

Resolution on Physical Discipline of Children By Parents

WHEREAS: Physical discipline by parents has been associated with heightened risk for harm to children's mental health, as well as to their cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional development (Bender et al., 2007; Bugental, Martorell, & Barraza, 2003; Coley et al., 2014; Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Gershoff, Sattler, & Ansari, 2018; Ma, 2016; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012; Maneta et al., 2017; Okuzono, Fujiwara, Kato, & Kawachi, 2017; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Sheu, Polcari, Anderson, & Teicher, 2010; Tomoda, Suzuki, Rabi, Sheu, Polcari, & Teicher, 2009; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996; Vittrup & Holden, 2010; Zulauf, Sokolovsky, Grabel, & Olson, 2018);

WHEREAS: Physical discipline is associated with increased adverse outcomes for children across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups and across community contexts (Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006; Bodovski & Youn, 2010; Bradley et al., 2001; Coley et al., 2014; Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Fish, Amerikaner, & Lucas, 2007; Flouri & Midouhas, 2017; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016b; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005b; Hendricks, Lansford, Deater-Deckard, & Bornstein, 2014; Lau, Litrownik, Newton, Black, & Everson, 2006; Ma, 2016; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; Ma, Grogan-Kaylor & Lee, 2018; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, & McKelvey, 2009; Vittrup & Holden, 2010; Wang & Kenny, 2014);

WHEREAS: Research indicates that physical discipline is not effective in achieving parents' long-term goals of decreasing aggressive and defiant behavior in children or of promoting regulated and socially competent behavior in children (Alampay et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996; Cohen & Brook, 1995; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014; Flouri & Midouhas, 2017; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005a; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2015; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Maneta, White, & Mezzacappa, 2017; Olson, Ewon Choe, & Sameroff; 2017; Olson, Lopez-Duran, Lunkenheimer, Chang, & Sameroff, 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Piché, Huynh, Clément, & Durrant, 2016; Stormshak et al., 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992);

WHEREAS: The research on the adverse outcomes associated with physical discipline indicates that any perceived short-term benefits of physical discipline do not outweigh the detriments of this form of discipline (Alampay et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996; Cohen & Brook, 1995; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014; Flouri & Midouhas, 2017; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005a; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2015; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Maneta, White, & Mezzacappa, 2017; Olson, Ewon Choe, & Sameroff; 2017; Olson, Lopez-Duran,

Lunkenheimer, Chang, & Sameroff, 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Piché, Huynh, Clément, & Durrant, 2016; Stormshak et al., 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992);

WHEREAS: Research has shown that children learn from the behavior modeled by parents, and therefore physical discipline may teach undesirable conflict resolution practices (Olson et al., 2011; Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Turns & Sibley, 2018; Zulauf et al., 2018);

WHEREAS: There is evidence that physical discipline may escalate into injurious behavior that meets accepted criteria for abuse (Afifi, Mota, Sareen, & MacMillan, 2017; Durrant, Trocmé, Fallon, Milne, & Black, 2009; Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008);

WHEREAS: Socially acceptable disciplinary goals of education, training, and socialization of children can be achieved without the use of physical discipline (Ateah, 2013; Beauchaine et al., 2005; Bugental et al., 2002; Burkhart, Knox, & Brockmyer, 2013; Canfield et al., 2015; Chavis et al., 2013; Dubowitz, Feigelman, Lane, & Kim, 2009; Durrant et al., 2014; Gershoff et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2009; Holland & Holden, 2016; Knox, Burkhart, & Howe, 2011; Leijten et al., 2017; Letarte, Normandeau, & Allard, 2010; Love et al., 2005; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011; Puma et al., 2012; Scholer, Hamilton, Johnson, & Scott, 2010; St. George, Wilson, McDaniel, & Alia, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2011);

WHEREAS: Children have a right to be treated with dignity and respect (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990; United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2007);

WHEREAS: Use of physical discipline is strongly predicted by parents' attitudes about it, which may arise from complex cultural identity issues, practices, and norms (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Socolar & Stein, 1995; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006);

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the American Psychological Association recognizes that scientific evidence demonstrates the negative effects of physical discipline of children by caregivers and thereby recommends that caregivers use alternative forms of discipline that are associated with more positive outcomes for children.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA engage in competency based public awareness, education and accessible outreach activities to increase public knowledge about the effects of physical discipline on children and knowledge regarding alternative forms of discipline and their effectiveness and outcomes for children and parents.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA engage in promoting culturally responsive professional training and accessible continuing education activities regarding alternative discipline strategies and their effectiveness.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA support funding for research in the U.S. and other countries on:

- **The factors that underlie parents’ supportive attitudes about physical discipline;**
- **The factors that lead parents to rely on physical discipline;**
- **Differences in cultural understanding and values, including socially shared beliefs and norms of practice related to the use of physical discipline;**
- **The factors that promote parents’ best practices in supporting their children, and in developing positive parent-child relationships with their children; and**
- **Interventions that may help to diminish parental reliance on physical discipline and enhance parents’ access to culturally sensitive alternative approaches.**

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA encourage efforts to increase access to positive parenting supports for underserved groups.

Supporting Statement

Introduction

Consistent with ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children grow within families that are influenced by their neighborhoods, local communities, and broader, national cultural and societal norms. Parents’ choices in strategies for raising their children are frequently informed by their personal upbringing (Campbell & Gilmore, 2007; Seay, Jahromi, Umaña-Taylor, & Updegraff, 2016). These parenting choices can also be adversely impacted by the challenges parents encounter in their daily life (Crnic & Booth, 1991; Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Finegood, Raver, DeJoseph, & Blair, 2017; Tran, 2014), which can be exacerbated by physically remote or socially isolated circumstances (Novello, Stain, Lyle, & Kelly, 2011; Tucker & Rodriguez, 2014; Webster-Stratton, 1990) and by socioeconomic stressors that can limit access to services (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002; Pickard & Ingersoll, 2016; Roubinov & Boyce, 2017).

Despite differences across the world on a range of issues related to parenting, most parents are committed to protecting their children’s best interests. Although parents demonstrate this commitment

to their children in various ways across cultures, parents typically expend considerable effort to ensure their children's well-being. Parents' attempts to correct children's undesirable behavior is often part of this effort and may occur in different ways. One way involves the use of physical discipline, the goal of which is to reduce the recurrence of children's undesirable behaviors and to increase the frequency of children's desirable behaviors. However, physical discipline does not achieve either of these goals, and children may be unintentionally harmed by physical discipline. Parents should be advised of alternative discipline strategies that are both more effective and helpful over time with regard to achieving parents' goals.

Although the decision to use physical discipline may be related to cultural, historical, and contextual factors, existing research demonstrates that not only is customary physical discipline an ineffective disciplinary strategy to achieve compliance (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005), it also potentially harms children (Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). This association with harm is evident in diverse groups of children across all ages and genders, who vary in the communities in which they live, in their family socio-economic status, and in their racial, ethnic, and religious background. Scientific evidence suggests then that physical discipline hampers parents' efforts to promote positive development in children. Even though the prevalence of parents using physical discipline with their children has declined over the last 50 years, approximately two-thirds of U.S. children are punished with this form of discipline (Child Trends Databank, 2015). Seventy-nine percent of 3-5- year-olds, 60% of 6-8- year-olds, and 52% of 9-11- year-olds experience physical discipline in a given year (Zolotor, Robinson, Runyan, Barr, & Murphy, 2011). By the time a child becomes an adolescent, 85% have received physical discipline by their parents at least once during their lifetime (Bender et al., 2007). Given these statistics, it is critical to consider the evidence regarding the effectiveness of physical discipline as a behavior modification tool, as well as the short- and long-term implications on children's physical and psychological health. It is also equally critical to consider this evidence in relation to the broader socio-cultural context within which children are growing.

Defining Physical Discipline

Psychologists define punishment as an aversive stimulus that follows a behavior to reduce the likelihood that the behavior will occur again (Hineline & Rosales-Ruiz, 2012). Physical discipline specifically involves the use of physical force, such as hitting a child with a hand, to cause a child to experience some degree of pain or discomfort with the intention of modifying the child's behavior (United Nations, 2007). Physical discipline typically includes striking a child with an open hand on the buttocks or extremities with the intention of modifying behavior without causing physical injury (Straus, 2000).

Physical Discipline versus Physical Abuse

Although evidence suggests that the use of physical discipline increases the likelihood of physical abuse (Afifi, Mota, Sareen, & MacMillan, 2017; Durrant, Trocmé, Fallon, Milne, & Black, 2009; Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014; Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008), the two are

not synonymous. Whereas in other countries, physical discipline is included within the category of cruel and inhumane treatment (see Opposition to the Use of Physical Discipline below), in the United States, there is a distinction made between physical discipline and physical abuse and their consequences. Physical abuse is illegal in the United States, but physical discipline use is not. U.S. courts devote considerable attention to the balance between parents' right to care and control of their child versus the child's right to be free of abuse in dependency and termination of parental rights cases. Acts of physical abuse are behaviors by parents or caregivers that result in physical injury to the child, whereas acts of physical discipline are behaviors that may cause some physical pain but not injury and are not considered excessive (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). For example, other forms of hitting children, such as beating children with objects that result in injury, are considered physically abusive. The Department of Health and Human Services defines physical abuse as including injuries that result "from severe discipline, including injurious physical discipline, or physical discipline that is inappropriate to the child's age or condition" (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003, p. 16). The vast majority of parents who engage in physical discipline of children do not intend to cause serious physical or emotional harm to their children. Nonetheless, physical discipline may unintentionally result in negative behavioral, social, and emotional outcomes for children. Physical discipline can also escalate into physical abuse (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Gershoff, 2013; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Zigler & Hall, 1989).

Effects of Physical Discipline on Children

Ineffectiveness as a disciplinary tool

Despite beliefs that physical discipline is an effective way to eliminate undesirable child behavior or to induce child compliance with parents' requests, there is no consistent scientific evidence that physical discipline makes children more or less likely to cease undesirable behavior or engage in desirable behavior in the short term (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a). Research instead suggests that physical discipline is not better than other discipline methods (e.g., reasoning, time out, taking away privileges, warnings, and ignoring misbehavior) nor does it serve to enhance the positive outcomes parents seek, such as conscience development or positive behavior and affect (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). Instead, use of physical discipline predicts increases—not decreases—in children's behavior problems over time, even after race, gender, and family socioeconomic status have been statistically controlled (e.g., Alampay et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996; Cohen & Brook, 1995; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014; Flouri & Midouhas, 2017; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005a; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2015; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Maneta, White, & Mezzacappa, 2017; Olson, Ewon Choe, & Sameroff, 2017; Olson, Lopez-Duran, Lunkenheimer, Chang, & Sameroff, 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Piché, Huynh, Clément, & Durrant, 2016; Stormshak et al., 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992).

Implications for the child

Although research may not capture all of the complexities of family functioning or the factors that influence discipline decisions, the scope of research indicates that physical discipline is associated with risk of adverse outcomes. Meta-analytic reviews have found physical discipline use to be linked with a host of undesirable behavioral, social, and biological outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Paolucci & Violato, 2004). First, physical discipline use is associated with increases in later externalizing behavior, aggression, and antisocial behavior (e.g., Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Gershoff, Sattler, & Ansari, 2018; Okuzono, Fujiwara, Kato, & Kawachi, 2017; Zulauf, Sokolovsky, Grabell, & Olson, 2018). The associations between physical discipline use and undesirable behaviors persist even when initial levels of the children's behavior problems are considered (e.g., Coley et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 1996; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005b; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012; Maneta et al., 2017; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010; Turns & Sibley, 2018). Moreover, reducing parents' use of physical discipline is associated with reductions in children's aggressive behavior, providing additional evidence that physical discipline predicts greater child aggression (Beauchaine, Webster-Stratton, & Reid, 2005; Gershoff, Ansari, Purtell, & Sexton, 2016; Gross et al., 2009; Leijten, Raaijmakers, Orobio de Castro, van den Ban, & Matthys, 2017). Physical discipline use is also associated with mental health problems in children, such as internalizing disorders, even after controlling for previous mental health issues (Ferguson, 2013; Bender et al., 2007; Coley et al., 2014; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Ma, 2016; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012; Maneta et al., 2017) as well as long-term adult mental health impairment (e.g., Afifi et al., 2017). And finally, children's heightened fear, anger, and sadness associated with physical discipline increase their general levels of psychological distress (Dobbs, Smith, & Taylor, 2006; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996; Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Because physical discipline is painful and parents are the source of that pain, physical discipline may reduce the quality of the parent-child relationship. Children may exhibit greater levels of distrust in and avoidance of parents who rely on physical discipline, which makes those children less likely to develop a strong attachment bond with those parents (Coyl, Roggman, & Newland, 2002; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), and, ultimately, become less receptive to parents' positive socialization efforts (Grusec, 2002; Maccoby, 1992). Additionally, physical discipline models aggressive behavior to children as a conflict resolution strategy and has been associated with increased peer aggression in preschool and school-aged children (Olson et al., 2011; Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Turns & Sibley, 2018; Zulauf et al., 2018). Such modeling of physical force to control another's behavior contradicts parents' and society's goals of teaching children to solve disagreements and to express their disappointment and frustration through means other than physical aggression.

Finally, in terms of neurological and biological correlates of physical discipline use, physical discipline is associated with impaired cognitive ability and detrimental brain development, which are themselves associated with the development of mental health problems (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Tomoda, Suzuki, Rabi, Sheu, Polcari, & Teicher, 2009). Neurobiologically, physical discipline also appears to contribute to alterations in or dysregulation of cortisol and dopamine activity, resulting in hypersensitivity to stress and increased risk for substance abuse, respectively (Bugental, Martorell, & Barraza, 2003; Sheu, Polcari, Anderson, & Teicher, 2010; Tomoda et al., 2009).

Physical Discipline across Cultural Groups and Contexts

Culture can be construed to reflect a grouping of individuals based on their shared social norms, beliefs, rituals, and priorities (Betancourt & López, 1993). Some cultural groups may consider physical discipline to be an appropriate and effective strategy based on shared practices or religious teachings (Flynn, 1998; Mosby et al., 1999; Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010). A critical issue to consider when evaluating the consequences of physical discipline on children concerns whether the adverse outcomes observed with such discipline vary across cultural groups, including race, ethnicity, and socio-economic context. Much debate about physical discipline has centered on possible racial and ethnic differences in its use and consequences. For example, the cultural normativeness theory posits that because physical discipline may be used more frequently and perceived as more normative by African American families and communities, it may have a less adverse, and potentially beneficial, impact on children (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). This theory, however, falls short on its assumptions. Although earlier work provided some support for the normativeness theory, more recent, methodologically sophisticated research with diverse and nationally representative samples disputes it. This latter body of research demonstrates no racial and ethnic differences in children's problematic behaviors after experiencing parents' physical discipline (Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006; Bodovski & Youn, 2010; Coley et al., 2014; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016b; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005b; Lau, Litrownik, Newton, Black, & Everson, 2006; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007; Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, & McKelvey, 2009; Vittrup & Holden, 2010; Wang & Kenny, 2014). Others suggest that the detrimental outcomes of physical discipline use are only weaker among African-American children (Stormshak et al., 2000) or are magnified among poor African American children even after controlling for parental education levels (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, Pipes McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001). In research suggesting physical discipline does not lead to worse outcomes for African-American children, the findings underscore that physical discipline still does not demonstrate benefits (Simons, Simons, & Su, 2013; Stacks, Oshio, Gerard, & Roe, 2009). Stated another way, the associations between physical discipline use and adverse outcomes are observed in children across various racial and ethnic groups.

Further, with respect to religiosity, few contexts demonstrate reduced negative effects of physical discipline use. For example, theological conservatism does not avert negative outcomes (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011) and avoiding the adverse outcomes associated with physical discipline use in conservative Protestants households was rare (Petts & Kysar-Moon, 2012). In contrast, greater sanctification of the parenting role and more frequent church attendance has been associated with less parental physical discipline use (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006; Petts, 2012) and accompanied by fewer child behavior problems (Petts, 2012).

Research suggests some children may be particularly likely to experience physical discipline, such as younger children (e.g., Mackenzie et al., 2011; Perron et al., 2014; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007) and children with disabilities (Hendricks, Lansford, Deater-Deckard, & Bornstein, 2014). Nonetheless, the documented adverse effects of physical discipline have been observed when considering a variety of potential characteristics: irrespective of the gender of the parent or child (Boutwell, Franklin, Barnes, & Beaver, 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2015; Paolucci & Violato, 2014; Piché et al., 2016; Vanfossen, Brown, Kellam, Sokoloff, & Doering, 2010); across child age groups, from very young children through adolescence (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Paolucci & Violato, 2014), with some indication that the negative effects worsen with age (Bradley et al., 2001; Ferguson, 2013; Olson et al., 2017); across socioeconomic strata wherein income and educational level are controlled (Bradley et al., 2001; Flouri &

Midouhas, 2017; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2009); regardless of neighborhood characteristics or family structure (Ma, 2016; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; Ma, Grogan-Kaylor & Lee, 2018; Vanfossen et al., 2010; Paolucci & Violato, 2014). The findings of adverse effects of physical discipline are not limited to urban areas; physical discipline use has been linked with negative outcomes in rural populations (Fish, Amerikaner, & Lucas, 2007), and rural adolescents receiving physical discipline perceive their parents as less warm (Simons, Johnson, & Conger, 1994).

Some research suggests immigrants to the U.S. may use less physical discipline, particularly in more immigrant-dense communities (Lee & Altschul, 2015; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003). Findings from studies outside of the United States, with diverse groups of children, reveal similar trends in the adverse effects of physical discipline (e.g., families from Europe, Asia, India, South America, and Pacific nations). In such cross-cultural studies, greater use of physical discipline is linked with poorer child outcomes, such as aggression and anxiety, and children do not show improved outcomes even in nations where physical discipline is more culturally normative (Alampay et al., 2017; Ani & Grantham-McGregor, 1998; duRivage et al., 2015; Flouri & Midhouhas, 2017; Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005; Ma, Han, Grogan-Kaylor, Delva, & Castillo, 2012; Murray, Anselmi, Gallo, Fleitlich-Bilyk, & Bordin, 2013; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006; Okuzono et al., 2017; Sim & Ong, 2005; Vives-Montero, Cortés-Pendón, López-Rubio, & Ascanio, 2017). Further, parents' perception of their physical discipline as less severe or more just does not reduce its connection to negative child outcomes across countries (Alampay et al., 2017).

Another common proposition is that the context of physical discipline use might mitigate the negative outcomes associated with it. Results from cross-sectional and longitudinal research have been mixed as to whether the warmth parents show toward their children buffers the harmful effects of physical discipline. Some studies show no moderating effects by parental warmth; others indicate that parental warmth can only weaken the negative effects but not eliminate them (Aucoin et al., 2006; Berlin et al., 2009; Bodovski & Youn, 2010; Deater-Deckard, Ivy, & Petrill, 2006; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Ma, 2016; Ma et al., 2012; MacKenzie et al., 2012; McKee et al., 2007; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Olson et al., 2012; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000; Stacks et al., 2009; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996; Wang & Kenny, 2014). Others speculate that the negative effects of physical discipline appear because of concomitant psychological or verbal punishment; yet child aggression or mental health issues increase with physical discipline use even after controlling for psychological discipline tactics or emotional abuse (Afifi et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Gamez-Guadix, Carrobles, Almendros, & Fernandez, 2010; Gamez-Guadix, Straus, Carrobles, Munoz-Rivas & Almendros, 2010; Taylor et al., 2010). Moreover, physical discipline use predicts childhood behavior problems independent of parental supervision and monitoring (Eamon & Altshuler, 2004; Melika, 2004); increased parental monitoring does not buffer the negative effects of physical discipline on long-term outcomes (Turner & Muller, 2004) perhaps because the effects of parental supervision are more relevant particularly for young adolescents (Pardini et al., 2008; Richards, Miller, O'Donnell, Wasserman, & Colder, 2004). Additionally, although many believe physical discipline ensures children's compliance in low-income neighborhoods, the science does not show that parents in these neighborhoods use physical discipline consistently more than do parents in other neighborhoods; and equally importantly, the science does not show that physical discipline is less deleterious for children from such high-risk neighborhoods (Berlin et al., 2009; Coley et al., 2014; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016b; Lee et al., 2013; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; Ma et al., 2018; MacKenzie et al., 2012; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2009).

Strength of the Evidence

Research on physical discipline is difficult to carry out because it is unethical and infeasible to randomly assign children to a condition in which they do or do not receive physical discipline from the moment they are born (McCartney & Rosenthal, 2000). However, recent work has utilized a variety of strong research designs; has adopted multiple measures to operationalize constructs like “behavior problems”; has increased validity; and has examined diverse samples, enhancing generalizability to different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and children from different communities and socio-economic backgrounds (Gershoff, Goodman, Miller-Perrin, Holden, Jackson, & Kazdin, 2018). For example, this body of research includes studies that approximate causal estimates to demonstrate the adverse effects of parental physical discipline use applying sophisticated propensity score matching techniques—comparing groups who have received physical discipline with carefully matched comparison groups (Gershoff et al., 2018; Hyland, Alkhalaf, & Whalley, 2013; Okuzono et al., 2017). Further, studies have observed increases in behavior over time after statistically controlling for potential sampling confounds of race, gender, or SES (Alampay et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 1996; Cohen & Brook, 1995; Coley et al., 2014; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005a; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Gunnoe & Marinier, 1997; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; MacKenzie et al., 2015; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Piché et al., 2016; Stormshak et al., 2000; Weiss et al., 1992). Longitudinal studies demonstrate that parental physical discipline predicts children’s problem behaviors even after statistically controlling for children’s initial levels of problem behavior (Berlin et al., 2009; Coley et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 1996; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005b; Lee et al., 2015; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012; MacKenzie et al., 2015; Maneta et al., 2017; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007; Taylor et al., 2010; Turns & Sibley, 2018; Wang & Kenny, 2014; Zulauf et al., 2018); this body of work includes rigorous cross-lagged panel design studies that model parent and child effects simultaneously across time. Interventions that target reducing parental physical discipline use observed accompanying reductions in children’s aggression (Beauchaine et al., 2005; Gershoff, Ansari, Purtell, & Sexton, 2016; Gross et al., 2009; Leijten et al., 2017; Vives-Montero et al., 2017; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). And meta-analyses demonstrate the consistency of observed associations between physical discipline and negative child outcomes.¹ Thus, findings from these methodologically rigorous studies show that parental physical discipline use can be detrimental, and conversely that other forms of discipline promote positive child behavior over time.

Opposition to the Use of Physical Discipline

Opposition to the use of physical discipline can be found in the international and professional communities. The United Nations has proclaimed that “the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguard and care,” (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). International agreement about the ineffectiveness of physical discipline has resulted in many countries banning the practice in all settings (United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), (2007).

Although the United States has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, APA has adopted two resolutions related to the Convention: *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*, and *UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Convention’s Optional Protocols*

(2001). Both resolutions affirm APA's support for the spirit and principles enumerated in the Convention. APA has two additional resolutions relevant to use of physical discipline. In 2006, APA passed the *Resolution against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, which opposes "...cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment," (APA, 2006). The U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child resolved that physical discipline constitutes a cruel and degrading form of punishment (United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). APA also passed the *Resolution on Corporal Punishment (1975)*, which opposes the use of corporal punishment in all schools and other institutions where children are cared for.

Moreover, numerous professional and public health organizations recommend that parents avoid using physical discipline, including: The [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), The [American College of Emergency Physicians](#), The American Medical Association, The [American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children](#), The U.S. Centers for Disease Control, The [Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling](#), The National Association of Counsel for Children, The [National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners](#), and The [National Foster Parent Association](#).

Alternative Discipline Strategies

Use of physical discipline is strongly predicted by parents' positive attitudes about it (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Socolar & Stein, 1995; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). Thus, understanding reasons for parents' use of physical discipline and helping to change parents' attitudes about it are important steps in reducing its prevalence. Interventions that teach positive parenting skills and deliver information intended to foster attitude change have already demonstrated their effectiveness in helping parents raise their kids more effectively—in line with their goals—and to reduce children's undesirable behavior. Such culturally-informed strategies for parents that help children learn positive behaviors, such as modeling orderly, predictable behavior, respectful communication, and collaborative conflict resolution are more likely to yield desirable behaviors and to foster a more positive and supportive family environment (example interventions, inclusive of community-based alternatives: Ateah, 2013; Beauchaine et al., 2005; Bugental et al., 2002; Burkhart, Knox, & Brockmyer, 2013; Canfield et al., 2015; Chavis et al., 2013; Dubowitz, Feigelman, Lane, & Kim, 2009; Durrant et al., 2014; Gershoff et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2009; Holland & Holden, 2016; Knox, Burkhart, & Howe, 2011; Leijten et al., 2017; Letarte, Normandeau, & Allard, 2010; Love et al., 2005; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011; Puma et al., 2012; Scholer, Hamilton, Johnson, & Scott, 2010; St. George, Wilson, McDaniel, & Alia, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2011).

Summary

The goal of physical discipline is to reduce the recurrence of children's undesirable behaviors and to increase the frequency of children's desirable behaviors. Although parents' decision to use physical discipline may be related to cultural, historical, and contextual factors, existing research demonstrates that not only is customary physical discipline an ineffective disciplinary strategy to achieve compliance (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005), it also potentially harms children (Ferguson,

2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). Use of physical discipline predicts increases—not decreases—in children’s behavior problems over time, even after race, gender, and family socioeconomic status have been statistically controlled (e.g., Alampay et al., 2017; Berlin et al., 2009; Campbell, Pierce, Moore, Marakovitz, & Newby, 1996; Cohen & Brook, 1995; Coley, Kull, & Carrano, 2014; Flouri & Midouhas, 2017; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004, 2005a; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Ma & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2015; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Maneta, White, & Mezzacappa, 2017; Olson, Ewon Choe, & Sameroff; 2017; Olson, Lopez-Duran, Lunkenheimer, Chang, & Sameroff, 2011; Pagani et al., 2004; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Piché, Huỳnh, Clément, & Durrant, 2016; Stormshak et al., 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Additionally, Meta-analytic reviews have found physical discipline use to be linked with a host of undesirable behavioral, social, and biological outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Paolucci & Violato, 2004). This body of work has utilized a variety of strong research designs; has adopted multiple measures to operationalize constructs like “behavior problems”; has increased validity; and has examined diverse samples, enhancing generalizability to different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and children from different communities and socio-economic backgrounds (Gershoff, Goodman, Miller-Perrin, Holden, Jackson, & Kazdin, 2018). Alternative parenting approaches that teach positive parenting skills and deliver information intended to foster attitude change have demonstrated their effectiveness in helping parents raise their kids more effectively—in line with their goals—and to reduce children’s undesirable behavior (Ateah, 2013; Beauchaine et al., 2005; Bugental et al., 2002; Burkhart, Knox, & Brockmyer, 2013; Canfield et al., 2015; Chavis et al., 2013; Dubowitz, Feigelman, Lane, & Kim, 2009; Durrant et al., 2014; Gershoff et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2009; Holland & Holden, 2016; Knox, Burkhart, & Howe, 2011; Leijten et al., 2017; Letarte, Normandeau, & Allard, 2010; Love et al., 2005; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011; Puma et al., 2012; Scholer, Hamilton, Johnson, & Scott, 2010; St. George, Wilson, McDaniel, & Alia, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2011).

¹ Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016 with 75 studies with over 160,000 children: effect sizes (*d*) of parental physical discipline on child externalizing, *d* = .41 (meaning a 2.1 times greater likelihood of externalizing), child internalizing problems, *d* = .24 (1.5 times greater likelihood of internalizing), child mental health problems, *d* = .53 (2.62 times greater likelihood of mental health problems), escalation to physical abuse, *d* = .64 (3.2 times greater likelihood of child abuse), adult antisocial behavior, *d* = .36 (1.92 times greater likelihood of antisocial behavior), adult mental health problem, *d* = .24 (1.5 times greater likelihood of adult mental health problems); Paolucci & Violato, 2004 with over 47,000 children: collapsing across possible affective outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, depression, anxiety), average weighted effect size (most conservative), *d* = .20 (1.4 times greater odds of adverse affective outcomes), behavioral outcomes (inclusive of child abuse, externalizing, aggression) *d* = .21 (1.46 times greater likelihood of behavior problems).

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