



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Neighborhood collective efficacy, parental spanking, and subsequent risk of household child protective services involvement[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child protective services involvement
Maltreatment
Neighborhood collective efficacy
Spanking

ABSTRACT

Children exposed to negative neighborhood conditions and parental spanking are at higher risk of experiencing maltreatment. We conducted prospective analyses of secondary data to determine the effects of neighborhood collective efficacy and parental spanking on household Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement, and whether spanking mediates the relationship between neighborhood collective efficacy and CPS involvement. The sample ($N = 2,267$) was drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a stratified random sample of 4,789 births between 1998–2000 in 20 large U.S. cities. Logistic regression models were employed to test the effects of neighborhood collective efficacy and spanking at child age 3 on mother's report of CPS contact during the subsequent two years. The product-of-coefficient approach was used to test the mediation hypothesis. One aspect of neighborhood collective efficacy (i.e., Social Cohesion/Trust) is associated with lower odds of CPS involvement ($OR = .80$, 95% CI 0.670–0.951) after controlling for Informal Social Control, parental spanking, and the covariates. Parental spanking predicts increased odds of CPS involvement during the next two years ($OR = 1.38$, 95% CI 1.001–1.898), net of neighborhood collective efficacy and the covariates. The mediation hypothesis is not supported. Promoting both cohesive and trusting relationships between neighbors and non-physical discipline practices is likely to reduce the incidence of household CPS involvement.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a serious public health concern in the United States. Child Protective Services (CPS) looked into claims of suspected maltreatment concerning more than 7.2 million individual children in 2015 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). Accumulating evidence demonstrates that children of parents who use spanking are at higher risk of experiencing maltreatment (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014; Zolotor, Theodore, Runyan, Chang, & Laskey, 2011). Spanking is the mildest type of corporal punishment that involves parental use of physical force on a child's bottom with an open hand to stop and correct misbehavior (Gershoff, 2002). Despite the considerable link between spanking and maltreatment, spanking constitutes a lawful parenting practice in the U.S. that is not considered as maltreatment unless it results in child injury

[☆] The Fragile Families Study was funded by a grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver NICHD (#R01HD36916) and a consortium of private foundations. Persons interested in obtaining Fragile Families contract data should see <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> for further information.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.03.019>

Received 11 October 2017; Received in revised form 10 February 2018; Accepted 12 March 2018

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(Gershoff, 2002). While the American Academy of Pediatrics has condemned the practice since 1998 (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998), more than half of 3-year-olds in the United States are spanked by a parent in a given month (Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017), and a full 70% of U.S. adults favor the practice (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2015).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) and family coercion theory (Patterson, 1982) suggest that even a mild, occasional use of spanking can escalate into child maltreatment through the following processes. By using physical means to correct children's misbehavior and defiance, parents are modeling and unintentionally teaching the legitimacy of aggressive behavior to children. The subsequent misbehaviors of children may possibly increase the frequency and severity of spanking and coercive practices because parents may become more frustrated and impatient to communicate their disciplinary message and to increase their child's compliance. Indeed, a recent study found evidence for this coercive cycle such that parental spanking to 1-year-old children predicted higher odds of subsequent CPS involvement in the household (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014).

A handful of prior studies have argued that the inferences concerning causal connections between spanking and child abuse are unwarranted, mainly because spanking and child maltreatment are often considered to be theoretically distinct parenting practices (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002; Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010; Larzelere, Swindle, & Johnson, 2013). However, recent meta-analyses by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) that aggregated the findings from 75 studies add rigorous empirical evidence to an accumulating literature concerning the similarity of spanking and physical abuse in terms of their effects upon children. A comparison of effect sizes for spanking and physical abuse in this meta-analysis indicated that although the effects of spanking are slightly smaller than those of physical abuse, both forms of coercive parenting behavior are associated with detrimental child outcomes.

Another research literature, grounded in ecological models and social disorganization theory, documents a relationship between the ways in which neighbors interact socially, or fail to interact, and child maltreatment rates in their communities (Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Molnar et al., 2016). These studies focus on neighborhood collective efficacy, which represents the willingness of neighbors to effectively organize and intervene on behalf of their common goals, as a protective factor for child maltreatment. Research connects neighborhood collective efficacy to two related social processes: *social cohesion/trust* (i.e., shared identity and positive relationships between neighbors) and *informal social control* (i.e., shared social norms and capacity to work together cooperatively to eliminate community problems) (Sampson, 1997).

Compared to their counterparts in neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy, parents residing in neighborhoods with low collective efficacy tend to experience more psychological distress (Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008), substance abuse (Boardman, Finch, Ellison, Williams, & Jackson, 2001), and intimate partner violence (Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2003), all of which are risk factors for use of physical child discipline (Gershoff, 2002) and child maltreatment (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009). Several studies also document direct links between low levels of neighborhood collective efficacy and parental use of punitive child discipline such as corporal punishment (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2013; Krishnakumar, Narine, Roopnarine, & Logie, 2014). Yet, no study to date has examined the correlated and ecological relationships between neighborhood social processes and physical child discipline practices as precursors of child maltreatment *simultaneously*. This study begins to address this gap by assessing the combined effects of neighborhood collective efficacy and parental spanking on child maltreatment as measured by household risk of CPS involvement.

A growing research literature integrates social disorganization and family stress perspectives and points to parenting processes as a mediating pathway through which neighborhood social processes predict child outcomes (e.g., Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Krishnakumar, Narine, Roopnarine, & Logie, 2014). This literature found that families living in neighborhoods with low levels of collective efficacy experience heightened distress, which can lead to the use of more punitive parental behaviors (Kohen et al., 2008) and corporal punishment (Krishnakumar et al., 2014). Adverse neighborhood conditions and dysfunctional parenting subsequently predict child behavior problems (Ingoldsby et al., 2006), which increases children's risk of being maltreated (Stith et al., 2009). However, the applicability of social disorganization and family stress perspectives to risk of child maltreatment has not been examined in prior research. Therefore, we test the hypothesis that a greater tendency among residents of neighborhoods lacking collective efficacy to use parental spanking helps explain neighborhood effects on child maltreatment.

Research has shown consistency across measures of behaviorally approximated child maltreatment, perceived maltreatment reported by practitioners, CPS administrative records, and self-reported CPS involvement (Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Font & Berger, 2015; McDaniel & Slack, 2005). CPS investigations are increasingly accepted as reliable indicators of child maltreatment in the U.S., particularly early maltreatment, than substantiated CPS reports mainly because substantiation decisions are often influenced by factors unrelated to whether maltreatment has actually occurred (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Moreover, demonstration of sufficient evidence to substantiate a CPS report can be very challenging to come by in cases involving young children who lack the language skills to describe the maltreatment that they have experienced (Klein, 2011). Thus, consistent with prior studies that assessed CPS involvement (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009; Lee et al., 2014; Zhai, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013), we use parental report of CPS contact as a proxy for household child maltreatment to capture the overall risk of abusive and neglectful parenting of children in the household that resulted in a CPS investigation.

Despite the fact that the frequency of parental spanking reaches its peak during the preschool years (Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017), prior literature has not investigated the longitudinal associations between neighborhood collective efficacy, spanking, and CPS involvement of preschool-aged children. We aim to address this gap by exploring the possible inter-relationship between exposure to low neighborhood collective efficacy and parental spanking in early childhood and its effects on subsequent CPS involvement with a series of prospective logistic regression analyses. Our models examine the independent effects of neighborhood collective efficacy at child age 3 on household CPS involvement during the next two years; the simultaneous effects of collective efficacy and spanking on

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