

The American College of Pediatricians Challenges Spanking Report: Response to *Report on Physical Punishment in the United States*

By The American College of Pediatricians

Crucial Questions Unanswered

The *Report on Physical Punishment in the United States*, authored by Elizabeth T. Gershoff, PhD and published by Center for Effective Discipline¹ is based primarily upon Gershoff's meta-analysis of corporal punishment research published in 2002.² Some medical organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association, have endorsed the report's conclusions. In condemning the use of all physical punishment by parents, the report makes the following conclusions:

- There is little evidence that physical punishment improves children's behavior in the long term.
- There is substantial evidence that physical punishment makes it more, not less, likely that children will be defiant and aggressive in the future.
- There is clear evidence that physical punishment puts children at risk for negative outcomes, including increased mental health problems.
- There is consistent evidence that children who are physically punished are at greater risk of serious injury and physical abuse.

Although very thorough, Gershoff's analysis fails to answer the crucial questions with respect to the use of disciplinary spanking by parents. For parents and health professions, the crucial questions are:

- Do all forms of "corporal punishment" (from abusive, injurious physical attacks to ordinary disciplinary spanking by parents) produce the same effect upon children?
- What are the effects of non-abusive spanking on children?
 - Does effectiveness depend on the child's age, the situation, cultural context, etc.?
- If parents use spanking, what is the most effective method and setting?
- How do the effects of spanking compare with alternative disciplinary tactics (such as time-out) that parents could use instead?
- How do punishments such as spanking support or undermine positive aspects of discipline and teaching by parents?

Limitations of Gershoff's Review: Severe Corporal Punishment & Misleading Associations

Gershoff's review fails to shed light on these crucial questions because most of the studies reviewed² emphasize severe forms of corporal punishment and³ base their conclusions on misleading associations with child outcomes. In most cases, these problems were due to the faulty studies with which Gershoff had to work. Such a research approach would make any disciplinary tactic look bad. Examples:

- Most studies in her review included the use of overly severe forms of corporal punishment: e.g., "slapped on face,"^{3,4,5,6,7,8,9} being beaten,^{4,10,11} hit with a fist and causing bruises or cuts.¹²
- Most of her conclusions were based on misleading associations with outcomes, when those outcomes were actually caused by the child's excessive misbehavior, not the parental response to the misbehavior. These conclusions are misleading since most (if not all) other disciplinary tactics are associated with the same detrimental outcomes if analyzed in the same way. Consider the following:

- The strongest evidence of detrimental child outcomes in her review was that spanking frequency in one year correlated (an average of $r = .18$) with aggression or antisocial behavior at a later time. This small correlation occurs because behaviorally difficult children cause parents to use all disciplinary tactics more frequently. Their original behavior problems make them more likely than less disciplined children to be aggressive later on.
- A few studies in Gershoff's review used the same methods to study other disciplinary tactics as well as corporal punishment. They usually found more detrimental associations for alternative tactics than for corporal punishment! For example, there were four applicable studies of aggressive types of behaviors in children under 13 (using the studies' statistics that are done the same for all disciplinary tactics and, where possible, minimizing problems pointed out by Baumrind et al., 2002).¹³
 - Using the associations emphasized by Gershoff, the frequency of spanking 2- and 3-year-olds was associated with disruptive behavior 20 months later ($r = .15$, i.e., $d = .30$). But the frequencies of all other disciplinary tactics were over twice as strongly associated with more disruptive behavior 20 months later (nonphysical punishment, $r = .31$; reasoning, $r = .47$; "other", $r = .33$). These correlations are misleading in that they make *every* disciplinary tactic look detrimental.¹⁴
 - Corporal punishment was actually associated with *less* aggression in school two months after its use ($r = -.19$), whereas 6 other disciplinary tactics were associated with slightly *more* aggression on average (reasoning, scolding, privilege removal, isolation, diversion, love withdrawal: mean $r = +.09$).¹⁵
 - Physical punishment was associated with *less* antisocial aggression 2 years later ($r = -.07$), whereas 2 other tactics (privilege removal and love withdrawal) averaged no association (mean $r = .00$).¹⁶
 - Calm physical discipline was associated with slightly more antisocial aggression and impulsivity ($r = .07$), whereas 3 other tactics (reasoning, privilege removal, time-out) were more strongly associated ($r = .19$) with the same outcomes.¹⁷

Conclusion: It is the excessive child misbehavior which originally exists that appears to lead to a wide range of detrimental outcomes. The excessive misbehavior causes parents to use all disciplinary tactics more frequently, not just spanking. The misleading associations used in Gershoff's review would make any disciplinary tactic look bad, and thus cannot distinguish between effective and counterproductive disciplinary tactics. The *Report* unfortunately omits this information.

Conclusions from other Published Reviews of Physical Punishment

Gershoff's meta-analysis¹ is only one of six scientific reviews of physical discipline of children published between 1996 and 2005. None of the other five scientific reviews support her absolutist anti-spanking conclusion.^{18, 19,20,21,22} The most recent review was a meta-analysis that looked at over 40 years of studies that compared physical discipline directly with other disciplinary tactics.²¹⁰ Its conclusions:

- The outcomes of physical discipline, when compared with other tactics, depended upon *how* it was used.

- The outcomes of physical discipline compared unfavorably with alternative disciplinary tactics only when it was the *primary* disciplinary method or was too severe (such as beating up a child or striking the face or head).
- The outcomes of customary physical discipline were neither better nor worse than for any non-physical tactic, except for one study favoring physical discipline for reducing drug abuse.
- The strongest causal evidence showed of benefits from physical punishment came when spanking (2 open-handed swats to the buttocks) was used to enforce or back-up time-out with 2- to 6-years-olds. This type of back-up spanking reduced defiance and/or aggression better than 10 of the 13 other disciplinary tactics with which it was compared. Another benefit is that, because this approach leads to greater child compliance with time-out, it reduces the need to use spanking later on.

Implications for Social Science Researchers

Gershoff's review does not focus on, or limit the definition of "physical punishment" to, the use of ordinary spanking by parents of young children in appropriate situations within a nurturing parent-child relationship. Additionally, because of its fatal methodological flaws, the Gershoff review reaches negative conclusions about the use of physical punishment that would be reached for any other disciplinary measure using the same research methods. Research that overcomes those flaws supports the use of disciplinary spanking to enforce time-out in defiant 2- to 6-year-olds. This review thus *does not* answer critical questions about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of disciplinary spanking. Any future research seeking to determine the effectiveness of disciplinary spanking by parents must exclude harsh abusive physical practices, must focus on children not adolescents, must examine the *how* and *when* of spanking, and must use research methodology that determines causal effects not simply associations.

Implications for Parents: Beyond Misleading Associations

Parents need reliable information about how to discipline their children in the most effective manner. Effective discipline is based on a foundation of a positive, loving parent-child relationship and uses proactive discipline skillfully. In responding to misbehavior, parents need to skillfully use the mildest effective disciplinary tactics. The most effective way to use spanking is to back up milder disciplinary tactics, such as reasoning and time out, with 2- to 6-year-old children. Research has shown this strategy to not only be effective in and of itself, but it also enhances the effectiveness of milder disciplinary tactics, making the need for stronger tactics such as spanking less necessary as the child gets older.^{21,14, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30} This combination use of milder disciplinary tactics with spanking was more effective than 10 alternative disciplinary responses across these 9 studies. There is no evidence against this particular use of spanking in a loving parent-child context. Disciplinary spanking with young children can be useful, effective and harmless according to the best available research.³¹

Released May 27, 2009

The American College of Pediatricians is a national medical association of licensed physicians and healthcare professionals who specialize in the care of infants, children, and adolescents. The mission of the College is to enable all children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being. More information is available at www.BestforChildren.org.

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