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008).

Despite the acceptance of CP as a disciplinary practice, there is increasing evidence that CP is associated with short- and long-term child behavior problems. Gershoff's (2002) meta-analytic review determined that CP is linked to such unintended negative behaviors as aggressive and delinquent acts in children, poor quality of parent–child relationships, and an increased risk of child physical abuse. Recent carefully designed longitudinal studies continue to support Gershoff's findings (e.g., Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012).

Based on such research, there is a growing awareness among professionals that CP is a public health threat (e.g., American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) recommends that pediatricians advise parents to use non-punitive methods of discipline. Similarly, evidence-based parenting training programs are

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unanimous in the discouragement of the practice due to it being an ineffective discipline strategy and potentially harmful to children (Voisine & Baker, 2012).

Although there are many types of determinants of CP (e.g., culture, stress, child characteristics), individual attitudes are the single most powerful predictor when compared with alternative predictors (anger, perceptions of the seriousness and intent of child misbehavior; Ateah & Durrant, 2005). Such attitudes reflect beliefs about the instrumental role of CP: parents who spank more frequently are likely to believe that spanking will result in more positive outcomes such as child compliance and respect for parents (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999; Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011).

Attitudes toward CP are a good construct to target for change because they are highly correlated with daily reports of spanking (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995) as well as predictive of subsequent spanking behavior. Additionally, these attitudes are relatively stable across time, as Vittrup, Holden, and Buck (2006) found in a 3½ year longitudinal study of disciplinary practices. In turn, specific attitudes (e.g., spanking attitude), are a major determinant of behavioral intention, which in turn is the best predictor of behavior (Webb & Sheeran, 2006).

How do these attitudes get formed? Attitudes are multiply determined through such channels as personal experiences, norms, and advice from influential individuals (Graziano & Namaste, 1990; Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor, Moeller, Hamvas, & Rice, 2012). According to Taylor et al. (2012), after one's own parents and spouse, pediatricians are the most trusted professionals followed by mental health workers, teachers, parent educators, and religious leaders. Interestingly, an earlier study found that perceptions of the advice provided by professionals (e.g., pediatricians, psychologists) were inconsistent. Both spankers and non-spankers believed that professionals supported their own views (Walsh, 2002).

Because parents' intention behind most CP is to promote good behavior and not to harm the child (Holden et al., 1999), individuals should be receptive to new information on the harmful effects associated with the practice. The present study was designed to change attitudes toward spanking by providing adults with another source of information about spanking—that from researchers. Given that attitudes are based in part upon relevant knowledge (Shimp, 1997), it follows that new information should be able to modify those beliefs. In addition, attitudes based on limited knowledge are less stable than attitudes derived from a more extensive knowledge base (Wood, 1982). Consequently, CP attitudes may be relatively easy to change, particularly among non-parents.

Many parent education programs have successfully targeted and changed attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors with regard to using corporal punishment (e.g., Voisine & Baker, 2012; Wagner, Spiker, & Linn, 2002). However, those programs involve an intervention lasting many weeks (e.g., 9) and thus are time consuming, labor intensive, and costly.

In contrast, there are at least three low-cost intervention studies aimed at changing CP attitudes that have been published. The first study taking this approach involved undergraduates reading a 2,000 word summary of recent empirical research on CP (Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005). In the pretest, 56% of the 64 students in the experimental group indicated they would spank a repeatedly misbehaving child if they were a parent. However, after reading the research summary, the percent dropped to 44%. There was no significant change in the control group.

The second study on targeted attitude change involved parents watching a 20 min program, entitled *Play Nicely*, designed to encourage alternatives to physical punishment (Scholer, Hamilton, Johnson, & Scott, 2010). In a randomized control study, the investigators found, on the basis of a follow-up phone interview one to eight months after viewing the program, the 45 parents' spank attitudes had become significantly less favorable. There was no significant change in the control group's attitudes.

Most recently, a third approach was tried. Investigators gave educational baby books designed to discourage CP to low-income mothers (Reich, Penner, Duncan, & Auger, 2012). It was found that the 53 mothers who were assigned to the group that received the educational books had less positive attitudes toward CP than the mothers who either received a non-educational book or no book, though there was no pre-test assessment.

The present investigation adopts a fourth approach to targeted attitude change. We report on two studies designed to test the effectiveness of a cost-effective approach to attitude change using information presented on the Web. Specifically, our intervention approach consisted of presenting very brief summaries of research findings regarding CP. Rather than giving a four-page research summary to participants (Robinson et al., 2005), we provided only two sentences of information for each of several areas of child behavior. We assumed that learning about CP's potential unintended negative associations would challenge beliefs about the benefits of the practice, and serve to begin to change attitudes as well as reduce the intention to use CP. Thus we hypothesized that a brief exposure to information about the negative correlates of CP would result in decreased favorable attitudes toward CP.

## Study 1

The first study utilized a non-parent, young adult sample to compare the effectiveness of two methods of information presentation. Young adults who do not yet have children are a good population to study with regard to child-rearing attitudes for two reasons. On the one hand, based on their childhood experiences, they already have established attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding the use of spanking as a disciplinary practice (e.g., Simons & Wurtele, 2010). However, these attitudes are not yet influenced by experiences with their own children, are based on fewer sources of information than parents' attitudes (Taylor et al., 2012), and therefore potentially easier to modify.

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