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The Parenting Project:

Healthy Children, Families, & Communities

Why Spanking Should Be Discouraged

By Eliza Cook and Kimberly Kopko

Spanking—hitting a child on the bottom with an open hand—has been a common parenting practice since the beginning of recorded history (Scott, 1996). However, despite recent research questioning the effectiveness and ethics of this controversial parenting practice, many parents widely accept its use today. One study conducted in 2004, reported that two-thirds of parents spank young children in the United States (Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004).

This fact sheet highlights research that supports eliminating spanking as a form of discipline for children as summarized in a recent publication, *"Spanking and Child Development: We Know Enough Now to Stop Hitting Our Children"* by Elizabeth Gershoff (2013).

Spanking is Ineffective

Most parents who spank their children believe that spanking will teach kids what is wrong (when they get spanked) and what is right (the absence of a spank). However, researchers find that children learn in more complex ways and need to internalize the reasons behind appropriate behavior, without the threat of physical punishment (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994, Hoffman, 1983).

- **Time-outs yield same short-term compliance as spanking.** One study analyzed the difference between spanking and time-outs, when asking children to comply with 30 various commands from their mothers (Roberts & Powers, 1990). The researchers found that when baseline differences were taken into account, spanking was not more effective than time-outs (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2013).
- **Long-term compliance: spanking is not effective.** To study if spanking encourages long-term compliance, researchers examined the development and evidence of conscience or guilt, obedience to commands, and resistance to temptation (Gershoff, 2013). The results reveal that spanking is associated with evidence of conscience; however more spanking is associated with less compliance over time (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2013).
- **Spanking increases child aggression.** Many parents report that they are most likely to spank after a child behaves aggressively (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). However after reviewing 27 relevant studies, the results all point to the finding that spanking is associated with more child aggression, not less (Gershoff, 2002). These findings, however, raise more questions: Do

children who are more aggressive encourage parents to spank? and, Does spanking promote aggression in children, or do more aggressive children get spanked? In response to these questions, researchers conducted several longitudinal studies and measured baseline aggression levels for each child. These studies found that while more aggressive children were spanked more frequently, spanking increased their aggression levels, even when controlling for baseline aggression (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013).

- **Spanking sends mixed messages.** Children cannot learn through spanking alone why their behavior was incorrect (Hoffman, 1983). In fact, spanking teaches children to behave only when the threat of physical punishment is present. Once the threat of physical punishment is gone they have no reason to behave appropriately (Hoffman, 1983). Furthermore, it can be very frightening and confusing for a child to be hit by a parent who they also love and depend on. One research study found that children report feelings of fear, anger, and sadness after being spanked (Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006). Even if parents also take time to explain the internal reasons why a child should behave, the feelings children experience after being spanked make it difficult to internalize their parent's explanation (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994).

Spanking is Linked with Negative Effects

Beyond being ineffective, spanking is also linked with many adverse side effects such as increases in mental health issues in childhood and adulthood, delinquent behavior in childhood and criminal behavior in adulthood, negative-parent child relationships, and increased risk of child abuse (Gershoff, 2002).

- **Reducing spanking will also likely reduce risk of child abuse**. A majority of child abuse cases by parents began with parents using spanking as a disciplinary tool (Durrant et al., 2006). In some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between child abuse and spanking. It is especially problematic if parents use spanking when they are upset, emotional, and frustrated as it is more likely that spanking will cross the line into unintentional child abuse. If parents are encouraged to use other discipline tactics besides spanking, it may minimize the likelihood of future child abuse cases.
- **Negative effects span across cultures**. Previous studies suggest that there may be different effects of spanking depending on whether the surrounding culture considers spanking an accepted practice (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). However, follow-up studies with higher quality data (nationally representative, longitudinal data) found that this was not the case. Spanking predicted increases in children's problem behavior over time across White, Black, Latino, and Asian subsamples (Gershoff, et al., 2012).

Spanking Violates Children's Human Rights

Recent research findings have spurred a shift in attitudes about the practice of spanking across many professional, religious, and human rights organizations worldwide.

- **Spanking is increasingly disavowed by professional and community organizations**. Very prominent organizations have begun to abandon spanking as a viable practice, and instead encourage parents to utilize different discipline practices. Among the most well known national organizations are the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2012) the American Humane Association (2009), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 1998), the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP, 2011), and the National Association of Social Workers (2012). In addition, prominent religious organizations have also passed resolutions that encourage parents to avoid spanking (United Methodist Church, 2008; General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 2012).
- **Growing consensus among human rights advocates about spanking.** Internationally, spanking is also referred to as corporal punishment. The United Nations has stated that corporal punishment is considered to be a form of violence and it should be banned in all contexts (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Other international human rights organizations have made similar claims as well (Europe-Wide Ban on Corporal Punishment of Children Recommendation 1666, 2004; IACHR, 2009). In response, 33 countries have banned corporal punishment of children, even by parents (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2013).

Conclusion

Research findings demonstrate that spanking is ineffective and harmful to children. In addition, there is increasing support from prominent professional, religious, and human rights organizations to avoid and eliminate spanking practices. However, spanking is still a common and accepted practice in the United States. Based on the evidence discussed in this fact page, national leaders, community stakeholders, parent educators, and parents should consider finding ways to discourage spanking as a viable discipline strategy.

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