

Perspectives on the Effects of Corporal Punishment: Comment on Gershoff (2002)

George W. Holden
University of Texas at Austin

Parental use of corporal punishment has been a contentious child-rearing topic for thousands of years. E. T. Gershoff's (2002) meta-analyses undoubtedly will rekindle the debate over whether parents should spank their children. The quality of the existing data is discussed as well as several surprising findings from the meta-analyses. The effects of corporal punishment are then considered from the perspectives of learning theory, socialization theory, and the child's point of view. Her ecological-process model is then evaluated in light of these perspectives. Research directions and social policy implications are addressed.

Parental use of corporal punishment is the single most controversial and emotionally charged topic in parent-child relationships. No other child-rearing topic has elicited as much attention or heated debate as whether parents should engage in the practice. Beginning in the 1st century C.E. and periodically thereafter, educators (e.g., Quintilian), philosophers (e.g., Locke, Plutarch, & Rousseau), and many others have argued against—or called for moderation in—parental use of corporal punishment (Peisner, 1989). In the past year alone, the controversy has been reflected in the more than 50 articles published in North American newspapers and magazines on the topic, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Newsweek*. Conflict on the topic is pervasive at multiple levels: Pediatricians hold divergent attitudes; husbands and wives disagree over its use; communities and states dispute it; and even countries debate whether to outlaw the practice. It is evident that a careful, thorough review on the topic is more than overdue.

Given the sometimes passionate disagreement surrounding the topic, it is important to evaluate the effects of corporal punishment in a factual, objective manner. Gershoff (2002) has done just that by compiling 88 studies spanning more than 50 years and using meta-analyses to evaluate the outcomes. Then, on the basis of a larger corpus of literature, she created a model depicting how various processes and contexts may affect children. I first make some observations about the quality of the meta-analytic data and then draw attention to a few of the surprising results. After discussing corporal punishment from several perspectives, I evaluate Gershoff's model and its implications.

The Meta-Analyses

Quality of the Primary Sources

The conclusions drawn from a meta-analysis are only as good as the constituent studies. How good is the quality of the empirical

data? Investigations into the effects of parenting practices involve a particularly challenging domain of study (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Many of the investigations, the earliest of which dates as far back as 1938, can be faulted on various grounds, including reliance on single and sometimes retrospective reports; weak assessment instruments; lack of assessment of parent-child relationship or contextual variables; neglect of child's temperament and difficultness; and a simple, deterministic view of parental influence.

A central methodological issue concerns the homogeneity of the independent variable. There are considerable semantic problems in this area. Gershoff (2002) labeled the parental behavior of interest as *corporal punishment*. However, she was not looking at all corporal punishment, which includes abusive acts (punching, beating, whipping, burning, etc.). It would be more accurate to say her focus was on what alternatively has been labeled *customary physical punishment* (Larzelere, 2000), *subabusive violence* (Graziano, Hamblen, & Plante, 1996), or, more commonly, *slapping* and *spanking* or one of its synonyms (*smacking* or *hitting* with a spoon, paddle, or some other object). The targeted area was limited to the child's buttocks or hand.

Even though there is unanimous accord among experts that harsh, abusive punishment is detrimental for children, there is some debate about other whether spanking is associated with negative outcomes (e.g., Baumrind, 1997; Larzelere, 2000). For that reason, it is important that the studies in Gershoff's (2002) review concerned parental customary corporal punishment rather than overly harsh or abusive behavior. How well did the studies reflect parental use of customary corporal punishment and exclude more severe forms of punishment? For two reasons, that question cannot be answered definitively. First, many of the studies reviewed did not inquire about more serious forms of corporal punishment and therefore may have inadvertently included abusive parents. Second, given that most of the data were based on self-reports by parents, it is possible that parents who engaged in more severe forms of physical punishment did not report it and thus were included when they should not have been. Controlling for those potential problems awaits future research. However, as far as can be determined from the studies, Gershoff did limit inclusion to customary corporal punishment.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to George W. Holden, Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1189. E-mail: holden@psy.utexas.edu

Although the behavior of interest must be narrowly defined, its expression across families is heterogeneous. Foremost, it is administered in a variety of ways. As Gershoff (2002) pointed out, some parents are instrumental spankers whereas others spank impulsively. Some parents spank hard, others hardly spank. When they spank, some parents are livid, others try to be loving. Studies have not systematically included these variables or other important ones, such as where the child is hit or at what point the spank is administered within a disciplinary bout (Chamberlin & Patterson, 1995; Ritchie, 1999). Another source of variation is the fact that spanking often co-occurs with other parenting behaviors, including initially scolding, yelling, or perhaps raging and subsequently reasoning. Therefore, researchers cannot definitively isolate the singular effects of spanking. A third source of variation concerns parental characteristics. Darling and Steinberg (1993) distinguished between the content of parental acts (e.g., spanking, reasoning) and the style in which it was delivered. Presumably, a spank delivered by a rejecting parent will send a very different message than a spank from a warm and loving parent.

Striking Results

Despite these and other limitations of the studies that contribute to “methodological noise,” Gershoff’s (2002) results provide important new information about the effects of corporal punishment. Three findings were particularly striking. First, the results of the meta-analyses were surprisingly consistent. Despite the methodological problems, and a heterogeneous set of studies collected over more than half a century, the direction of effects was largely uniform. Although the magnitude of the effect sizes varied considerably, the directionality was the same across all studies in 7 of the 11 child construct analyses.

A second noteworthy finding was the lack of positive outcomes. According to Gershoff’s (2002) analysis, the one positive outcome was immediate compliance, reported in five studies. Typically that was operationalized as the child complying within 5 s to the parent’s directive. However, the inconsistent effect sizes qualified this “positive” effect—probably because three of the constituent studies were experimental laboratory investigations. That children will comply immediately after being hit can hardly be called a meaningful positive outcome. A more important outcome variable would be the likelihood that the child did not repeat the same transgression over days, weeks, or even months. The most applicable finding related to the effectiveness of spanking in the meta-analyses concerned internalization. Corporal punishment was not positively associated with internalization of positive conduct, what many parents say is the goal of corporal punishment (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999).

In stark contrast to the one allegedly positive outcome, 4 (quality of parent–child relationship, child’s mental health, being a victim of physical child abuse, and aggression in adulthood) of the remaining 10 constructs, at the composite level, showed negative outcomes at the medium effect size, and 4 showed a small effect size (moral internalization, aggression, delinquent and antisocial behavior, and criminal and antisocial behavior in adulthood). Only 2 outcomes (mental health, abuse of own child or spouse) did not attain at least a small effect size. Both of these nonsignificant outcomes were measured in adulthood. The uniformity of the negative outcomes was noteworthy.

The nine types of negative outcomes reflect adequately researched categories. Other potential effects of corporal punishment that have not received sufficient research attention include cognitive effects (e.g., Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) and the development of masochism (Rousseau, 1782–1789/1928). These and other potential negative effects await future meta-analyses.

Although Gershoff’s (2002) review has documented negative associations with corporal punishment, no causal connections have been shown. Given that most children in the American culture are spanked, why do only a small proportion manifest negative outcomes? As Straus (2001) pointed out, a medical analogy is helpful here. Consider the relation between smoking and lung cancer. Although medical research has documented that smoking causes cancer, it is estimated that only about 33% of smokers will die from smoking (Matteson, Pollack, & Cullen, 1987). Why some spanked children develop problems and others do not is a key research question, a topic to which I return when considering Gershoff’s model.

Perspectives On Corporal Punishment

To put the results of the meta-analyses into perspective, I consider the effects of corporal punishment from three different viewpoints.

Learning Theory

Despite the comprehensiveness of Gershoff’s (2002) article, there was no discussion about the theoretical underpinnings of corporal punishment as a form of learning. However, for more than 70 years psychologists have been investigating the effectiveness of punishment and its consequences. Both Thorndike (1935) and Skinner (1953) claimed that punishment was ineffective for producing significant and lasting behavioral change. Subsequent research proved them to be wrong. According to Domjan (2000), punishment can be an effective agent of behavioral change, but only under certain conditions. To be effective, it must occur after every transgression, be immediate, be intense at least for the first transgression, and not be signaled by a discriminative stimulus. These conditions represent a tall order for parents; in fact, it is likely parents are destined to fail on all four counts.

Consider the conditions when applied to the recommended procedures for the proper administration of spanking. Published guidelines for spanking were found in two books (Dobson, 1992; Rosemond, 1994) and one magazine article (Trumbull & Ravenel, 1998). They were then compared on seven criteria (see Table 1). Besides the fact that the recommendations apparently are based on personal opinion and diverge on each criterion, the advice is noteworthy in that it conflicts with learning principles. First, the admonition that it be used infrequently, or as a last resort, means that the child will not be spanked after each occurrence of the transgression. Second, although effective punishment must be immediate, only Rosemond (1994) followed this principle. However, in vivo situational exigencies sometimes preclude the immediate delivery of a spank (e.g., if the transgression occurs in public or if the parent is overly angry and remembers the admonition to calm down before spanking; Trumbull & Ravenel, 1998). Dobson (1992) advocated making sure that the spank is painful, though just how intense the spank needs to be for effective behavioral sup-

Table 1
Three Recommended Ways to Spank a Child

Author	Age	Place	Method	Occurrence	Contingency	Emotion	Follow-through
Dobson (1992)	15 mos–12 yrs	If in public, move to private spot	Neutral object; make sure it hurts	Use infrequently; vary response to same transgression, but punish each time	Not stated	Do not use when angry	In case of strong-willed child, be sure to “outlast him and win” (p. 71)
Rosemond (1994)	24 mos–9 or 10 yrs	Only in private	Open hand	Only occasionally—not predictable	Do it quickly without warnings	Spanking in anger is okay	Clear, stern message but do not reassure of love
Trumbull & Ravenel (1998)	18 mos–10 yrs	Always in private	Forewarn, one or two spansks to buttocks	Use when other approaches fail	Do not administer on impulse or if out of control	Administer in loving, controlled manner	Embrace the child and calmly review transgression and desired behavior

Note. mos = months; yrs = years.

pression is unclear. This recommendation follows learning theory, but as Dinsmoor (1998) observed,

It should be noted that the person administering the punishment (e.g., a parent punishing a child) may not be willing to resort to the degree of severity necessary to produce [extinction]. Milder punishment does not suppress the behavior as completely as does extinction, and in both cases, a recovery occurs when the procedure is discontinued. (p. 199)

Finally, the punishment should not be signaled by the presence of a discriminative stimulus (i.e., the parent). Rosemond’s recommendation of spanking without warning may be the closest approximation to this condition, but in reality, spanking is typically preceded by a warning or threat (Buck, Holden, & Stickels, 2001). One piece of spanking advice was particularly troubling. Dobson (1992) advised parents to escalate the conflict in the case of a strong-willed child in order to “outlast him and win” (p. 71). This sounds more like a recipe for injury and abuse than for effective parenting.

In addition to identifying the proper conditions for punishment to be effective, learning theorists also have long recognized that punishment is accompanied by unintended side effects. As Solomon observed in 1964, “There are experiments, many of them carefully done, [which] show some of the devastating consequences of the utilization of punishment to control behavior. The side effects are frightening, indeed, and should *not* be ignored!” (p. 250). Newsom, Favell, and Rincover (1983) pointed out that every punishment technique has four effects: the primary effect (i.e., response suppression), a physical effect (physiological consequences), secondary effects (side effects), and social effects (reactions in persons other than the recipient of the punishment).

As mentioned above, the primary effect of corporal punishment has not been adequately tested, nor is there any published evidence about children’s physiological reactions to spanking. However, Gershoff’s (2002) review did find varying degrees of support for nine negative side effects. The social effects of corporal punishment have largely been ignored, but there is some evidence about negative effects here as well. Many parents who spank report

feeling remorse or guilt after doing so (e.g., Graziano et al., 1996; Holden et al., 1999), and it likely is a prime source of marital conflict in the child-rearing domain (Dobson, 1992).

Considering corporal punishment from the perspective of learning theory indicates that punishment is unlikely to be successful but may well result in negative side effects. This perspective also reveals that there is other information we need to know about the context in which the spank was administered. These questions include: How and to what part of the body was it administered? Was it used contingently? Was it used previously for that transgression? What was the intensity each time it was used? Has it been used consistently by both parents?

Socialization Research

Much of the socialization research over the past 50 years or so has been concerned with parental discipline and the process of internalization, or how children acquire the motives, values, and behavior of their parents and society at large (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Maccoby, 1992). Three points can be made in consideration of that research. First, discipline is not synonymous with punishment, although in several places Gershoff (2002) appeared to equate them. *Discipline* means to train, instruct, or educate. Training cannot be accomplished simply by suppressing undesired behaviors through punishment. If the goal of discipline is to promote the child’s obedience and internalization of the parent’s message (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), then effective instruction must be a foremost consideration. And for several reasons, as I mention below, corporal punishment may get in the way of hearing that message.

A second point worth recognizing is that the results from the meta-analyses are consistent with existing research and theory about children’s development in the area of internalization (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), prosocial behavior (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), moral behavior (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997), and aggressive as well as antisocial behavior (Coie & Dodge, 1998). As Kochanska and Thompson (1997) put it, “power oriented, forceful discipline elicits very high anxiety or arousal in the child and it

interferes with the effective processing of the parental message about behavioral standards, and thus undermines internalization" (p. 68). Conversely, the finding that the use of corporal punishment does not promote cooperative, reciprocal relationships fits with the contemporary understanding of how positive parent-child relationships develop (e.g., Maccoby, 1992).

Despite the correspondence of the results and the research literature, the association between corporal punishment and child outcomes represents a good testing ground for understanding parental influence on human development. Currently, Gershoff's (2002) review provides only a snapshot linking corporal punishment with negative outcomes. A much fuller understanding is needed to explain how this one parental behavior can result in long-term outcomes. Information about the continuity and change of both the child's and the parents' behavior is needed. For children, initial child misbehavior is sometimes used as an alternative hypothesis—parents spank because they have a difficult child (Larzelere, 2000). But where did the difficultness originate? Is it a reflection of inappropriate parenting practices at an early age, the child's temperament, or perhaps a "third" variable? Do parents who spank engage in other behaviors (e.g., yelling) that contribute to the negative effects? Over time, what other child-rearing practices do parents use that may exacerbate, maintain, or even ameliorate possible prior effects of corporal punishment? Socialization research needs to address these and similar questions in more sophisticated ways and with more complex models to fully understand how this one parenting practice may affect children (Collins et al., 2000).

The Child's Perspective

Despite all the research into the effects of corporal punishment, the recipient of the disciplinary practice has been largely ignored by researchers. Although there are a few exceptions involving children's responses to vignettes (e.g., Catron & Masters, 1993) or giving older children surveys or interviews (Graziano et al., 1996; Rohner, Bourque, & Elordi, 1996), very little is known about corporal punishment from the 3- to 5-year-old child's perspective, when spanking is at its zenith (Buck et al., 2001; Straus, 2001).

Consider a spanking incident from the child's end. When a child is spanked, powerful sensory information and physiological reactions are elicited. From the child's viewpoint, corporal punishment is an assault (i.e., knowingly or intentionally causing physical pain) by a powerful adult and consequently is believed by some to be "deeply traumatic" (Straus, 2001, p. 9). Assuming the corporal punishment was executed appropriately so it was sufficiently painful, various neurophysiological stress reactions are likely to occur (see McEwen, 2001). It is likely the child then experiences intense emotional arousal and one or more particular emotions (i.e., fear, anger, humiliation, embarrassment, or perhaps sadness), though crying may be the only obvious manifestation of the distress (Graziano et al., 1996).

The child's arousal and negative emotion likely affects both the perception and acceptance of the parent's disciplinary message (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). One fundamental question that a child-oriented perspective would address is, Do children remember the nature of their transgression or simply that they were hit? Similarly, does corporal punishment, in fact, achieve the desired effect or does it breed resentment, avoidance, or even perhaps a

desire for retaliation? It is likely that children's reactions are complicated by such characteristics as age, gender, temperament, and background (e.g., Kochanska & Thompson, 1997). Nevertheless, investigating corporal punishment through the eyes of children rather than the adult is the single most pressing research need.

Gershoff's Model

Gershoff (2002) conceptualizes and organizes the research on parental use of spanking into what could be called an ecological-process model. No less than 30 variables at three different levels of analysis are identified, including 7 mediational processes in the child. Although her list is comprehensive, it is not complete. As indicated above, there are other characteristics pertinent to corporal punishment (e.g., contingency and the nature and history of the parent-child interactions). The interactional context variables, particularly the characteristics of the misbehavior that temporally precede corporal punishment, need more attention. Although the parent's emotional state and goals may affect the mediational processes, their impact has been played out prior to the outcomes. If the intent of the model was to provide a thorough listing of key variables, Gershoff largely succeeded. If the intent was to provide a process model, or the way the variables may interact, there is clearly more work to be done.

To get to the bottom of understanding how corporal punishment affects children, the key is understanding how children react physiologically, affectively, and cognitively to the disciplinary incident, as Gershoff (2002) recognized. It is likely that this reaction involves at least a two-process model: an immediate physiological and sensory reaction and then a secondary cognitive appraisal stage. Therefore, the mediational processes in the child could be divided into primary and secondary mediational processes. Most of the variables listed in the model (i.e., attributions, social information processing, social controls) fall in the secondary or cognitive appraisal phase. However, the physical and physiological effects should not be ignored. The social context of the family, the community, and the culture may well influence the cognitive appraisal process (as can be inferred from research in African American children, Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997) and, consequently, child effects.

The model can also be faulted because it does not readily translate into testable hypotheses. How and why particular mediational processes become activated and then may result, for some children, in particular outcomes needs development. However, Gershoff has set the stage for researchers to flesh out the model and figure out how to put the pieces together.

Social Policy Implications

Gershoff's (2002) meta-analytic review undoubtedly will add fuel to the impassioned debate about whether children should be spanked. Some readers will determine only that more careful research is needed. Others may conclude that given the convergence of the meta-analytic evidence with learning theory and socialization research, it is clear that customary corporal punishment of children does not accomplish the goal for which it is used. Furthermore, in some cases, customary corporal punishment carries with it unintended negative baggage that is counterproductive.

Consequently, the most prudent advice for parents would be to avoid the practice, pending the outcome of additional research.

For still other readers, Gershoff's (2002) meta-analyses represent compelling evidence that spanking can be associated with a variety of negative outcomes and thus represent a call to action. But a quandary remains for those ready to rally around the banner of social change. How does one go about changing such a normative, deeply embedded child-rearing practice? Should corporal punishment be outlawed, like Sweden and 10 other nations have done? The answer lies at both cultural and individual levels.

In the United States, it is unlikely that legislation outlawing the practice would be successful. Parents' belief in their entitlement to use corporal punishment is deeply embedded in American history, beliefs about the privacy of the family and personal freedoms, and attitudes about children and how to rear them. Rather than legislating change, a more successful but time-consuming strategy would be to focus on educating parents about the problems associated with corporal punishment. In addition, the reasons underlying parental use of the practice need to be understood and targeted. For example, corporal punishment may be used because of an instrumental goal, an instrumental religious reason, an impulsive reaction, or a lack of knowledge of alternatives. Effective education also needs to prompt parents to reflect about their use of punishment, to provide them with substitutes to corporal punishment, and to redirect them to a reward-based discipline orientation so they can feel successful in managing their children.

Conclusion

Psychologists who are concerned with children's development and promoting effective parenting would be remiss were they to advocate or justify spanking in the face of the evidence summarized by Gershoff (2002). This review reflected the growing body of evidence indicating that corporal punishment does no good and may even cause harm. To what degree it represents a "poisonous pedagogy" (Miller, 1983, p. 9) awaits future research. Although the studies need improvement and the mediational processes need explication, the weight of the available evidence, as well as theory, is clearly on the side of the negative effects of customary corporal punishment. The stakes are high for the welfare of children, of parents, and for societies committed to the ethical treatment of all individuals.

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