

Evidence Favoring the Use of Disciplinary Spanking

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There is a paucity of published research focusing on ordinary, non-abusive disciplinary spanking of young children administered by loving, well-intentioned parents. There is, however, some quality research indicating short and long term efficacy of disciplinary spanking.

Short-Term Studies

The only studies that meet the most rigorous requirements for evidence-based medical practice are clinical field trials conducted by Roberts with clinically oppositional children.^{i ii iii} To determine which back-up or enforcer procedure was most effective in controlling a child's escape from time-out, a spank procedure was tested against 3 other procedures in randomized clinical field trials. The two-swat spank procedure was found to be the most effective, most preferred and most practical of all measures tested. Forehand and McMahon in their research similarly found "a mild spanking to be the most feasible back-up for the child leaving the time-out chair."^{iv} Even though these studies focused on spanking only as an enforcer of time-out, they are significant for other reasons:

- They are well-designed, randomized, clinical field studies that compare spanking to other responses.
- The problem behavior of noncompliance with time-out is very similar to other types of problem behaviors a defiant child might display. These studies offer evidence of spanking's effectiveness in changing problem behavior.
- The effectiveness of time-out is crucial to most behavioral parenting programs. The spank procedure can strengthen time-out's effectiveness and reduce a parent's need to use spanking independently or primarily.

Long-Term Studies

The long-term effects of any disciplinary measure, including spanking, are enormously influenced by the parental and environmental factors within the disciplinary process. **Baumrind** conducted a decade-long prospective study of families with children ages 4-9 years. She identified three general parenting styles and evaluated the effects these styles had upon the children's development. The following parenting styles were identified:

Authoritarian Parents were more controlling, more restrictive, less inclined to explain, more punitive, detached, and less warm. To discipline they used fear, little encouragement and often corporal punishment.

Permissive Parents were markedly less controlling, minimally demanding, freely granting of the child's demands, uninvolved with the child, and benign toward the child's impulses and actions. To discipline they used ridicule, guilt provocation, little power and reasoning, and rarely corporal punishment.

Authoritative Parents employed a combination of firm control and positive encouragement of a child's independence. They affirmed the child's qualities and, yet, set a standard for future conduct. They made reasonable demands of their children and promoted respect for authority. They were more consistent with the discipline. To discipline they used reasoning, power, reinforcement to achieve objectives, and some corporal punishment.

Some of the study's findings included:

- The Authoritative parents who balanced firm control with encouragement reared the most socially responsible and assertive children, i.e. achievement orientation, friendliness toward peers, cooperativeness with adults, social dominance, nonconforming behavior and purposiveness.
- The Authoritative parents favored corporal punishment over other negative sanctions.
- Permissive parents (both mothers and fathers) admitted to "explosive attacks of rage in which they inflicted more pain or injury upon the child than they had intended." They became more "violent because they felt they could neither control the child's behavior nor tolerate its effect upon themselves."
- Nonbrutal punishment, including physical expressions, by loving parents who used correct methodology achieved superior behavior control as well as:
 - More rapid re-establishment of affectional relationship between parent and child following an emotional release.
 - Less guilt reactions to transgression since an unpleasant consequence is imposed.
- Punishment is an effective means of controlling childhood behavior, and is not intrinsically harmful to the child.

Baumrind published in 2012 a 10-year follow-up study of the outcomes of authoritative parenting.^v Her findings confirmed that the authoritative style is optimal.

Guarendi found that 70% of the parents of "outstanding" (self-motivated, strong character, considerate of others, and high morality) students employed some physical punishment in the rearing of their children.^{vi} Some relied upon it often and others rarely used it. He found, "Spanking was generally considered to be one tool in a parent's discipline repertoire."

Larzelere and Kuhn's 2005 meta-analysis of a quarter-century of literature uniquely compared physical punishment of children with alternative disciplinary measures, such as time-out, reasoning, privilege removal, physical restraint, and scolding.^{vii} To address the methodological problem inherent in grouping all forms of physical punishment, they distinguished the following four categories: *conditional* spanking (used under limited conditions), *customary* physical punishment (typical manner of use by ordinary parents), *overly severe* physical punishment, and *predominant* physical punishment. Additionally, Larzelere and Kuhn's methods took into account selection biases, a confounding problem inherent in most studies of parental discipline since parents use disciplinary tactics to the extent that they perceive behavior problems in their children. The review's findings are summarized below.

- Conditional spanking was associated with better child outcomes than were 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary tactics, with no differences in outcomes compared to the other three alternatives.
- Conditional spanking and customary physical punishment were never associated with worse outcomes than any other alternative tactic.
- The meta-analysis results favored conditional spanking over nonphysical punishments in general for reducing defiance and antisocial behavior.
- Customary physical punishment was associated with less substance abuse than was non-contact punishment in one large retrospective study. Otherwise, customary physical punishment was equally as effective as any alternative disciplinary tactic.
- All types of physical punishment were associated with lower rates of antisocial behavior than were alternative disciplinary tactics.
- Physical punishment predicted more adverse child outcomes than alternative tactics only when it was used severely or predominantly.
- No evidence was found that physical punishment was more strongly associated with physical aggression than other disciplinary tactics.

The American College of Pediatricians issued a thorough review of the scientific literature in their 2021 policy statement, *Physical Punishment: A scientific Review of Its Use in the Discipline of Children*.^{viii} They concluded, "There is no established causal link between a parent's use of ordinary nonabusive spanking and the occurrence of physical child abuse, or the development of childhood aggression. There is evidence of short-term effectiveness and positive long-term outcomes when parents use disciplinary spanking for persistent defiance within a nurturing environment."

Conclusion

In a positive family setting, spanking has been found to be a positive predictor of outcome. Tennant even found that the childhood antecedents that were most associated with non-use of illegal drugs by young men were being spanked as a child, attending church and having a "happy" parental marriage.^{ix}

References

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