

THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

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Abstract

Long considered an effective, and even necessary, means of socialising children, physical punishment has been revealed to be a predictor of a wide range of negative developmental outcomes. The extent of agreement in the research literature on this issue is unusual in the social sciences. Physical punishment is associated with increased child aggression, antisocial behaviour, lower intellectual achievement, poorer quality of parent-child relationships, mental health problems (such as depression), and diminished moral internalisation. The evidence about whether physical punishment results in short-term compliance is mixed, with some studies showing effectiveness in achieving this and others not. Short-term compliance can, however, be achieved as effectively without using physical punishment. Physical punishment has negative effects on child outcomes, especially if it is harsh, regardless of culture. When punishment use is normative in a culture, the effects are slightly less negative. Research findings support ongoing efforts to help parents use more positive methods of parenting, and the removal of a defence in law for the use of physical punishment against children.

INTRODUCTION

Research findings about the effects of physical punishment on outcomes for children provide a persuasive argument in favour of changing policies on the use of physical punishment within families.² A research team from the Children's Issues Centre recently reviewed research on the guidance and discipline of children (Smith et al. 2005). This paper summarises and updates a section of that report. The research suggests that physical punishment is both ineffective and harmful as a method of disciplining children. This paper provides both an overview and specific examples of recent research on physical punishment relating to the following topics: social, cognitive and mental health; moral

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- 2 Research findings are in my view only one argument for change. Moral and ethical arguments are equally important.

internalisation and family relationship outcomes; and the interactions with culture and ethnicity. It is firstly important to get some definitions clear, because much of the debate about the effects stems from the difficulty in agreeing on definitions.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DISCIPLINE AND PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

Physical or corporal punishment is the use of force to cause pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control (Straus and Stewart 1999). Although researchers attempt to distinguish between physical punishment and abuse, this is very hard to do and there is no general agreement about the dividing line between physical punishment and physical abuse. It is not possible to define what a “safe smack” is. Abusive and non-abusive parents differ mainly in how often and how severely they physically punish their child, and whether that physical punishment is purportedly for correcting children.

Discipline is the guidance of children’s moral, emotional and physical development, enabling children to take responsibility for themselves when they are older (Holden 2002, Wissow 2002). It involves teaching children the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and it makes them aware of the values and actions that are acceptable in their family and society. Discipline can be positive, for example, praising the child for doing something good or for stopping doing something inappropriate; or discipline can be negative, for example, smacking a child for doing something wrong. Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behaviour is unacceptable and other behaviour is acceptable. Negative discipline focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid something unpleasant.

A distinction is often made between “power-assertive” and “inductive” discipline. Power-assertive disciplinary methods involve following a child’s inappropriate behaviour with a negative consequence (smacking, threats, withdrawal of privileges) without explanation or justification. Inductive methods involve setting limits, setting up logical consequences, reasoning and explanation (Holden 2002).

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

There are methodological problems in determining the effects on children’s behaviour of physical punishment and other methods of discipline. It is not possible to assign children randomly to “punishment” and “no punishment” groups, so it is difficult to establish a causal relationship. The other problems are confounding variables (other variables that are associated with punishment and difficult to separate from it), limited outcome measures (e.g. retrospective reports by parents or children), the definition of punishment (and distinguishing it from physical abuse), and lack of generalisability because of limited sample populations (e.g. clinical samples or European-only samples).

Many studies have indicated positive relationships between corporal punishment and various measures of child behaviour, but most of these studies have been cross-sectional and correlational in design. Correlational studies simply show the relationship of two or more variables at a given point in time, and are limited in their ability to demonstrate causality. For example, if a correlation is found between physical punishment and child aggression, it may be that physical punishment leads to child aggression. However, there is an equally plausible argument that the aggressive behaviour may be the causal variable that leads to the parental punishment, i.e. noncompliant children elicit more punishment from their parents. Most researchers, however, think that there is a bi-directional effect, with both variables both causing and being the effect of the other. There are now some longitudinal studies that provide evidence for causality, which will be discussed below.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

This section summarises the evidence concerning the effects of physical discipline by referring to a major literature review published in 2002 (Gershoff 2002a) and to additional studies.

The research on the effects of corporal punishment achieves a degree of consistency that is rare in social science (Holden 2002, Straus and Stewart 1999). This research shows that there is a variety of negative long-term consequences of using physical punishment as a method of family discipline. Gershoff (2002a) carried out a meta-analysis of 92 studies on corporal punishment, which examined the effect of punishment on 11 outcome variables. Gershoff's review specifically excluded studies that included abusive or potentially abusive techniques in their definition of corporal punishment.

Gershoff (2002a) found that corporal punishment was only associated with one desirable behaviour, and this was immediate compliance. However, the study findings were inconsistent, with two of the five studies showing that corporal punishment was associated with less compliance. The other three studies were of clinical samples of children who had been referred for problem behaviours. Hence, the generalisability of their findings is doubtful and suggests that corporal punishment may only be effective for disobedient and disruptive children. Gershoff points out that most parents are not only interested in immediate compliance, but also want ongoing compliance, and the research shows that this does not necessarily take place and that there are other unforeseen long-term consequences of corporal punishment.

Gershoff's (2002a) review and meta-analysis of the research literature on corporal punishment provides the following summary:

Ten of the 11 meta-analyses indicate parental corporal punishment is associated with the following undesirable behaviours and experiences: decreased moral internalisation, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behaviour, decreased quality of relationship between parent and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behaviour, decreased adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. Corporal punishment was associated with only one desirable behaviour, namely, increased immediate compliance. (Gershoff 2002a:544)

In part because of the methodological problems with studies of corporal punishment, advocates of corporal punishment have dismissed many of these negative findings (Larzelere 2000, Larzelere and Kuhn 2005). Straus (2001), however, argues that there are now five prospective studies (where children's behaviour is observed at different points in time) that all show the long-term negative effect of corporal punishment. In these studies, higher rates of misbehaviour occurred two and four years later for children who were spanked compared to those who experienced little or no corporal punishment.

Critics of Gershoff's review have also said that it is not appropriate to include studies of severe corporal punishment. They argue that the negative effects of corporal punishment are only associated with harsh, punitive discipline, which is "acknowledged by all experts to be detrimental to children's wellbeing and ethically unacceptable" (Baumrind et al. 2002:581). In response, Gershoff (2002b) has argued that, rather than being deviant, the levels of punishment included are normative.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Social Behaviour

Corporal punishment is associated with children's aggression and other antisocial behaviour (towards peers, siblings and adults). Corporal punishment may legitimise violence for children in interpersonal relationships because they tend to internalise the social relations they experience (Vygotsky 1978). Ironically, the behaviour that parents are most likely to intend to prevent when they physically punish children is exactly the behaviour that they are likely to be strengthening. Social learning theory (Bandura 1969) also suggests that physical punishment enables children to learn aggressive behaviour through modelling. If parents try to modify their children's behaviour through inflicting pain, then those children are likely to do the same to others when they want to influence other people's actions.

Gershoff's (2002a) meta-analysis reviewed 27 studies in childhood and four in adulthood looking at the relationship between physical punishment and aggression. These studies varied in the age of the children studied (1–16 years), the type of data gathered (most,

however, were parental self-report), and the experimental design (most were cross-sectional). The findings of the meta-analysis consistently showed that the parental use of physical punishment was associated with child aggressive behaviour. Gershoff's review also includes 13 studies of delinquent and antisocial behaviour in childhood, and five studies of the same variables in adulthood. With only two exceptions, the studies showed a consistent link between the use of corporal punishment and delinquent and antisocial behaviour.

Grogan-Kaylor (2004) used data from the most recent (1998) wave of data collection of the United States National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. There were 1,811 children in the sample, and their average age was slightly over 10 years. The children were predominantly from low-income families and about half of them were of colour. The study examined the relationship between parental use of corporal punishment and children's antisocial behaviour, using a fixed effects analysis, which provides more rigorous statistical controls than those used in previous research, controlling for both observed and unobserved covariates. Children's antisocial behaviour was measured by the Behavior Problems Index, and parental use of physical punishment through the HOME inventory, which includes questions about spanking.

Whether or not parents had spanked their child in the past week was related to children's antisocial behaviour two years later, regardless of the child's prior levels of antisocial behaviour. The fixed effects model showed that there was a similar-sized negative effect for both low and high levels of corporal punishment. There were no effects of gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status on this relationship between parental punishment and children's antisocial behaviour. The study concluded that even low and common levels of spanking were associated with increases in antisocial behaviour. Unlike studies using other statistical methods, this study suggests that the effect of punishment on behaviour is not linear, and challenges the assumption that only frequent and severe punishment is associated with harmful effects.

Cognitive Effects

A sociocultural perspective on development suggests that children's cognitive development emerges out of social interactions. Social relationships such as early attachment to caregivers, friendships and collaborative learning between peers, and relationships between children and teachers, directly and indirectly influence children's learning and motivation to learn. The use of verbal methods of discipline through explanation and reasoning are likely to provide the child with more cognitive stimulation than the use of corporal punishment without induction (Straus 2001). Thus, poorer cognitive outcomes may result if parents who physically punish their children make less use of inductive methods of discipline, such as explanation and reasoning – procedures that are likely to enhance cognitive growth. It may also be that children

who are anxious about being physically punished are inhibited from exploring their physical and social worlds, and therefore less likely to extend their cognitive skills.

Gershoff's (2002a) meta-analysis does not include any studies linking physical punishment to cognitive development or academic achievement, but our report (Smith 2005) located seven studies linking aspects of children's cognitive development to family discipline (Cherian 1994, Jester et al. 1999, Shumow et al. 1998, Smith and Brooks-Gunn 1997, Solomon and Serres 1999, Straus 2001, Straus and Paschall 2003). These seven studies all show an association between harsh discipline and poorer academic achievement and/or cognitive development across a range of ages and ethnic groups. One of the seven studies (Smith and Brooks-Gunn 1997) focused on verbally punitive behaviour and the other six studies focused on physical punishment.

A longitudinal study in Wisconsin public schools by Shumow et al. (1998) examined the relationships between parental discipline, children's academic achievement at school and teacher ratings of behavioural adjustment to schools. The study used a variety of measures including parental reports (from interviews) of child-rearing expectations and discipline at two points in time (when children were in third and fifth grade), school achievement results and teacher ratings. Reported parental harshness was associated with negative teacher reports of child adjustment at school and parental reports of behaviour problems at home. Parenting strategies were stable over two years, indicating a consistent child-rearing approach. In both the third and fifth grades, parental harshness was associated with children displaying poorer developmental outcomes (in academic achievement and adjustment to school), even after controlling for family income, race, family structure, parental education and maternal unemployment. The authors concluded that parental harshness was associated with poorer cognitive achievement (and social adjustment) in the school setting.

Quality of Parent–Child Relationships

One concern arising out of attachment theory is that the use of physical punishment can have an adverse effect on the quality of the relationships between children and their parents. Children's secure attachment is fostered by warm, positive parent–child interactions and negatively associated with harshly punitive interactions. Attachment is known to have an important influence on a wide variety of child development outcomes and social competence (Coyl et al. 2002). Attachment security is vital for children's sense of wellbeing and their feelings of safety within and outside the boundaries of the family, and is a vital ingredient in the development of conscience (Laible and Thomson 2000). Gershoff (2002a) reviews 13 studies linking the use of physical punishment with the quality of parent–child relationships. The studies consistently showed that physical punishment was positively associated with poorer child–parent relationships.

Coyl et al. (2002) investigated factors that affected infant attachment security, such as stressful events, maternal depression, negative parent–child interactions and corporal punishment. The study involved interviews with mothers involved in a Head Start programme when their infants were 14 months old, and used Q-sort measures of attachment and two questions about spanking from the HOME inventory. About two-thirds of the children in the sample were insecurely attached, a figure about twice as high as would be expected from the general population. The study also included a measure of negative mother–child interactions.

The majority of the mothers in the study (77%) reported no spanking in the past week, while 23% said that they had spanked the child in the past week. In the group that did spank, just under half had spanked only once in the week and about one-in-six had spanked the child at least six times in the past week. Using path analysis the authors showed that there was a direct path linking negative interactions and frequency of spanking to insecure infant attachment, but also that there was an indirect effect from maternal depression to insecure infant attachment mediated by negative interactions and frequency of spanking. Maternal depression had the strongest negative effect on attachment security, followed by negative interactions, frequency of spanking and relationship stress. The study suggests that physical punishment and negative mother–infant interactions are more likely to take place when mothers are depressed and stressed, and these negative disciplinary techniques have an adverse effect on security of infant attachment.

A qualitative study (Russell 1996) of the views of New Zealand parents and parent-educators provides a graphic example of how family discipline can affect parent–child relationships. The study quotes a mother who made a conscious decision never to smack her own children:

My parents were very strict. I assumed everyone was being brought up the same. You will do as you're told and you won't question. My mother would use the wooden spoon; my father was more into bare hands. There were other things: go to your room, miss out on something. If you were naughty, they almost took it as a personal affront, they just seemed so offended by it, like you were insulting them. I was basically very good and I was hit frequently. I'm sure through being smacked it made me do so silly things without thinking. It made me go out and do the same thing again, what I'd been smacked for. The message I got from them when they hit me was not "what you're doing is bad, don't do it again". The message I got was "we don't love you". (Russell 1996:69)

Mental Health

Less visible than externalising behaviour, but equally serious, is the development of internalising problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and other mental health concerns. Such problems are often ignored and left untreated, and can have lifelong effects, including influencing the parenting of the next generation. New Zealand's high levels of suicide (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa 2003) are already a concern, so this is a particularly worrying effect of the acceptance of punishment in our culture. According to Straus (1999), mental health problems are associated with physical punishment due to their being an outcome of the suppression of childhood anger associated with being hit by adults who children depend on for love and nurturance.

Gershoff (2002a) reviewed 12 studies of physical punishment and mental health in childhood, and eight studies of physical punishment and mental health in adulthood. Again, there was complete consistency in the findings of these studies that mental health problems in childhood and adulthood were associated with the use of physical punishment.

Heaven and Goldstein (2001) surveyed 242 Anglo-Australian and Asian-Australian high school students about their parents' disciplinary style, and their own depression and self-esteem. Depression was significantly related to perceptions of parents' punitiveness and withdrawal of love. Among Anglo students, low self-esteem was significantly related to low levels of inductiveness and high levels of love withdrawal. Students were more depressed, regardless of ethnicity, if they had experienced punitive and unaffectionate parenting. The effect of parental discipline on depression was mediated by low self-esteem in Anglo students (but not in Asian students). Punitive discipline also had a more negative effect on internalising behaviour for girls than for boys.

Moral Internalisation

Social information processing theory (Grusec and Goodnow 1994) suggests that the major long-term goal of family discipline is to help children internalise the values and attitudes of society to guide their own behaviour. Moral regulation and internalisation include sensitivity to wrongdoing and appropriate conduct, and the ability to restrain oneself from misbehaviour and to correct damage (Kerr et al. 2004). Promoting internal control over behaviour is an important goal in family discipline, and most experts regard it as much more important than immediate compliance. Many parents want their children to internalise such values, and they do not realise that the excessive use of power-assertive discipline in the absence of induction or explanation may have the opposite effect from what they wish to achieve. That power-assertive methods are not as effective as inductive discipline in promoting moral internalisation has been shown in many studies.

Gershoff's review supports the view that the use of physical punishment tends to lessen the chances that children will internalise parental rules and values. Reviewing 15 studies in this area showed that all but two of these studies showed an association between the use of physical punishment and lower levels of moral internalisation.

Kochanska et al. (2001) carried out a longitudinal study of the development of self-regulation in children under four years of age. Mothers of normally developing infants participated in laboratory sessions with their children at 22, 33 and 45 months. Researchers observed and assessed children's compliance with their mothers' requests in "Do" (sustaining boring behaviour) and "Don't" (ceasing pleasant behaviour) contexts. Committed compliance meant eagerly embracing maternal agendas and following maternal directives in a self-directed way; situational compliance was essentially cooperative, but seemed contingent on sustained maternal control. Internalisation was also observed in "Do" and "Don't" contexts by looking at whether children complied with requests when the mother moved to another room. Mothers' styles of discipline were also observed.

There were several significant negative correlations between the maternal use of power and children's committed compliance, as well as between the maternal use of power and children's independent compliance (when alone). The authors argue that committed compliance is the first step towards internal control. It represents the conflict between children's wish to comply and their desire to be autonomous. Power-assertive disciplinary techniques do not support moral internalisation.

Interactions with Culture and Ethnicity

There has been considerable research into the relationship between ethnicity, aspects of the parenting and disciplinary environment, and outcomes for children (Marshall 2005). Several authors suggest that the effects of harsh disciplinary strategies, in particular physical punishment, may vary across social and cultural contexts (Deater-Deckard and Dodge 1997, Horn et al. 2004, Kelley and Tseng 1992, Simons et al. 2000).

Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) argue that punishment has different meanings for some cultural groups, such as African-Americans, and that parent-child relationships are another important mediating factor. They contend that where physical punishment is a predominant and normative mode of discipline and where it is used in a controlled fashion in the context of a nurturing relationship, it is looked on as culturally acceptable, and as a sign of good parenting, and that therefore the effects can be positive. Indeed, there are some studies supporting this view (Horn et al. 2004). There are, however, further confounding factors associated with ethnicity such as poverty, low social status, and the risk associated with living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Generally the findings are inconclusive, with some studies finding ethnic differences in the association between physical punishment and poor outcomes, and others not. Different researchers concur, however, that any moderating effects of ethnicity are only at ordinary or moderate levels of physical punishment. Extremely harsh discipline that shades into physical abuse is equally deleterious for all children, regardless of culture. The negative consequences of severe physical punishment have been replicated across cultures (Marshall 2005).

A recent study tested the hypothesis that in cultures where physical punishment is normative, the effects of it are less negative (Lansford et al. 2005). Cultural normativeness refers to the extent to which family members within a culture perceive physical punishment as normal for their culture, and the extent to which families actually use it in that culture. The normativeness of physical punishment varied across six countries in the study, from the lowest in Thailand, through China, the Philippines, Italy to the highest in Kenya (Lansford et al. 2005), with varying collectivist and religious affiliations among those countries. Altogether, 336 mother–child dyads, mainly middle-class, were interviewed to assess the relevance of physical punishment in each culture, and to determine the perceptions (of mothers and children) of the use of physical punishment in their families and in other families in their cultural group. Children’s internalised and externalised behaviour problems were measured using the Achenbach Checklist.

The results showed that countries differed in the reported use and normativeness of physical punishment, and how it was related to children’s adjustment. Perceived normativeness moderated the association between punishment and child aggression and anxiety. That is, in cultural groups such as Kenya’s, where physical punishment was more frequently used, adjustment problems were less severe. To put it another way, in countries where physical punishment was less common, children experienced more harmful effects from physical punishment. Nevertheless, children who had experienced physical punishment, regardless of whether it was perceived as normative, were more aggressive and anxious. The authors concluded:

Even if a practice is sanctioned by a cultural group, it does not mean that the practice is necessarily acceptable. Regardless of where they live, children have rights and parents have responsibilities towards children ... There are times where it may be necessary to apply a global standard to protect children from serious long-term harm. Thus, it is important not to take an extreme position on cultural relativism. (Lansford et al. 2005)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our review of research has established that there is little evidence to recommend retaining physical punishment in the parental repertoire of discipline. Only one desirable outcome for child behaviour has been associated with physical punishment – in some, but not all, studies – and this outcome is immediate compliance. Even those who argue in favour of the use of physical punishment as a backup to other disciplinary strategies, such as reasoning and time out, suggest that it is only effective under severely limited conditions (as to age of child, severity, timing and context among other things). When compliance is just as easily (and effectively) achieved with alternative inductive and positive methods of child rearing and milder forms of punishment, it is unnecessary, risky and unethical to use physical punishment.

Research on the long-term effects of physical punishment are consistent, and overwhelmingly negative over a wide variety of child development outcomes. The use of physical punishment has been associated with many negative social outcomes, including aggression, disruptive behaviour in school, lack of acceptance by peers, crime and delinquency. Children's cognitive and intellectual development are also adversely affected by parental use of physical punishment. Physical punishment is linked to insecure attachment and poorer relationships between children and parents, and to a variety of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. The overall goals of family discipline for most families are for children to internalise the values and attitudes that will lead to appropriate behaviour, rather than relying on external monitoring and control. Research suggests that the use of physical punishment does the reverse, and inhibits the development of moral internalisation. While the effects of physical punishment may be a little less severe when it is normative in a culture, the effects are still negative. In societies like Aotearoa New Zealand, where it is increasingly being accepted that physical punishment is not desirable, it is likely that the ongoing outcomes will be negative.

The use of physical punishment is deeply embedded in our culture and history, but it is a clear and preventable health risk for children. One very frequently used everyday argument in favour of corporal punishment is from people who say "I was spanked and I am okay". Straus (1999) points out that people who say this may be among the lucky ones who were not adversely affected by corporal punishment. Corporal punishment does not guarantee a harmful effect, but the more that children experience corporal punishment and the more frequent and severe it is, the more they are at risk for problems like aggression and depression, regardless of their cultural background. The use of corporal punishment as a method of family discipline is a health risk for children – a risk to which parents might not expose their children if they understood the probability of harmful consequences.

There is no universal recipe for effective discipline, and while research findings may seem clear, their application to real life is a different matter. Many parents, however, want to avoid the health risks inherent in punitive approaches towards their children, and feel increasingly uncomfortable with the use of physical punishment. Parents can and do change their ideas about discipline, with or without external support. Ongoing efforts to encourage and help parents to use positive disciplinary approaches, such as the Ministry of Social Development SKIP programmes (Strategies with Kids – Information for Parents),³ are therefore to be supported. These efforts, in my view, need to be supported by a change in the law so that parents cannot use as a defence that they were using reasonable discipline when they have assaulted children.

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3 SKIP involves work with community groups to provide resources and training for parents and caregivers of children up to five years old.

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