

Corporal punishment and child adjustment[☆]

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Abstract

The association between corporal punishment and children's emotional and behavioral functioning was studied in a sample of 98 non-referred children with a mean age of 12.35 ($SD = 1.72$) recruited from two school systems in the southeastern United States. Children were divided into those who had experienced no corporal punishment over approximately a two-week period, those who had experienced mild levels of corporal punishment (i.e., 1 or 2 instances), and those who had experienced high levels of corporal punishment (i.e., 3 or more instances). Results indicated that use of corporal punishment was associated with problems in both emotional and behavioral adjustment. However, these associations were strongest for children who experienced high levels of corporal punishment, for children who were impulsive, and for children who did not experience a warm and supportive family climate. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Parental use of corporal punishment (i.e., spanking or hitting a child for a transgression) is a common method of disciplining children. Indeed, researchers have reported that over 94% of parents of toddlers use some form of corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999) and that 75% of a college student sample reported experiencing some form of corporal punishment in their childhood (Ateah & Parker, 2002). The debate over the appropriateness of this form of discipline has been detailed extensively in terms of moral, religious, and political foundations (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Gershoff, 2002; Greven, 1990; Kazdin & Benjet, 2003; Straus, 1994). The intensity of the debate is illustrated by the fact that, for some, corporal punishment is a moral imperative for parents and a necessary aspect of parents' obligation to discipline their children; for others, the use of corporal punishment is an act of aggression that should be banned by law. In fact, a number of countries (e.g., Austria, Finland, Germany, Sweden) have made corporal punishment illegal as a means of discipline for children at home and school (Gershoff, 2002; Kazdin & Benjet, 2003).

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There exists a rather extensive empirical literature on the association between corporal punishment and children's adjustment. In one of the most comprehensive reviews of the literature to date, Gershoff (2002) provided a meta-analysis of 88 studies investigating the association between corporal punishment and children's adjustment. The results provide a rather negative picture of the effects of corporal punishment on children. The only positive effect that was noted was on the child's immediate compliance to parental commands. In contrast, a number of negative effects of corporal punishment were documented across studies. For example, parental use of corporal punishment showed a positive association with aggression, delinquent/antisocial behavior, and becoming a victim of child abuse in children. Corporal punishment was negatively correlated with internalization of parental norms and quality of parent-child relationships. Beside these concurrent relations, this meta-analysis documented an association between the experience of corporal punishment in childhood and problems in adult adjustment, including aggression, criminal/antisocial behavior, abuse of spouse and/or child, and poor mental health.

The link between corporal punishment and problems in adjustment, combined with the high rates of corporal punishment that currently exist, is clearly a source of concern. However, a key question is whether or not the state of research, as reflected in this meta-analysis, should be the final word for guiding mental health policy. Kazdin and Benjet (2003) noted that there are a number of important issues not addressed adequately by the existing research that could help to guide policy decisions (see also Benjet & Kazdin, 2003). The first issue concerns the wide variety of definitions of corporal punishment that have been used in past research and that were combined in the Gershoff meta-analysis. That is, past research has often not distinguished between frequent and severe levels of punishment (e.g., slapping in face, hitting with object to cause injury) that either were or would be considered abusive, from occasional use of mild physical discipline (e.g., spanking with open hand). Illustrating the importance of this distinction, Baumrind, Larzelere, and Cowan (2002) conducted a reanalysis of the studies included in the Gershoff (2002) meta-analysis and found that more negative outcomes were associated with children exposed to more severe forms of punishment.

Unfortunately, most studies have not provided the data necessary to determine whether this link between more severe punishment and negative outcomes is due to a linear or curvilinear relation between corporal punishment and child adjustment. That is, it is possible that problems in child adjustment increase as the level of corporal punishment increases. However, it is also possible that there may be a curvilinear relationship, with both low and very high levels of corporal punishment being associated with problems in adjustment. The few studies that have used a methodology that can distinguish between linear and curvilinear associations have led to mixed results. For example, Larzelere (1986) examined the association between corporal punishment and aggression in children by comparing three levels of spanking frequency (minimal, moderate, and frequent) on the frequency of aggressive behaviors children exhibited toward family members. He reported that the frequency of aggressive behaviors increased as the frequency of spanking increased. Bryan and Freed (1982) included measures of both frequency and intensity of corporal punishment and found that an increase in both intensity and frequency was associated with an increase in aggression. Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994) differentiated between different types of physical punishment by comparing three types of punishment (no spanking, spanking, and violent hitting) and its association with measures of child aggression. Level of aggression increased across the conditions in a linear fashion for all types of corporal punishment (Strassberg et al., 1994).

In contrast to these findings of a linear association between corporal punishment and child aggression, some studies have found that mild forms of corporal punishment may not be associated with more problems in child adjustment, and may even be associated with more positive adjustment. For example, Parke and Slaby (1983) reviewed the literature regarding the antecedents to the development of childhood aggression and concluded that aggression increases only in the presence of high intensity physical punishment, but not mild physical punishment. Similarly, in a prospective longitudinal study, Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, and Huesmann (1977) found that medium levels of punishment in childhood were associated with the lowest aggression scores later in development. Some of the positive effects of mild levels of corporal punishment may be due to the fact that parents who use infrequent and mild spanking typically use it in the context of other forms of discipline. Specifically, Larzelere (2000) reported that spanking had beneficial outcomes in 2- to 6-year-old children (e.g., reduced non-compliance, reduced fighting) when it was mild and used primarily to back up other disciplinary tactics. Similarly, Wissow (2001) reported that, in a large national sample of 2017 parents, those who used average levels of corporal punishment made more frequent use of nonphysical disciplinary strategies (e.g., time out) and had higher levels of nurturing interactions compared to parents who reported below-average levels of spanking. However, both of these groups reported lower levels of nurturing interactions with their children when compared to parents who reported high levels of corporal punishment.

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