

FEATURE

The case against spanking

Physical discipline is slowly declining as some studies reveal lasting harms for children.



By Brendan L. Smith

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A growing body of research has shown that spanking and other forms of physical discipline can pose serious risks to children, but many parents aren't hearing the message.

"It's a very controversial area even though the research is extremely telling and very clear and consistent about the negative effects on children," says Sandra Graham-Bermann, PhD, a psychology professor and principal investigator for the Child Violence and Trauma Laboratory at the University of Michigan. "People get frustrated and hit their kids. Maybe they don't see there are other options."

Many studies have shown that physical punishment — including spanking, hitting and other means of causing pain — can lead to increased aggression, antisocial behavior, physical injury and mental health problems for children. Americans' acceptance of physical punishment has declined since the 1960s, yet surveys show that two-thirds of Americans still approve of parents spanking their kids.

But spanking doesn't work, says Alan Kazdin, PhD, a Yale University psychology professor and director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. "You cannot punish out these behaviors that you do not want," says Kazdin, who served as APA president in 2008. "There is no need for corporal punishment based on the research. We are not giving up an effective technique. We are saying this is a horrible thing that does not work."

Evidence of harm

On the international front, physical discipline is increasingly being viewed as a violation of children's human rights. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a directive in 2006

calling physical punishment “legalized violence against children” that should be eliminated in all settings through “legislative, administrative, social and educational measures.” The treaty that established the committee has been supported by 192 countries, with only the United States and Somalia failing to ratify it.

Around the world, 30 countries have banned physical punishment of children in all settings, including the home. The legal bans typically have been used as public education tools, rather than attempts to criminalize behavior by parents who spank their children, says Elizabeth Gershoff, PhD, a leading researcher on physical punishment at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Physical punishment doesn’t work to get kids to comply, so parents think they have to keep escalating it. That is why it is so dangerous,” she says.

After reviewing decades of research, Gershoff wrote the Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: *What Research Tells Us About Its Effects on Children*, published in 2008 in conjunction with Phoenix Children’s Hospital. The report recommends that parents and caregivers make every effort to avoid physical punishment and calls for the banning of physical discipline in all U.S. schools. The report has been endorsed by dozens of organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association and Psychologists for Social Responsibility.

After three years of work on the APA Task Force on Physical Punishment of Children, Gershoff and Graham-Bermann wrote a report in 2008 summarizing the task force’s recommendations. That report recommends that “parents and caregivers reduce and potentially eliminate their use of any physical punishment as a disciplinary method.” The report calls on psychologists and other professionals to “indicate to parents that physical punishment is not an appropriate, or even a consistently effective, method of discipline.”

“We have the opportunity here to take a strong stand in favor of protecting children,” says Graham-Bermann, who chaired the task force.

APA’s Committee on Children, Youth and Families (</pi/families/committee/index.aspx>) (CYF) and the Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest (</pi/governance/bappi/index.aspx>) unanimously approved a proposed resolution last year based on the task force recommendations. It states that APA supports “parents’ use of non-physical methods of disciplining children” and opposes “the use of severe or injurious physical punishment of any child.” APA also should support additional research and a public education campaign on “the effectiveness and outcomes associated with corporal punishment and nonphysical methods of discipline,” the proposed resolution states. After obtaining feedback from other APA boards and committees in the spring of 2012, APA’s Council of Representatives will consider adopting the resolution as APA policy.

Preston Britner, PhD, a child developmental psychologist and professor at the University of Connecticut, helped draft the proposed resolution as co-chair of CYF. “It addresses the concerns about physical punishment and a growing body of research on alternatives to physical punishment, along with the idea that psychology and psychologists have much to contribute to the development of those alternative strategies,” he says.

More than three decades have passed since APA approved a resolution in 1975 opposing corporal punishment in schools and other institutions, but it didn't address physical discipline in the home. That resolution stated that corporal punishment can "instill hostility, rage and a sense of powerlessness without reducing the undesirable behavior."

Research findings

Physical punishment can work momentarily to stop problematic behavior because children are afraid of being hit, but it doesn't work in the long term and can make children more aggressive, Graham-Bermann says.

A study published last year in *Child Abuse and Neglect* revealed an intergenerational cycle of violence in homes where physical punishment was used. Researchers interviewed parents and children age 3 to 7 from more than 100 families. Children who were physically punished were more likely to endorse hitting as a means of resolving their conflicts with peers and siblings. Parents who had experienced frequent physical punishment during their childhood were more likely to believe it was acceptable, and they frequently spanked their children. Their children, in turn, often believed spanking was an appropriate disciplinary method.

The negative effects of physical punishment may not become apparent for some time, Gershoff says. "A child doesn't get spanked and then run out and rob a store," she says. "There are indirect changes in how the child thinks about things and feels about things."

As in many areas of science, some researchers disagree about the validity of the studies on physical punishment. Robert Larzelere, PhD, an Oklahoma State University professor who studies parental discipline, was a member of the APA task force who issued his own minority report because he disagreed with the scientific basis of the task force recommendations. While he agrees that parents should reduce their use of physical punishment, he says most of the cited studies are correlational and don't show a causal link between physical punishment and long-term negative effects for children.

"The studies do not discriminate well between non-abusive and overly severe types of corporal punishment," Larzelere says. "You get worse outcomes from corporal punishment than from alternative disciplinary techniques only when it is used more severely or as the primary discipline tactic."

In a meta-analysis of 26 studies, Larzelere and a colleague found that an approach they described as "conditional spanking" led to greater reductions in child defiance or anti-social behavior than 10 of 13 alternative discipline techniques, including reasoning, removal of privileges and time out (*Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2005). Larzelere defines conditional spanking as a disciplinary technique for 2- to 6-year-old children in which parents use two open-handed swats on the buttocks only after the child has defied milder discipline such as time out.

Gershoff says all of the studies on physical punishment have some shortcomings. "Unfortunately, all research on parent discipline is going to be correlational because we can't randomly assign kids to

parents for an experiment. But I don't think we have to disregard all research that has been done," she says. "I can just about count on one hand the studies that have found anything positive about physical punishment and hundreds that have been negative."

Teaching new skills

If parents aren't supposed to hit their kids, what nonviolent techniques can help with discipline? The Parent Management Training program headed by Kazdin at Yale is grounded in research on applied behavioral analysis. The program teaches parents to use positive reinforcement and effusive praise to reward children for good behavior.

Kazdin also uses a technique that may sound like insanity to most parents: Telling toddlers to practice throwing a tantrum. Parents ask their children to have a pretend tantrum without one undesirable element, such as hitting or kicking. Gradually, as children practice controlling tantrums when they aren't angry, their real tantrums lessen, Kazdin says.

Remaining calm during a child's tantrums is the best approach, coupled with time outs when needed and a consistent discipline plan that rewards good behavior, Graham-Bermann says. APA offers the Adults & Children Together Against Violence program, which provides parenting skills classes through a nationwide research-based program called Parents Raising Safe Kids. The course teaches parents how to avoid violence through anger management, positive child discipline and conflict resolution. (For more information on ACT, see the November *Monitor* (</monitor/2011/11/act.aspx>).

Parents should talk with their children about appropriate means of resolving conflicts, Gershoff says. Building a trusting relationship can help children believe that discipline isn't arbitrary or done out of anger.

"Part of the problem is good discipline isn't quick or easy," she says. "Even the best of us parents don't always have that kind of patience."

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