

# Spanking and Child Development: We Know Enough Now to Stop Hitting Our Children

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**ABSTRACT**—*Spanking remains a common, if controversial, childrearing practice in the United States. In this article, I pair mounting research indicating that spanking is both ineffective and harmful with professional and human rights opinions disavowing the practice. I conclude that spanking is a form of violence against children that should no longer be a part of American childrearing.*

**KEYWORDS**—*spanking; corporal punishment; violence against children*

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Spanking has been used as a method of correcting children's behavior since the beginning of recorded history (Scott, 1996), and likely was used by prehistoric parents long before it occurred to anyone to write about it. With spanking's long tenure in the scope of human history, it is no surprise that the mounting calls for parents to stop spanking their children have met with skepticism, if not outright derision, from both conservative family advocates (Dobson, 1996) and some academics (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002). In this article, I summarize why we should be concerned about the continued use of spanking as a form of discipline.

Spanking, which in this article means hitting a child on the bottom with an open hand, is a common parenting practice

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around the world. Half of the children in a 33-country survey by UNICEF reported having been physically punished by their parents (UNICEF, 2010). The prevalence of spanking in the United States is even greater, with two thirds of young children being spanked by their parents (65% of 19- to 35-month-olds; Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004), and most teenagers (85%) reporting that they were slapped or spanked by their mothers at some point (Bender et al., 2007).

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SPANKING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

As befits a widespread childrearing practice, a large body of research has examined the links between spanking and subsequent child behavior. This literature has been reviewed extensively elsewhere (Gershoff, 2002, 2010), so what follows summarizes what is known about spanking and child development.

### Spanking Is Ineffective

Most parents' main goals in spanking their children are (a) to punish misbehavior and thereby reduce recurrence of the undesirable behavior and (b) to increase the likelihood of desirable behavior in the future. Spanking is a form of punishment and as such can only directly achieve the first goal. Specifically, punishment is the process by which a behavior (e.g., a child running into the street) elicits a punishing consequence (e.g., a spanking) that decreases the likelihood of that behavior happening again (e.g., the child no longer runs into the street; Hineline & Rosales-Ruiz, 2012). How well does spanking decrease undesirable behaviors? Research on spanking has focused on three undesirable behaviors—short- and long-term noncompliance, and children's aggression.

### Short-Term Noncompliance

The most germane test of the effectiveness of a punishment is whether it gets the child to stop engaging in a misbehavior immediately. Recent evidence is difficult to obtain for several



reasons. First, spanking is challenging to observe in the home because it occurs relatively rarely in most families and because families may not spank in front of observers. Second, it is difficult to study in the lab because university institutional review boards prohibit the gratuitous hurting of participants.

In the 1980s, a research team at Idaho State University conducted a series of experiments comparing spanking with giving time-outs (Roberts & Powers, 1990). The team assigned young children with behavior problems who had been referred to the clinic to one of several conditions: Some children who disobeyed an instruction were put in time-out alone and others were put in time-out, but spanked if they did not stay in the time-out for the allotted time. The children were then observed to see whether they complied with a series of 30 commands from their mothers. In an initial meta-analysis of these studies, children were more likely to comply when mothers spanked than when they used time-outs (Gershoff, 2002). But the findings were based on a comparison of postintervention rates of compliance, which is typical for random assignment experiments, and failed to consider the fact that the comparison groups in two of the five studies had substantially different rates of initial compliance at baseline. When the data were reanalyzed to compare the pre- to postintervention changes in compliance for spanking with those for time-outs to take the baseline differences into account, spanking was not found to be more effective than time-outs at increasing children's immediate compliance to mothers' commands (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2013).

#### *Long-Term Noncompliance*

Parents discipline to achieve not just short-term compliance but long-term changes in behavior. Several studies have examined whether spanking is effective in achieving long-term compliance or promoting the development of conscience, variously operationalized as obedience to commands, resistance to temptation, and evidence of conscience or guilt. More spanking is associated with less long-term compliance and evidence of conscience (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2013), so spanking has not been found to reduce noncompliance in the long term.

#### *Aggression*

Parents report that one of the misbehaviors most likely to elicit spanking is when a child acts aggressively (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). Beyond the irony of parents acting aggressively to reduce aggression in their children, does spanking reduce children's aggression? The answer is, clearly and definitively, no. In all 27 of the relevant studies, spanking was associated with more, not less, aggression in children (Gershoff, 2002).

Critics of the spanking literature maintain that this association is an artifact of a child effect, such that aggressive children elicit harsher parenting generally and more spanking in particular from their parents (Baumrind et al., 2002). Several longitudinal studies have directly tested this hypothesis by examining cross-lagged associations between spanking and children's aggression,

comparing the path from spanking to aggression (the extent to which spanking predicts changes in children's aggression over time, controlling for initial levels of spanking) with the path from children's aggression to spanking (the extent to which children's aggression predicts changes in spanking over the same period). In one study of more than 3,000 preschoolers, increases in spanking from ages 1 to 3 predicted increases in children's aggression from ages 3 to 5, over and above initial levels and maternal warmth (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013).

A second study across the preschool years with more than 2,500 children found that spanking at ages 1, 2, and 3 predicted increases in externalizing behaviors 1 year later, but found no evidence of a child effect (Berlin et al., 2009). Moving to the elementary school years, a study of a nationally representative sample of 11,044 children found both the spanking effect and child effect to be significant over the period from kindergarten to third grade (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012). Finally, in a study of 440 families that followed children over the transition to adolescence, both the spanking and child effect paths were significant (Sheehan & Watson, 2008).

In these studies, although children's aggressive behavior often elicited more spanking over time, this effect did not entirely explain the association between spanking and children's aggression. Rather, spanking predicted increases in children's aggression over and above initial levels. In none of these longitudinal studies did spanking predict reductions in children's aggression over time; in other words, spanking was not effective at achieving parents' desired goal of reducing children's aggression. Spanking consistently predicted increases in children's aggression over time, regardless of how aggressive children were when the spanking occurred.

#### *Why Is Spanking Ineffective?*

One main reason spanking is ineffective is that it fails to adhere to the conditions that behaviorists say must exist for punishment to be effective, namely, that it be immediate, consistent, and delivered after every instance of the targeted behavior (Hindle & Rosales-Ruiz, 2012). It is difficult to imagine that a parent would be able to meet all these criteria when administering spanking; indeed, it would likely be both inadvisable and bordering on abusive if parents spanked children following every instance of a given misbehavior.

Children learn by more complicated methods than just which behaviors elicit a punishment; indeed, successful socialization requires that children internalize reasons for behaving in appropriate and acceptable ways (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Spanking alone does not teach children why their behavior was wrong or what they should do instead (Hoffman, 1983). Rather, it teaches them that they must behave when the threat of physical punishment exists, but once the threat is gone, they have no reason to behave appropriately (Hoffman, 1983).

Moreover, spanking is ineffective because it is different from other forms of punishment and discipline in that it involves

hitting, which is of course a form of violence (see further discussion of this issue later). Hitting, by its nature, causes physical pain, and it can be confusing and frightening for children to be hit by someone they love and respect, and on whom they are dependent. Children report fear, anger, and sadness when they are spanked (Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006), feelings that interfere with their ability to internalize parents' disciplinary messages (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Children who are spanked are more likely to attribute hostile intentions to others, attributions that in turn increase the likelihood that they will behave aggressively in social interactions (Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986).

Spanking models the use of aggression and violence, teaching children that it is acceptable and reasonable for the person in charge to use violence to get what he or she wants and that violence is sometimes a part of loving relationships (Eron, Walder, & Lefkowitz, 1971). This latter message then perpetuates the transmission of violence in families across generations. The fact that parents often spank to punish children's own aggression is doubly confusing to children, with spanking becoming a hypocritical "do as I say, not as I do" form of parenting.

#### Spanking Is Linked With Numerous Adverse Side Effects

In addition to its ineffectiveness at changing children's behavior, spanking is linked with a range of unintended and undesirable outcomes that thus can be thought of as adverse side effects. In a series of meta-analyses, spanking was associated with increases in mental health problems in childhood and adulthood, delinquent behavior in childhood and criminal behavior in adulthood, negative parent-child relationships, and increased risk that children will be physically abused (Gershoff, 2002).

The link between spanking and physical abuse is the most disturbing of these unintended effects, but it should not be a surprising one; both parental acts involve hitting, and purposefully hurting children. The difference between the two is often degree (duration, amount of force, object used) rather than intent, as most documented cases of physical abuse begin with parents physically punishing their children for a perceived misdeed (Durrant et al., 2006). Reducing parents' use of spanking may go a long way toward reducing the number of children who suffer physical abuse each year.

#### Negative Outcomes of Spanking Are Similar Across Cultures

Some researchers argue that spanking should be more effective with children in cultures that support spanking, in part because children should more readily accept the practice (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Studies of this cultural normativeness hypothesis have primarily used race or ethnicity as a marker of culture. In several early studies, spanking or harsh physical punishment indeed was associated with more aggression among White children but not among Black children (e.g., Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996). However, in studies using longitudinal and

nationally representative data, spanking predicted increases in children's problem behavior over time across White, Black, Latino, and Asian subsamples (e.g., Berlin et al., 2009; Gershoff et al., 2012), particularly when subsample differences in frequency of spanking were considered (Gershoff et al., 2012). In one of only a few studies that measured normativeness, more spanking was consistently associated with more aggression in children, even when mothers or children perceived that their communities largely accepted spanking (Gershoff et al., 2010).

#### CRITICISMS OF SPANKING FROM OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY

The abundance and consistency of studies linking spanking with undesirable outcomes in children has failed to spur societal change in attitudes about or use of spanking. Change may need to come from outside the academic world, and a growing number of organizations representing professionals who work with children and human rights advocates have voiced concerns about and disapproval of spanking.

#### Spanking Is Increasingly Disavowed by Professional Organizations

Based in large part on the consistency of the research linking spanking with undesirable outcomes but also on changes in attitudes about the appropriateness of hitting children in the name of discipline, several national professional organizations have called on parents to abandon spanking as a childrearing practice and for professionals to recommend disciplinary alternatives to spanking. The most prominent of these organizations are the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2012), the American Humane Association (2009), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child & Family Health, 1998), the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP, 2011), and the National Association of Social Workers (2012). The AAP has taken these recommendations one step further by including discipline and alternatives to spanking on its list of injury-prevention topics that pediatricians should discuss with parents during well-child visits (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2008).

In addition to these official policy statements, several leading professional organizations for practitioners who work directly with or on behalf of children endorsed a report commissioned by Phoenix Children's Hospital recommending that parents avoid spanking in favor of nonpunitive discipline (Gershoff, 2008). The organizations include the AACAP, the AAP, the American College of Emergency Physicians, the American Medical Association, the National Association for Regulatory Administration, the National Association of Counsel for Children, the NAPNAP, and Voices for America's Children (Phoenix Children's Hospital, 2009).

Religious leaders have begun to speak out against spanking, as well. Two major denominations in the United States, the United

Methodist Church (2008) and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA (2012), passed resolutions encouraging parents to avoid spanking and use other forms of discipline.

### Spanking Violates Children's Human Rights

Consensus is growing among human rights advocates that spanking, or corporal punishment as it is commonly known in international circles, violates children's human rights according to at least seven human rights treaties (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). The United Nations has said unequivocally that "corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, para. 18); that corporal punishment violates Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects children from "all forms of physical or mental violence" (United Nations, 1989, Article 19, para. 1); and that it should be banned in all contexts (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Other international human rights bodies have called for corporal punishment to be outlawed in their member countries. For example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has called for the whole of Europe to ban corporal punishment of children (Europe-Wide Ban on Corporal Punishment of Children, Recommendation 1666, 2004). Similarly, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), part of the Organization of American States, of which the United States is a member, concluded that corporal punishment violates children's human rights according to several treaties and thus should be banned "in all contexts" (IACHR, Rapporteurship on the Rights of the Child, Organization of American States, 2009, p. 1, para. 3).

Largely in response to these human rights concerns, 33 countries have banned all corporal punishment of children, including that by parents (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2013). Human rights-based arguments have little influence in the United States until we ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the United States is one of only three countries not to have done so (the others are Somalia and South Sudan, the latter of which gained independence in 2011). Yet it is clear that American society is increasingly isolated in our insistence that parents (and, in 19 states, public school personnel) can spank children as a form of discipline.

### CONCLUSION

We now have enough research to conclude that spanking is ineffective at best and harmful to children at worst. We also know that a range of professional and human rights organizations condemn the practice and urge parents to use alternative forms of discipline. We thus have research-based and human-rights-based reasons for not spanking our children.

But there is a third reason not to spank our children, and that is a moral one. Although most Americans do not like to call it so, spanking is hitting and hitting is violence. By using the euphemistic term *spanking*, parents feel justified in hitting their

children while not acknowledging that they are, in fact, hitting. We as a society have agreed that hitting is not an effective or acceptable way for adults to resolve their differences, so it should not be a surprise that hitting children, like hitting adults, causes more problems than it solves. It is time to stop hitting our children in the name of discipline.

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