

The Final Word on Spanking Children

Debates about spanking have been around a long time, with most psychologists advising against it. Nevertheless over 80% of parents continue to use physical punishment as a means of discipline. Some researchers have also challenged the evidence against spanking, contending that not all forms of physical punishment are harmful and that context and parenting style must be taken into consideration when evaluating its harmfulness. Some also contend that its effectiveness in improving a child's behavior outweighs the immediate harm of physical punishment.

Recently a group of psychologists from several universities around the country reviewed the extensive research literature on physical punishment, taking into consideration other factors besides physical punishment that might affect the results, such as experimental designs, context, parenting styles, and even culture. One big problem in trying to study the harmful effects of physical punishment is how to set up the experiment. Studies that merely demonstrate that kids who are spanked at home later display more behavior problems, mental health problems, poorer performance in school, and poorer relationships with their parents provide some information about the effects of physical punishment, but they don't prove that the spanking caused the problems. Other factors besides spanking may have caused some of these later behaviors. To rule out other factors would require a study in which some parents were randomly assigned to spank their children and other parents assigned to only use nonphysical consequences for bad behavior. Such a study is impractical and probably unethical, so researchers have had to turn to other experimental methods.

One set of studies looks at children's behavior at a young age, identifies which parents use physical punishment and which don't, and follows the two groups of children over time as they grow older. These studies have included over 11,000 children and demonstrated that spanking as early as age 1 and repeated over intervals to age 16 predicted later behavior problems for these children. None of the studies found evidence that spanking decreased behavior problems as the children aged. Furthermore, children who were more frequently spanked showed higher levels of behavior problems as they grew older.

Another set of experiments used random assignment in a creative manner: instead of randomly assigning parents to spank or not spank, they randomly assigned some of the parents who spank to programs that teach them how to use other discipline methods that avoid physical punishment. Children of the parents who learned nonphysical methods of discipline showed a decrease in behavior problems in school compared to those children whose parents continued to use physical punishment.

The reviewers also looked at research into levels of physical punishment to examine whether low levels of physical punishment might not be harmful. These studies compared children who were

physically abused with those *in the same households* who were merely spanked. Both sets of children demonstrated behavior problems at school, but the abused children demonstrated more serious problems. These results indicate that all physical punishment is harmful, and that the harsher the physical discipline, the more likely that child will have serious problems later.

A number of studies have looked at the role of culture in physical punishment. Surveys indicate that African American parents endorse and practice physical punishment more often than do European Americans or Latino Americans. However, even within the African American population, children of parents who use physical punishment are more likely to display behavior problems than children of parents who don't.

Parenting style has also been studied as a factor that may account for the harmful effects of physical punishment. Perhaps it's not the spanking itself but the harsh, punitive attitude of the parent that actually creates the child's problem behaviors. Supporting this idea, some studies have found that the negative effects of spanking are more harmful when parents score low in warmth and high in negativity. However studies following parents and children over several decades did not find that parental warmth diminished the negative effects of spanking on the children's behavior.

The bottom line from all this research is straightforward: Spanking and similar forms of physical punishment are not healthy for children, especially if it starts when the child is very young. Children who are regularly spanked as punishment are more likely to act out in school, aggress toward other children, experience later mental health problems, and develop more conflicted relationships with their parents than children who are not physically punished. Spanking is likely to be even more harmful to the child when administered by an angry parent. Thus the lesson for parents of kids of all ages is to stay calm during discipline and have nonphysical consequences ready when your child misbehaves.

For more information on how to stay calm and use non-physical discipline procedures, check out our Therapy Helpers section on Parenting at this website.

Gershoff, E.T., Goodwin, G.S., Miller-Perrin, C.L., Holden, G.W., Jackson, Y., & Kazdin, A.E. The strength of the causal evidence against physical punishment of children and its implications for parents, psychologists, and policymakers. 2018. *American Psychologist*, 73, Pg 626-638