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Antecedents and socioemotional consequences of physical punishment on children in two-parent families

Mary Keegan Eamon*

*School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, 1207 West Oregon Street,
Urbana, IL 61801, USA*

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Abstract

Objective: The main objective of this study was to test a structural model of the antecedents and socioemotional consequences of mothers' use of physical punishment on children in two-parent families.

Method: Mother-child data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, based on a sample of 1397 4- to 9-year-old children, were used to test a structural model derived by the author from previous research. The hypothesized model was revised; the revised model was cross validated on a split-half sample, and estimated separately by age group, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Results: The revised model fit the data well and was supported by cross-validation. Poverty, maternal birth age, parents' education, maternal depression, and marital conflict were directly or indirectly related to mothers' frequent use of physical punishment. Frequent use of physical punishment was directly related to children's socioemotional problems, as were maternal depression and marital conflict. Few subgroup differences were found.

Conclusions: Main findings indicate that the effect of poverty on mothers' use of physical punishment is indirect, and is mediated by maternal depression and marital conflict. Depressed mothers spank their children more frequently and experience higher levels of marital conflict, which, in turn, is directly related to their use of physical punishment. Younger, more educated mothers spank their children less often. Children who are spanked more frequently exhibit more socioemotional problems. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Physical punishment; Socioemotional problems; Depression; Marital conflict; Poverty

* Corresponding author.

Introduction

Children who are harshly or physically punished are more likely to experience socioemotional problems than are children whose parents use other forms of discipline (Deater–Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Larzelere, 1986; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles–Sims, 1997; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). These problems include antisocial behaviors, low self-esteem, internalizing symptoms (such as anxiety, withdrawal, and depression), and externalizing behaviors (such as aggression, disobedience, and impulsiveness). Childhood effects of physical punishment may carry over into adulthood in the form of depression, suicide, alcohol abuse, and family violence (Straus, 1991; Straus & Kantor, 1994). Parents' use of physical punishment also may increase the potential for child abuse (Whipple & Richey, 1997; Whipple & Webster–Stratton, 1991).

Previous research indicates that cultural, demographic, marital, psychological, and socioeconomic factors predict parents' use of physical or harsh punishment (Conger et al., 1993; Deater–Deckard et al., 1996; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Straus, 1991), which is linked to children's socioemotional problems. The main objective of the present study was to test a structural model of the antecedents and socioemotional consequences of mothers' use of physical punishment on a national sample of 4- to 9-year-old children in two-parent families. In this study, antecedents of physical punishment included poverty, maternal birth age and education, fathers' education, maternal depression, and marital conflict. The socioemotional consequences of physical punishment, as well as of maternal depression and marital conflict, were measured by children's externalizing and internalizing problems. The hypothesized relations among these variables were derived from the literature review that follows.

Influences of household and parental characteristics

A number of household and parental characteristics, including poverty, maternal birth age, and mothers' and fathers' education, have been shown to influence maternal depression, marital conflict, and mothers' use of physical punishment. Income or absence of financial strain, age, and years of education are all inversely related to adult depressive symptoms (Aneshensel, Rutter, & Lachenbruch, 1991; Blazer, Kessler, McGonagle, & Swartz, 1994; Bruce, Takeuchi, & Leaf, 1991; Kessler et al., 1994; Muntaner, Eaton, Diala, Kessler, & Sorlie, 1998). Stress caused by higher exposure to discrete life events (such as crime victimization, family illness, and job loss) and chronic strains (such as inability to fulfill family role obligations and responsibilities for young children) is experienced more frequently by poor or young parents. High levels of stress seem to at least partially explain relations between economic hardship and age and maternal depression (Belle, 1990; McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Ross & Huber, 1985; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995). Education is a coping resource (Kessler, 1982; Ross & Mirowsky, 1989); it facilitates effective problem solving, thus reducing the risk of depression.

Some studies suggest that more educated couples have fewer marital conflicts and negative interactions than do less educated couples (Harrell, 1990; Stets, 1997). Couples with more education may be more likely to use nonconflictual methods to resolve differences. Alternatively, negative reactions to low-status occupations or social positions held by less

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