



Age, sex, and racial differences in harsh physical punishment: Results from a nationally representative United States sample



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine age, sex, and racial differences in the prevalence of harsh physical punishment in childhood in a nationally representative sample of the United States. Data were from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) collected in 2004 and 2005 ($n = 34,653$). Logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine age, sex, and racial differences in the prevalence of harsh physical punishment. Results suggest that the prevalence of harsh physical punishment has been decreasing among more recently born age groups; however, there appear to be sex and racial differences in this trend over time. The magnitude of the decrease appears to be stronger for males than for females. By race, the decrease in harsh physical punishment over time is only apparent among Whites; Black participants demonstrate little change over time, and harsh physical punishment seems to be increasing over time among Hispanics. Prevention and intervention efforts that educate about the links of physical punishment to negative outcomes and alternative non-physical discipline strategies may be particularly useful in reducing the prevalence of harsh physical punishment over time.

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Introduction

Controversy exists with regard to the use of physical punishment in childrearing. Advocates assert that physical punishment is not harmful provided it is implemented in a calm and controlled manner for corrective purposes within the context of a warm and supportive parent–child relationship (Baumrind, 1997). Opponents of physical punishment have argued that physical punishment not only violates children's basic human rights (Durrant, 2008), but also that research consistently indicates that physical punishment is associated with adverse mental health, physical health, developmental and behavioral outcomes across the lifespan (Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Afifi et al., 2014; Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Afifi, Mota, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2013; Douglas & Straus, 2006; Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff, 2002). As a consequence, a number of key health organizations have issued position statements advocating against

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the use of physical punishment in childrearing (Canadian Paediatric Association, 2004; Canadian Psychological Association, 2004; Shelov & Altman, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Physical punishment is defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing the child to experience bodily pain or discomfort so as to correct or punish the child’s behavior” (Gershoff, 2008, p. 9). While spanking is most often defined as hitting a child’s buttocks with an open hand (Gershoff, 2013), physical punishment is a broader concept that can include spanking and other forms of mild, physical force such as a slap on a child’s hand, as well as more severe forms of physical force such as hitting a child with an object or slapping a child across the face (Gershoff, 2008). A variety of different definitions and measures of physically aggressive parenting practices have been used throughout the literature, making comparisons between studies difficult (Douglas & Straus, 2006). In this study, we chose to use the term *harsh physical punishment* rather than physical punishment due to the recognition that our measure (i.e., pushed, grabbed, shoved, or hit by a parent or other adult living in your home) could include acts beyond the range of customary or more normative disciplinary actions such as spanking (Afifi et al., 2012).

There is some debate in the literature as to what is considered abusive vs. non-abusive disciplinary practices (Whipple & Richey, 1997). Generally, physically aggressive disciplinary practices that pose a high risk of injury to the child (or cause actual harm or injury to the child) are the practices where social and legal interventions are applied (Straus, 2001). In this study, we attempted to assess differences in the prevalence of harsh physical punishment, independent of physical harm (i.e., being hit so hard that it left marks, bruises, or caused an injury), because this type of punishment is often used in childrearing (Afifi et al., 2014; Hanson et al., 2006; Hawkins et al., 2010; Straus & Stewart, 1999), but is unlikely to result in legal or social service intervention (Straus, 2001). A major limitation of extant research on physical punishment (including spanking) is that concurrent, physically abusive experiences are not considered in most analyses (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002).

Nationally representative data from the United States has indicated that the physical punishment of children is nearly a universal phenomenon, with 94% of toddlers being physically punished (usually by spanking or being slapped on the hand) by parents in the past year (Straus & Stewart, 1999). It is noteworthy that more severe forms of physical punishment are frequently used in childrearing. For example, Straus and Stewart (1999) also reported that more than 1 in 4 parents reported hitting children aged 5–12 years with objects and between 4.8% and 6.9% of children aged 2–17 years were slapped on the face, head, or ears. Similarly, nationally representative data from Canada has indicated that 22.3% of the adult Canadian population reported having been slapped on the face, head, or ears, or spanked or hit with something hard, and 10.5% reported having been pushed, grabbed, shoved, or had something thrown at them before the age of 16 years (Afifi et al., 2014). Data from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) and the 2005 National Survey of Adolescents-Replication (NSA-R) conducted in the United States found that 9.0% (NSA) and 8.5% (NSA-R) of adolescents aged 12–17 years experienced injurious spanking (i.e., spanked so hard it caused bad bruises, cuts, or welts); 4.2% (NSA-R) reported having ever been thrown across the room or against a wall, floor, car, or against other hard surfaces by a parent or other adult in charge of them (Hawkins et al., 2010); and approximately 10% (NSA) experienced severe physical assault by a caretaker (Hanson et al., 2006). These findings highlight that the experience of harsher forms of physical punishment are not an uncommon experience for many children and youth.

Attitudes toward the use of physical punishment in childrearing have also been shifting in recent decades (Durrant, 2008; Gershoff, 2008; Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). Where physical punishment in childrearing was once considered a necessary and integral component of the disciplinary process (Straus, 2001), evidence gleaned from different cross-sectional surveys conducted in the United States points to a decline in attitudes favoring physical punishment in childrearing (Straus, 2010). In the United States, there appears to be substantial support that spanking a child with a hand represents a non-abusive parenting practice, less consensus exists with regard to more moderate and severe forms of physical punishment such as slapping a child on the face or the use of implements for disciplinary purposes (Bensley et al., 2004). At the international level, 39 nations have now implemented bans on the use of physical punishment against children (Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, 2014). The intention of such bans are not to place parents in jails for spanking, but rather to protect the basic human rights of children and to make societal shifts toward no tolerance for violence against children. Additionally, the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly prohibits the use of any form of physical or mental violence against children. Taken together, evidence suggests a global trend in attitudinal change regarding the acceptability of physical punishment as a legitimate and effective parental disciplinary technique. Nonetheless, physical punishment in childrearing remains a legal practice in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere.

Less information exists regarding whether these shifting attitudes have translated into a decreased use of physical punishment by parents over time. In the United States, evidence suggests an 18% decrease in the use of physical punishment (spanking or slapping) over the period 1975 to 2002 (Zolotor, Theodore, Runyan, Chang, & Laskey, 2011). Substantiated cases of physical abuse have declined 43% over the period from 1992 to 2004 (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). Data from the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) has also indicated a 23% decline in rates of physical abuse based on the harm standard since 1993 (Sedlak et al., 2010). However, data from the NSA and NSA-R indicates no significant change in the overall prevalence of injurious spanking from 1995 to 2005 (Hawkins et al., 2010). Further, little is known about the prevalence of harsh physical punishment independent of other forms of maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, and exposure to intimate partner violence) of children in the United States born prior to 1975.

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