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# Child Abuse & Neglect

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## Research article

# Dimensions of physical punishment and their associations with children's cognitive performance and school adjustment

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Physical abuse  
 Corporal punishment  
 Cognitive performance  
 School engagement  
 Peer isolation

## ABSTRACT

This study examined how a range of physical punishment measures, ranging from mild corporal punishment to physical abuse, are associated with cognitive performance, school engagement, and peer isolation over a 3-year span among 658 children initially observed between the ages of 8 and 14. Physical punishment was captured in three groups: mild corporal punishment, harsh corporal punishment, and physical abuse, and both caregiver- and child-reported punishment measures were considered. After accounting for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, only initial exposure to physical abuse was significantly associated with declines in cognitive performance. However, all forms of physical punishment were associated with declines in school engagement, and harsh corporal punishment was associated with increased peer isolation. Our findings were relatively consistent regardless of whether physical punishment was reported by the child or caregiver. Overall, our findings suggest that the prevention of physical abuse may enhance children's cognitive performance, but that alone may not be sufficient to ensure children are engaged and well-adjusted in school.

## 1. Introduction

Both corporal punishment and physical abuse have been linked with lower cognitive development and academic performance (Barahal, Waterman, & Martin, 1981; ; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Kurtz, Gaudin, Howing, & Wodarski, 1993; Perez & Widom, 1994; Perry et al., 1983). However, our understanding of the effects of physical abuse and the effects of corporal punishment largely stem from separate bodies of research. That is, most research examining the association between physical abuse and subsequent academic and cognitive outcomes does not account for experiences of non-abusive corporal punishment; and, conversely, many studies of corporal punishment do not account for experiences of physical abuse. Given the lack of consensus in defining physical abuse and corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2002), and with consideration to their co-occurrence, we suggest that both experiences should be examined when attempting to understand their impacts on the outcomes of children. In this study, we examine how a range of physical punishment measures, ranging from spanking to physical abuse, are associated with cognitive performance and school adjustment over a 3-year span among children ages 8–14. We address 3 research questions: (1) Is physical punishment associated with children's cognitive performance and school adjustment outcomes?; (2) Do associations between physical punishment and children's outcomes vary by the severity and amount of physical aggression?; (3) Are associations between physical punishment and children's outcomes consistent across child and caregiver reports?

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.008>

Received 30 November 2016; Received in revised form 8 May 2017; Accepted 1 June 2017

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## 2. Physical abuse and corporal punishment

### 2.1. Definitions and measurement

Although physical abuse is often presented, in both research and practice, as a dichotomous concept, in reality there is a full spectrum of physically aggressive behaviors that parents may exhibit towards their children. Corporal punishment and physical abuse are on a continuum of physical aggressive behaviors against children; with frequent corporal punishment often leading to subsequent physical abuse (Garbarino, 1977; Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). Although the continuum has been identified, there remains significant disagreement about where to draw the line between legal corporal punishment and illegal physical abuse (Gershoff, 2002). For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines physical abuse as the deliberate use of bodily force that either resulted in or had the potential to result in bodily harm of a child (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008, p. 14), whereas corporal punishment has been defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purpose of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (, p. 761). Both definitions are based not on the type of act but rather on its propensity to cause serious harm. However, the degree of harm or potential harm that is required remains disputed. In practice, most studies of corporal punishment focus on parents’ self-reported use of spanking (MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfoegel, Brooks-Gunn, 2012; Straus & Paschall, 2009; Strauss, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997). However, corporal punishment could encompass a broad range of acts. For example, some researchers have included hitting or striking a child with objects as a form of corporal punishment (Tomoda et al., 2009), whereas other scholars have argued that hitting with an object “poses a significant risk of causing an injury that needs medical treatment and therefore crosses the line from corporal punishment to physical abuse” (Straus & Donnelly, 1993, p. 3; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). Some have used the extent of injury, rather than the act itself, to differentiate abusive and non-abusive physical punishment. For example, Lansford et al. defined physical abuse based on whether the intentional striking of a child left marks for longer than 1 day or required medical attention (Lansford et al., 2002).

Notably, the sources of information on physical punishment vary. For spanking or other legal forms of corporal punishment, measures often rely on caregivers to accurately report their use of physical punishment. This, of course, raises concern about social desirability response, in which people answer questions in a manner they believe would be perceived favorably by others. Given the commonality of corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999) and its relatively widespread public acceptance (Child Trends, 2015), it is possible that caregivers would unashamedly admit their amount of use. However, most caregivers do not believe physical punishment is the best choice, even if they find it permissible (Jones, Eyberg, Adams, & Boggs, 1998). Thus, we may expect a degree of underreporting on legal forms of physical punishment. When caregivers are asked to report on illegal behavior, specifically, physical abuse, we may expect a much larger degree of underreporting, given that not only is physical abuse widely frowned upon, it also triggers mandatory reporting laws. Thus, it is also very common for researchers to define physical abuse based on the determination of abuse from child protective services (CPS) (e.g., Kurtz et al., 1993; Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990). This approach is problematic in three ways. First, the statutes defining abuse vary across state (specifically with regard to corporal punishment exceptions; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Second, caseworker determinations of maltreatment are influenced by a variety of external factors (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Lastly, among children whose families were investigated by CPS, formal determinations of maltreatment do not necessarily relate to differences in children’s outcomes (Hussey et al., 2005). Relatively few studies measure maltreatment using current reports from children. Thus, there has been relatively less scrutiny of the accuracy or potential flaws in use of child reports. Children would have their own reasons for underreporting, including fear of getting their caregivers in trouble and fear of repercussions if their caregiver were to find out what they shared. In addition, children may not accurately recall events to the same degree as adults. For these reasons, we examine both child and caregiver reports of physical punishment in our study.

### 2.2. Associations with cognitive and academic outcomes

Researchers have consistently linked child maltreatment to suboptimal academic outcomes. Specifically, child maltreatment is associated with absenteeism (Leiter, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997), low reading and math scores (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996), low high school graduation rates (Currie & Widom, 2010; McGloin & Widom, 2001; Merskey & Topitzes, 2010; Tanaka, Georgiades, Boyle, & MacMillan, 2015), and high grade retention (Eckenrode et al., 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kinard, 1999; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). There is also evidence specifically linking physical abuse to adverse cognitive or academic outcomes. Children who experience physical abuse have been shown to have lower school performance (Kurtz et al., 1993), more verbal deficits (Tarter, Hegedus, Winsten, & Alterman, 1984), more significant thought problems (Lansford et al., 2002), lower IQ (Barahal et al., 1981; Perez & Widom, 1994), lower receptive language skills (Perry et al., 1983) and more discipline problems in school (Eckenrode et al., 1993) than children who do not experience physical maltreatment. Studies that have examined multiple types of maltreatment have suggested that physical neglect is more directly associated with cognitive development than other forms of maltreatment (Font & Berger, 2015).

A relatively larger body of research has examined the associations between corporal punishment and cognitive or school outcomes. Corporal punishment has been associated with lower cognitive functioning and competence in children (Berlin et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a, 2016b; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Straus & Paschall, 2009), including low child receptive vocabulary scores (MacKenzie et al., 2013), low IQ (Berlin et al., 2009; Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997), and disruptive classroom behavior (Michels, Pianta, & Reeve, 1993). Three relatively recent meta-analyses examined cognitive development as an outcome and found corporal punishment to have a significant negative effect on cognitive abilities and development

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