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## Physical punishment, childhood abuse and psychiatric disorders<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** Physical punishment, as a means of disciplining children, may be considered a mild form of childhood adversity. Although many outcomes of physical punishment have been investigated, little attention has been given to the impact of physical punishment on later adult psychopathology. Also, it has been stated that physical punishment by a loving parent is not associated with negative outcomes; however, this theory has not been empirically tested with regard to psychiatric disorders. The main objective of the present study was to investigate three categories of increasing severity of childhood adversity (no physical punishment or abuse, physical punishment only, and child abuse) to examine whether the childhood experience of physical punishment alone was associated with adult psychopathology, after adjusting for sociodemographic variables and parental bonding dimensions.

**Methods:** Data were drawn from the nationally representative National Comorbidity Survey (NCS,  $n=5,877$ ; age 15–54 years; response rate 82.4%). Binary logistic and multinomial logistic regression models were used to determine the odds of experiencing psychiatric disorders.

**Results:** Physical punishment was associated with increased odds of major depression (AOR=1.22; 95% CI=1.01–1.48), alcohol abuse/dependence (AOR=1.32; 95% CI=1.08–1.61), and externalizing problems (AOR=1.30; 95% CI=1.05–1.60) in adulthood after adjusting for sociodemographic variables and parental bonding

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dimensions. Individuals experiencing physical punishment only were at increased odds of adult psychopathology compared to those experiencing no physical punishment/abuse and at decreased odds when compared to those who were abused.

**Conclusions:** Physical punishment is a mild form of childhood adversity that shows an association with adult psychopathology.

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*Keywords:* Physical punishment; Child abuse; Psychiatric disorders

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## Introduction

The relationship between severe forms of childhood adversity (sexual abuse, physical abuse) and adult psychopathology has been well established in the literature (Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997; Levitan, Rector, Sheldon, & Goering, 2003; McHolm, MacMillan, & Jamieson, 2003; Molnar, Berkman, & Buka, 2001; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Weiss, Longhurst, & Mazure, 1999). However, there is controversy over whether physical punishment used to discipline children is associated with negative outcomes (Andero & Stewart, 2002; Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere, 2000; Straus, 1999). Some believe that physical punishment by a loving parent has no ill consequences for children (Larzelere, 2000; Rosemond, 2005), while others believe that physical punishment is a minor form of assault and may be associated with negative outcomes (Ateah, Secco, & Woodgate, 2003; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998).

Research has demonstrated that an association exists between physical punishment and dimensions of poor psychological well-being (Bachar, Canetti, Bonne, DeNour & Shalev, 1997; Straus & Kantor, 1994; Turner & Muller, 2004). These studies have made important contributions to the literature but are unable to describe the impact that physical punishment may have on the occurrence of psychiatric disorders since diagnoses of psychiatric disorder were not assessed. To date, the most comprehensive examination of the relationship between physical punishment and psychiatric disorders was conducted in a general population sample of 4,888 individuals aged 15–64 years (MacMillan et al., 1999). Psychiatric disorders were divided into anxiety disorders, major depression, alcohol abuse or dependence, and one or more externalizing problem(s). The results indicated that individuals who were physically punished sometimes or often were more likely to have an anxiety disorder, alcohol problems, and one or more externalizing disorders compared to those who were never physically punished and after adjusting for age, gender, income, and parental education. However, a limitation of the study was the inability to adjust for quality of parental relationships when investigating the association between physical punishment and lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders.

Several limitations exist in the research on physical punishment and psychiatric disorders. First, most samples are restricted to one or a few psychiatric disorders (Holmes & Robins, 1988). Also, few studies consider the confounding effect that child physical or sexual abuse may have on the relationship between physical punishment and psychiatric disorders. It is possible that a child who is physically punished may also experience child abuse. Fergusson and Lynskey (1997) investigated physical punishment and abuse together in a composite measure labeled physical punishment/maltreatment. While informative, this measure does not allow the impact of physical punishment or child abuse to be readily isolated. It is important to include measures of physical punishment and the co-occurrence of physical or sexual child

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