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Maternal use of physical punishment in response to child misbehavior: implications for child abuse prevention[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The objective was to examine the roles of cognition and affect in maternal use of physical punishment.

Method: Through a review of the literature, distal and proximal predictors (cognitive and affective) of physical punishment use were identified. One hundred and ten mothers of 3-year-old children were interviewed regarding two disciplinary situations that occurred during the previous 2-week period that elicited their strongest reactions: one which resulted in the use of physical punishment (if this occurred) and one which did not. The individual and combined contributions of the predictors of physical punishment use were analyzed through logistic regression.

Results: The predictors of physical punishment following individual analyses were: maternal attitude toward physical punishment, maternal perception of the seriousness and intent of the child misbehavior, and maternal anger in response to the child misbehavior. Through multivariate analysis 54% of the variance in physical punishment use was explained.

Conclusions: Both cognitive and affective factors affect the decision to use physical punishment with children. These findings can be useful in establishing parenting educational programming that is directed at decreasing the rates of physical punishment and subsequently child physical abuse.

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years, the use of physical punishment with children has been linked to many negative developmental outcomes, such as aggression (e.g., Brezina, 1999; McCabe, Clarke, & Barnett, 1999; Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Ulman & Straus, 2003), psychological maladjustment (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; Eamon, 2001; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996), and impaired parent-child relationships (Gershoff, 2002). One of the outcomes most consistently linked to physical punishment is physical harm or injury to the child (Gershoff, 2002; Gil, 1979; Kadushin & Martin, 1981).

While it is sometimes argued that corporal punishment and physical abuse are two distinct phenomena, there is a considerable amount of evidence demonstrating that most abuse *is* physical punishment. For example, Gil (1970), in a national US study of all cases of child physical abuse reported during a 2-year period, found that the most common type of abuse involved “incidents developing out of disciplinary action taken by caretakers” (p. 126). In an extensive examination of substantiated cases of nonsexual abuse by parents, Kadushin and Martin (1981) found that the abuse “almost invariably” (p. 249) occurred within the context of a disciplinary interaction.

These findings are not unique to the United States. For example, a nation-wide Canadian study of a representative sample of 7,672 child maltreatment investigations carried out in 1998 demonstrated that the majority of substantiated cases of child physical abuse occurred in the context of punishment (Trocmé & Durrant, 2003). Similar findings have been obtained in studies carried out in Finland (Santsalo & Santsalo, 1979, cited in Peltoniemi, 1983) and Hong Kong (Samuda, 1988).

Despite the evidence demonstrating its risks, the use of physical punishment with children occurs in many nations. Its prevalence has been estimated at 51% in Canada (Oldershaw, 2002), 61% in Greece (Halkias et al., 2001), 87% in Northern Ireland (Murphy-Cowan & Stringer, 1999), ranging from 60 to 90% in the United States (Straus & Stewart, 1999) and 90% or more in Hong Kong (Samuda, 1988), New Zealand (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997), and the United Kingdom (Ghate, Hazel, Creighton, Finch, & Field, 2003).

Although many experts have argued that the societal sanctioning and prevalence of physical punishment contribute to the occurrence of child physical abuse (e.g., Gil, 1979; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, 1994), there are currently no large scale primary prevention programs in North America specifically directed toward the reduction or elimination of this practice. Primary prevention initiatives are those that are directed at the general population to address underlying causes and reduce incidence (Meston, 1993) such as public media campaigns outlining the risks of smoking. The prevention programs that do exist in relation to disciplinary practices with children are generally available for a fee to parents who have an interest in improving their disciplinary responses. Secondary and tertiary prevention programs, respectively, target parents who have been identified as at-risk of abusing their children (such as those who are single, young, and/or economically disadvantaged), or who have been physically abusive of their children in the past. Such programs are most likely to focus on the enhancement of parenting skills (including the use of non-physical discipline) and knowledge about children, their needs, as well as the development of support networks.

However, there are factors, perhaps more proximal to the disciplinary encounter itself, that may influence a parent’s use of physical punishment. For example, parental anger may lead to use of physical punishment, even in a knowledgeable, skilled parent. To be effective, primary, secondary and tertiary

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