

June 26, 2002

## Is Corporal Punishment an Effective Means of Discipline?

*Corporal punishment leads to more immediate compliant behavior in children, but is also associated with physical abuse. Should parents be counseled for or against spanking?*

WASHINGTON — Corporal punishment remains a widely used discipline technique in most American families, but it has also been a subject of controversy within the child development and psychological communities. In a large-scale meta-analysis of 88 studies, psychologist Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, PhD, of the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, looked at both positive and negative behaviors in children that were associated with corporal punishment. Her research and commentaries on her work are published in the July issue of *Psychological Bulletin*, published by the American Psychological Association.

While conducting the meta-analysis, which included 62 years of collected data, Gershoff looked for associations between parental use of corporal punishment and 11 child behaviors and experiences, including several in childhood (immediate compliance, moral internalization, quality of relationship with parent, and physical abuse from that parent), three in both childhood and adulthood (mental health, aggression, and criminal or antisocial behavior) and one in adulthood alone (abuse of own children or spouse).

Gershoff found "strong associations" between corporal punishment and all eleven child behaviors and experiences. Ten of the associations were negative such as with increased child aggression and antisocial behavior. The single desirable association was between corporal punishment and increased immediate compliance on the part of the child.

The two largest effect sizes (strongest associations) were immediate compliance by the child and physical abuse of the child by the parent. Gershoff believes that these two strongest associations model the complexity of the debate around corporal punishment.

"That these two disparate constructs should show the strongest links to corporal punishment underlines the controversy over this practice. There is general consensus that corporal punishment is effective in getting children to comply immediately while at the same time there is caution from child abuse researchers that corporal punishment by its nature can escalate into physical maltreatment," Gershoff writes.

But, Gershoff also cautions that her findings do not imply that all children who experience corporal punishment turn out to be aggressive or delinquent. A variety of situational factors, such as the parent/child relationship, can moderate the effects of corporal punishment. Furthermore, studying the true effects of corporal punishment requires drawing a boundary line between punishment and abuse. This is a difficult thing to do, especially when relying on parents' self-reports of their discipline tactics and interpretations of normative punishment.

### Corporal Punishment Articles

Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and Experiences: A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review ([/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284539.pdf](#)) (PDF, 879KB)

Corporal Punishment, Physical Abuse, and the Burden of Proof: Reply to Baumrind, Larzelere, and Cowan (2002), Holden (2002), and Parke (2002) ([/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284602.pdf](#)) (PDF, 465KB)

Ordinary Physical Punishment: Is It Harmful? Comment on Gershoff (2002) ([/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284580.pdf](#)) (PDF, 108KB)

Perspectives on the Effects of Corporal Punishment: Comment on Gershoff (2002) ([/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284590.pdf](#)) (PDF, 96KB)

Punishment Revisited-Science, Values, and the Right Question: Comment on Gershoff (2002) ([/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284596.pdf](#)) (PDF, 79KB)

"The act of corporal punishment itself is different across parents - parents vary in how frequently they use it, how forcefully they administer it, how emotionally aroused they are when they do it, and whether they combine it with other techniques. Each of these qualities of corporal punishment can determine which child-mediated processes are activated, and, in turn, which outcomes may be realized," Gershoff concludes.

The meta-analysis also demonstrates that the frequency and severity of the corporal punishment matters. The more often or more harshly a child was hit, the more likely they are to be aggressive or to have mental health problems.

While the nature of the analyses prohibits causally linking corporal punishment with the child behaviors, Gershoff also summarizes a large body of literature on parenting that suggests why corporal punishment may actually cause negative outcomes for children. For one, corporal punishment on its own does not teach children right from wrong. Secondly, although it makes children afraid to disobey when parents are present, when parents are not present to administer the punishment those same children will misbehave.

In commentary published along with the Gershoff study, George W. Holden, PhD, of the University of Texas at Austin, writes that Gershoff's findings "reflect the growing body of evidence indicating that corporal punishment does no good and may even cause harm." Holden submits that the psychological community should not be advocating spanking as a discipline tool for parents.

In a reply to Gershoff, researchers Diana Baumrind, PhD (Univ. of CA at Berkeley), Robert E. Larzelere, PhD (Nebraska Medical Center), and Philip Cowan, PhD (Univ. of CA at Berkeley), write that because the original studies in Gershoff's meta-analysis included episodes of extreme and excessive physical punishment, her finding is not an evaluation of *normative* corporal punishment.

"The evidence presented in the meta-analysis does not justify a blanket injunction against mild to moderate disciplinary spanking," conclude Baumrind and her team. Baumrind et al. also conclude that "a high association between corporal punishment

and physical abuse is not evidence that mild or moderate corporal punishment increases the risk of abuse."

Baumrind et al. suggest that those parents whose emotional make-up may cause them to cross the line between appropriate corporal punishment and physical abuse should be counseled not to use corporal punishment as a technique to discipline their children. But, that other parents could use mild to moderate corporal punishment effectively. "The fact that some parents punish excessively and unwisely is not an argument, however, for counseling all parents not to punish at all."

In her reply to Baumrind et al., Gershoff states that excessive corporal punishment is more likely to be underreported than overreported and that the possibility of negative effects on children caution against the use of corporal punishment.

"Until researchers, clinicians, and parents can definitively demonstrate the presence of positive effects of corporal punishment, including effectiveness in halting future misbehavior, not just the absence of negative effects, we as psychologists can not responsibly recommend its use," Gershoff writes.

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