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Research article

A randomized controlled trial of an intervention program to Brazilian mothers who use corporal punishment

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated a positive parenting program to Brazilian mothers who used corporal punishment with their children. The intervention was conducted in four agencies serving vulnerable children, and at a home replica laboratory at the University. Mothers who admitted using corporal punishment were randomly assigned between experimental ($n = 20$) and control group ($n = 20$). The program consisted of 12 individual sessions using one unit from *Projeto Parceria* (Partnership Project), with specific guidelines and materials on positive parenting, followed by observational sessions of mother-child interaction with live coaching and a video feedback session in the lab. The study used an equivalent group experimental design with pre/post-test and follow-up, in randomized controlled trials. Measures involved: Initial Interview; Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) – parent and child versions; Beck Depression Inventory (BDI); observational sessions with a protocol; and a Program Evaluation by participants. Analysis of mixed models for repeated measures revealed significant positive effects on the BDI and SDQ total scores, as well as less Conduct problems and Hyperactivity in SDQ measures from the experimental group mothers, comparing pre with post-test. Observational data also indicated significant improvement in positive interaction from the experimental group mothers at post-test, in comparison with controls. No significant results were found, however, in children's observational measures. Limitations of the study involved using a restricted sample, among others. Implications for future research are suggested.

1. Introduction

Corporal punishment by parents against children is the key factor for the perpetuation of violence in society according to “the cultural spillover theory of violence” by Straus (1996). This is a consistent argument, as several studies (Bergamo & Bazon, 2011; Crouch, Milner, & Thomson, 2001; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Milner et al., 2010) have identified the escalation of aggressive behavior from childhood to adulthood in individuals who suffered corporal punishment. As a result of this pattern, there is greater risk for crime in youngsters and later in adulthood (Straus, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014); risk for abusive behavior in romantic relationships (Jouriles, McDonald, Mueller, & Grych, 2012; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998); as well as risk for repeating a coercive discipline with their own children when assuming a parental role (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Straus' theory is consistent with the extensive literature regarding serious side effects of corporal punishment to the bio-psychosocial development of children. A 20-year review of the literature on corporal punishment in childhood identified that having a history of physical punishment is a high risk for developing neurological, cognitive, emotional and social development problems, as

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well as physical health difficulties (Durrant & Ensom, 2012). In addition, other studies show associations between childhood corporal punishment with mental health problems, such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression (Ackerman, Newton, McPherson, Jones, & Dykman, 1998; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Most problematic behaviors of children victims of corporal punishment include aggression, deficits in social problem solving and communication, and low levels of empathy (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1993). When compared to children who did not suffer corporal punishment, victims exhibit behaviors of isolation due to a tendency to interpret interactions as hostile (Salzinger et al., 1993), and respond with retaliation (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1990). Finally, Straus et al. (2014) present a comprehensive review of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on the adverse consequences of corporal punishment, arguing that this practice is associated with an increase of child behavior problems; slow cognitive development; lower academic performance; sexual risk behavior in adolescence; low self-control and self-esteem; greater acceptance of violence in relationships; antisocial behavior in early adulthood; occurrence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and criminal practices.

These studies suggest that corporal punishment in childhood not only has adverse and immediate psychological impact on children, but may also lead to psychological difficulties throughout life that would potentially harm adult social relations, as well as the next generation of children. Added to these consequences is the impact of physical violence in the biological structure of the individual, which may cause permanent brain damage, learning difficulties and poor academic performance (Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Lansford et al., 2010). Furthermore, Gershoff (2013) argues that the current status of the scientific literature provides sufficient data on the ineffectiveness of corporal punishment and its adverse consequences, with professional positions and human rights bodies advising against this practice.

Despite this evidence, corporal punishment against children is still common in international homes with a general prevalence of around 50% (UNICEF, 2010), and in Brazilian homes with at least 44.1% prevalence, according to a large sample studied (Zanotti-Jeronymo et al., 2009). This practice is inherently ironic, as the real intention of parents when using corporal punishment is to make children obey and respect them, and not to cause damage (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999; Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011).

A Federal Law to ban corporal punishment of children in Brazil's vast territory was approved recently (Brazil, 2014). One way of reaching the goal to eliminate or decrease the use of corporal punishment would be through parenting programs, which are considered essential components for the prevention and treatment of child abuse (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011). Nevertheless, Brazil still needs to develop public policies so that parents receive guidance on positive parenting.

As indicated in a systematic review of parenting programs to prevent corporal punishment (Santini & Williams, 2016a), although the international and Brazilian literature show impressive positive results with such programs (Chaffin et al., 2004; Kolko, 1996; Runyon, Deblinger, & Schroeder, 2009; Santos & Williams, 2008; Swenson, Schaeffer, Henggeler, Faldowski, & Mayhew, 2010), identifying effective techniques and technology to promote positive behavior of parents towards their children, there are yet no published studies that incorporate such positive parenting approaches with live coaching and video feedback – resources that significantly contribute to the improvement in parental behavior, as shown by Capage, McNeil, Foote, and Eyberg (1998) and Fukkink (2008). Santini and Williams (2016a) remarked that the reviewed studies presented exclusively instructional individual/group parental education/psychotherapy, or live coaching, without a combination of the two approaches.

It is hypothesized in the present study that parental education in an individual psychotherapy format associated with live coaching and video feedback would reach more comprehensive and positive results. In addition, Santini and Williams (2016a) found that there were no publications in the Brazilian literature of parenting programs aimed at preventing corporal punishment using scientific rigor, such as Randomized Control Trials (RCT). This lack of rigor does not occur only in the case of Brazil, as in a systematic review of parenting programs in developing countries, Mejia, Calam, and Sanders (2012) found only one study with strong methodology, but its aim was not specific towards the use of corporal punishment: Cooper et al. (2009) conducted a training in South Africa to promote sensitive and responsive parenting and secure attachment.

Projeto Parceria or Partnership Project is a Cognitive-Behavioral Brazilian intervention program to teach parenting skills to mothers with a history of IPV (Williams, Santini, & D'Affonseca, 2014), including two units: (I) one to deal with the emotional aspects associated with a history of IPV and other traumatic experiences; and (II) another on positive parenting. As Project *Parceria* has presented positive results with mothers with a history of IPV (Santini & Williams, 2016b), and mothers of children involved in the Court system (Pereira, D'Affonseca, & Williams, 2013), the authors attempted in the present study to evaluate the effects of using exclusively the project's unit 2 (on positive parenting) to mothers who use corporal punishment associated with techniques identified in the literature as giving positive results.

Thus, the aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of an intervention program (second unit of *Projeto Parceria* on positive parenting) with the addition of the variables live coaching and video feedback with mothers who use corporal punishment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 40 mothers selected from four institutions attending vulnerable children (Child Protection Service – CPS, and three NGOs) participated in the program. Considering the study's limited funding, this sample size was predetermined with an attrition margin of 10 participants per group, as 40 is the minimum necessary sample to detect statistically significant effects and ensure equivalent random distribution between control group (CG) and experimental group (EG), based on Kazdin's (2002) recommendations. Thus, CPS referred children were equally represented in both groups.

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