

To Spank or Not To Spank

The Relationship Between  
Spanking in Early Childhood  
and Later Antisocial Behavior

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# A Quick Survey

- How many of you were spanked as a child?
- How many will not spank your children?
- How many will probably spank your children?

# Research Question

- As a group, we decided to answer the following question:
  - “Does the use of spanking as a disciplinary method for children in early childhood, particularly concerning ages 2 to 8, result in later antisocial behavior?”

# A Definition of Spanking

- While we all might know what spanking is, a precise academic definition of spanking is controversial.
- Accordingly, ways that researchers have typically defined spanking include:
  - “... hitting a child with an open hand on the buttocks or the extremities with the intent to discipline without leaving a bruise or causing physical harm.” (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003)

# A Definition of Spanking

- Spanking is not the following:
  - Slapping the face
  - Kicking
  - Arm twisting
  - Shaking
  - Pinching
  - Choking
  - Beating
  - Delivery of repeated demoralizing blows

# A Definition of Antisocial Behavior

- Antisocial behavior includes the following:
  - Aggression
  - Cheating
  - Lying
  - Bullying
  - Delinquent and/or criminal behavior
  - Lack of remorsefulness for misbehavior
  - Deliberate destruction of property
  - Blatant disobedience of parents and other authority figures
  - Lack of empathy for others

# Spanking Statistics

- In the United States, 74% of parents of children under the age of 17 use spanking as a means of guidance and discipline.
- The use of spanking by parents has decreased from 99% in the 1950s and 97% in 1975.
- Presently, 94% of parents with children ages 3 and 4 use some form of corporal punishment.
- About 1/3 of students feel resentment towards parents as a result of being spanked.

# Spanking

## Demographics

- Lower SES parents are more likely to spank children ages 1 to 3 if a child is participating in an unsafe activity.
- Black ethnicity and maternal age predict a higher frequency of spanking.
- Caucasians and higher income parents report either not spanking at all or utilizing it only as a last resort.
- Low parental wellbeing is associated with more persistent spanking.
- Males report more favorable attitudes towards spanking than women.

# Three Positions Concerning Spanking

- The use of spanking and its effects are very controversial.
- As a result, three main positions have developed concerning this issue.

# Position One

## “Violence Begets Violence”

- This view states that spanking under all conditions has negative consequences for all children.
- Based on Social Learning theory
  - Negative outcomes, such as aggression, are modeled to the child and subsequently reenacted in the child’s life.
- This position claims that if all parents were to stop spanking, society would experience less violence and crime.
- Consequences include: increased child aggression, behavior problems, criminal behavior, future abuse, depression, and thoughts of suicide.
- Not many people fully subscribe to this position.

## Position Two

# “Conditional Corporal Punishment”

- Also labeled, “No Blanket Injunction Warranted.”
- This position holds that spanking is not necessarily negative or positive, but can be either or both depending on the circumstances.
- Moreover, spanking can actually have several positive consequences.
- Positive outcomes concerning 2 to 6 year olds are that occasional spanking can enhance the effectiveness of alternatives such as explanation and time-out.
- Furthermore, if properly administered in conjunction with local law, spanking can actually curb child abuse.
- Factors that must be taken into consideration are: age, sex (both child and parent), race, culture, family structure, warmth of parent, and context.

## Position Three

### “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child”

- This is the most infrequent in research and academic writings but perhaps the most popular in the general population.
- This position contends that not only is spanking beneficial, but to refrain from it would be detrimental.
- Spanking teaches respect for authority, leads to less acting out, and provides more respectful and controlled behavior.
- Spanking teaches children early on that violating laws and rules have consequences and is perhaps the only mode of discipline that children fully understand.
- This position contends that the violence and crime in this society is associated with the lack of spanking.

# Research Findings

- Most researchers contend that spanking should not be administered to children from birth to 2 years of age.
  - Such a reality is strongly related to later antisocial behavior and is ineffective at changing behavior due to lack of comprehension.
- Moreover, spanking should not be used on adolescents.
- Consequently, the age of focus concerning this topic in the research is primarily from ages 2 to 11.
- Regarding these ages, research associating spanking with antisocial behavior is VERY controversial.

# Research Findings

- Most researchers contend that the relationship between spanking and antisocial behavior is bidirectional and causal.
- This means that antisocial behavior already present in children, such as aggression, typically leads to more spanking by the caregiver.
- Then, frequent and long term spanking is associated with more antisocial behavior such as delinquency, noncompliance and aggression.
- Consequently, antisocial behavior is related to more spanking, which in turn is related to more antisocial behavior.

# Research Findings

- Most studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between spanking and aggression, regardless of age.
- Spanking has been linked with low-self esteem, depression and low educational attainment.
- Children who are spanked are four times more likely to repeatedly and severely abuse their siblings.

# Research Findings

- The effects of spanking can extend to adolescence and even adulthood, being associated with alienation, masochistic sex and the implementation of physical child abuse.
- More negative effects correlated with spanking include:
  - Decreased moral internalization.
  - Decreased mental health of child and as an adult.
  - Increased adult criminal and antisocial behavior.
  - Increased risk of abuse to spouse.
  - Increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse.

# Research Findings

- However, as mentioned earlier these findings are very controversial.
- For example, in one study, spanking was related to more fights for children ages 8 to 11 and for children who were White.
- However, in the same study, spanking produced fewer fights for children ages 4 to 7 and for children who were Black.
- Researchers therefore concluded:
  - That spanking may actually deter aggression for Black children.
  - And that there is no evidence that spanking and antisocial behavior are correlated for boys 6 and younger, and girls 8 and younger.
- Furthermore, due to the high percentage of children who are spanked, it is difficult to conclude that spanking unequivocally causes great harm to this nation's children.

# Research Findings

- Perhaps the only consensus in the research is:
  1. It cannot be stated conclusively that spanking creates more antisocial behavior in children. They are *only* related.
  2. **MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED!**

# Research Findings

- One of the reasons for this continual controversy relates to the perspective that a researcher presupposes.
  - If researcher uses a Social Learning model, they are more likely to attribute antisocial behavior (particularly aggression) to be modeled from spanking.
  - If one uses a Contextual-Developmental model (e.g. Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Systems Theory), one is more likely to take other factors into consideration and not directly associate antisocial behavior with spanking.
- Other reasons for the controversy include:
  - Correlational data as not being able to say conclusively either way.
  - Researchers not correctly controlling for the children specific behaviors.
  - Confounding spanking with other disciplinary techniques.

# Research Findings

- Accordingly, researchers say that these factors must be taken into consideration concerning this issue:
  - Parental Style
    - Amount of affection given, authoritative versus authoritarian, etc.
  - Sex of child
    - Boys misbehave and show more antisocial behaviors and therefore are punished more.
  - SES
    - Lower SES have higher rates of delinquency and other antisocial behavior to begin with.
  - Frequency
    - The more frequent spanking, the more it relates to lasting negative effects.
  - Children's individual personality
  - Family context
    - For example, a child of a single parent mother who is spanked is more likely to model aggression towards others.

# Research Findings

- Child's perception of the event
  - If seen as a legitimate expression of parental authority and not an act of interpersonal aggression, spanking has less harmful effects.
  - However, if the child sees it as an act of aggression and not a rightful use of parental authority, negative consequences can result.
- Age of the child
  - Younger children can differentiate better between behavior that is acceptable only for adults.
  - As a result, older children have a higher propensity to model aggression and other antisocial behavior of adults who spank.
  - Accordingly, beneficial effects of spanking are greater among children 6 and under, and the most negative for children 10 to 12.
- Race and culture
  - African Americans tend to show more warmth and reasoning when spanking and give autonomy later to their children.
- Specific context of discipline administered
- Consistency of discipline style

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- As a form of corporal punishment, spanking is a severe form of punishment.
- Therefore, spanking tends to be coercive as caregivers are forcing children to behave in desirable ways.
- This guidance and discipline technique is therefore more associated with Behaviorism than with the Social Constructivist model.
- Consequently, spanking, like punishment, is an external form of control which can prevent the development of Moral Autonomy.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- Spanking can further restrict Moral Autonomy as:
  - Caregivers fail to promote a mutual respectful relationship.
    - Respectful interactions are not engaged in or modeled.
    - Caregivers do not look at child's capabilities or ask for input.
  - Children are prevented an opportunity to establish perspective taking.
    - Children are not allowed to inquiry why a certain behavior caused a problem or if acceptable.
  - Active learning is taken away.
    - Children are not given a chance to negotiate, better develop problem solving skills or make choices on their own.
  - Most often, caregivers only address the child's behavior and do not look to the child's intent or root causes, while not ascertaining if child was situationally disadvantaged.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- Besides Moral Autonomy, the two other long-term goals of the Social Constructivist model, self-discipline and positive self-concept, can as well be undermined.
- Researchers have stated that the most effective aspect of spanking is that it increases immediate compliance.
- As a result, spanking is used primarily for short term purposes without much attention to long term consequences.
  - Looking solely at controlling immediate behavior, not focusing beyond to influence children's lives.
- Moreover, the primary goal of spanking is typically retribution.
  - To make the child pay for their behavior
- As a result, the child is not given appropriate behaviors to model.
  - A behavior is taken away with no pro-social behavior given back.
  - Not providing an opportunity for children to express their emotions and feelings in pro-social ways.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- Further outcomes that are associated with punishment and spanking include:
  - Increased aggression and depression.
  - More dependence on others to make their decisions.
  - Fear of caregiver as trust is often not established.
  - Shame and embarrassment
- At the very least, spanking tends to withhold opportunities for pro-social behavior to be modeled and learned.
- Besides perspective taking, spanking can prohibit pro-social behavior such as empathy and respect for others.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- It can prohibit the fostering of relationships, as children are not typically encouraged to talk about the incident with caregiver or peers.
  - Does not provide an open dialogue.
- Spanking can convey that children are not viewed as competent or capable, as children are not allowed to be involved in resolutions to their problems.
- As a result, spanking can incline children to not make decisions that are intelligent, ethical, or socially responsible, necessary in a democratic society.
- Many times an opportunity to take personal responsibility is not given and therefore learning from experience and learning personal responsibility is inhibited.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- Spanking tends to disallow power to be shared among the child and the adult, unlike the Social Constructivist model.
  - Less give and take, negotiation or compromise.
- To remain effective, spanking needs to become more severe and more frequent, which can result in severer consequences.
- The person who administers spanking in a given situation, normally fails to consider the developmental needs of a child.
- Typically, spanking does not empower children as they are prevented from being in charge of their own behavior and thinking.

# Findings Related to HDFS 461

- According to the Social Constructivist model, it is perhaps better to use the following as opposed to only spanking:
  - Redirection
  - Attempt to find root causes.
  - Provide more choices (if possible), to allow for active learning.
  - Model more appropriate behaviors
  - Since spanking is mostly administered because caregivers “own the problem,” try to:
    - Modify the environment
    - Use more “I” Messages
    - Use related consequences
  - The Negotiation Model of Conflict Resolution
    - Invite child into the process of resolution.
    - Provides perspective taking and active learning.
  - Natural consequences
  - Other forms of Authentic Communication such as Reflective Listening.

# Conclusions

- According to a Social Constructivist Model of guidance and discipline, spanking is probably not the most effective method.
- Instead, one should consider using different means instead of or accompanied with spanking.
- The relationship between spanking and antisocial behavior, particularly for children ages 2 to 8, is very complicated.
- While most studies report a correlation, direct causation cannot be stated emphatically.
- Many factors must be taken into consideration concerning this issue.
- However, declaring that spanking is definitely positive cannot be derived from the empirical evidence.

# Conclusions

- It must be kept in mind that more research is needed.
- This issue will not be settled until "researchers have undertaken comprehensive investigations of the effects of spanking on a wide variety of outcomes, across many subgroups of children, in different contexts, and using data collected specifically for this purpose." (Gunnoue & Mariner, 1997)

# Discussion

- Of the three positions concerning spanking mentioned earlier, which one do you personally associate yourself with and why?
  - “Violence Begets Violence”
  - “Conditional Corporal Punishment”
  - “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child”