

# **Global perspective on corporal punishment and its effects on children**

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There are few groups as valuable to the flourishing of a society and yet more dependent on protection from that society than children. The healthy development of children is essential to the well-being of humanity. Thus, the promotion of this development must be a mandate for society. In 1989, the United Nations passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, “the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history” with 196 States having ratified the Convention (UNICEF). Despite the high rate of ratification of the Convention, the Rights of the Child has not been fully implemented world-wide and there remains much confusion and debate as to the best ways to protect children, one of most vulnerable populations on the planet. The Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 16.2, to “end all forms of violence against children,” provides a mechanism by which the world governments can better respond to and empower the Rights of the Child.

The present paper provides a global perspective on the protection of children from violence with a focus on the role of corporal punishment in the family. To do so, the paper will address the definitional distinction between corporal punishment and physical abuse, the short- and long-term effects of corporal punishment, prevalence rates of corporal punishment throughout the world, the prevalence of legal protections from corporal punishment offered to children in nations around the globe, and parenting programs that have promoted non-violent forms of discipline.

The use of corporal punishment in the home represents a convergence of factors including, but not limited to social, biological, community norms and values, and economic and political priorities. These factors influence attitudes about corporal punishment that are then associated with the use of corporal punishment within the family, the tolerance of that use by the community, the legal enforcement to protect children from, and the policies that are enacted to protect children from violence in the home. Importantly, and discussed in more depth later in this paper, decades of research have demonstrated a link between the use of corporal punishment and negative effects on children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016); however other research has revealed that these effects might be quite small (Ferguson, 2013). As such, it is essential that researchers understand the prevalence and subsequent impact of corporal punishment on children in order to educate the general public and policy makers.

## **Definitional Issues: Corporal Punishment and Physical Abuse**

Identifying definitions to distinguish corporal punishment from other forms of abuse can be difficult due to differing beliefs about the parent-child relationship and appropriate forms of discipline across countries and cultures. While countries and cultures have little difficulty in agreeing that children should not be exposed to sexual stimulation or intrusion, there is more cultural nuance in the definition of physical abuse (Freer, Sprang, & Chen, 2013) and how, or whether, corporal punishment is distinct from physical abuse. In fact, researchers with Asian populations have found that the outcome of the discipline, not the intention of the caregiver, was essential to determine child abuse determinations such that when the child suffered minor injuries from discipline with “good intentions” the behavior was labeled as excessive discipline but not abusive. However, when the discipline resulted in severe injuries the behaviors were

labeled abusive (Kwok & Tam, 2005). This real-world distinction is enigmatic of the problem in identifying the line between physical abuse and corporal punishment. The present paper defines physical abuse using the definition provided by the Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA; 2010) that defines abuse as the injury of a child on purpose, including beating, biting, kicking, striking, or any action that leads to physical injury of the child. In contrast, corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force, no matter how intense, with the intent to cause the child to experience bodily pain as a form of discipline for the child's behavior (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

Thus, there are two key distinctions inherent in these definitions: 1) physical abuse is defined by an injurious action made on the child whereas corporal punishment does not, and 2) corporal punishment is intended as a disciplinary action by the caregiver whereas physical abuse may not. Importantly, and possibly most confusing, these two definitions do not provide exclusionary criteria that prevents a disciplinary act of corporal punishment to meet the definition of physical abuse, nor for physical abuse to not have been an intended as a disciplinary function. The inability to clearly distinguish physical abuse and corporal punishment remains a controversy without a current solution. However, this definitional issue must not preclude research and policy decisions about corporal punishment.

In fact, some countries, all 5 Nordic countries for example (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) have laws that protect children from all types of physical abuse and corporal punishment, relegating the distinction between the two as immaterial (Österman, Björkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014). The approach of these Nordic countries, as well as other countries, to provide equal legal protections for children from physical abuse and corporal punishment greatly simplifies the definitional confusion, making any distinction moot, and promoting better safety from violence for children.

### **Effects of Corporal Punishment**

As mentioned previously, past research has revealed negative outcomes related to the experience of corporal punishment. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Gershoff (2002) found a strong negative association of corporal punishment with the parent-child relationship and mental health in childhood and adulthood. In addition, this research revealed that children who experienced corporal punishment reported higher levels of aggression and antisocial behavior in childhood and adulthood and that these children were more likely of being a victim of physical abuse and to become a perpetrator of physical abuse on their own child or spouse as an adult (Gershoff, 2002). However, this research did not clearly distinguish the use of corporal punishment from physical abuse and thus there was a lack of clarity as to whether corporal punishment accounted for any of these negative associations. In response, a recent meta-analysis limited corporal punishment to "spanking (defined as "hitting a child on their buttocks or extremities using an open hand;" Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016, pg. 453) to avoid the possible confounding of physical abuse in earlier findings. Similar to the earlier meta-analysis, these researchers found that spanking was associated with child outcomes of worse relationships with parents, more mental health problems, greater aggression, greater antisocial behaviors, greater externalizing and internalizing problems, lower cognitive ability, and lower self-esteem. Additionally, the researchers found an important relationship between spanking and the experience of physical abuse in which children who had experienced spanking were at greater risk to experience physical abuse by their parents. There were also long-term effects found with adults who had experienced greater spanking as a child reporting greater antisocial behaviors,

worse mental health, and greater support for the use of corporal punishment on children. These similar findings across nearly two decades suggest that the “distinction between acceptable physical punishment and unacceptable physical abuse is largely semantic; they are linked with the same detrimental outcomes for children, just to varying degrees” (Gershoff et al., 2018, pg. 632). Finally, an international study including mothers from China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand found that mothers who used corporal punishment had children with more symptoms of aggression and of anxiety (Gershoff et al., 2010).

It is important to note that some research has revealed small or no negative relationship between corporal punishment and either short- or long-term effects on children (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). This meta-analysis found that children who experienced a specific form of spanking were less likely to be noncompliant than children who received other types of discipline. However, the absence of negative outcomes associated with corporal punishment appears to be an exception within the entire body of research. Finally, and of possible greatest importance, the lack of negative outcomes associated with the use of corporal punishment was no worse than other disciplinary techniques examined, which means that corporal punishment was also no better than any other disciplinary techniques.

An additional factor that has been theorized to explain the difference in the findings of negative outcomes for children who experience corporal punishment is the culture in which a child lives. The cultural normative hypothesis (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997) states that corporal punishment may be less negatively impactful, and possibly even a positive impactful, if the use of corporal punishment is considered culturally normal. The explanation that expect and accept the corporal punishment when they misbehave. Some research has supported this hypothesis with African-American children who received corporal punishment being reported as having fewer behavioral problems than European-American children (Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997). However, a meta-analysis that included five studies found no differences between White and Black children on a variety of outcomes. An additional study revealed an interesting finding that African American and Hispanic mothers who used spanking had children with decreases in internalizing problems in the short-term but over the long-term spanking was associated with greater internalizing and externalizing problems for both groups of children. This finding indicates that while there could be short-term benefits to the use of corporal punishment, long-term effects appear to be more consistently negative. While more research needs to examine the cultural normative hypothesis, especially with international samples, current research does not support this proposed hypothesis.

In summary, though the size of the effects are unclear, the majority of past research has identified a plethora of negative associations between the use of corporal punishment and child development, while finding an absence of benefits to the use of corporal punishment nor differences based on racial or ethnic group differences. In addition, exposure to corporal punishment increases the risk for exposure to physical abuse which has been theorized to be due to an escalation in violence over time (Ateah & Durant, 2005). Taken in total, the use of corporal punishment appears to provide no meaningful benefit to child development and many deleterious effects.

### **Prevalence Rates of Corporal Punishment**

With the majority of research revealing negative short- and long-term effects associated with the use of corporal punishment, one might expect that the use of corporal punishment would be low throughout the world. However, this is far from the case. Past research on prevalence

rates has revealed rates as low as 15% in an affluent community in India to 76% in a community in the Philippines (Runyan et al., 2010) and UNICEF (2014) reporting as high as 80% of children experience corporal punishment at some time in childhood. More recent reports from UNICEF have revealed that the rates of corporal punishment vary widely across countries in 2018 with Albania and Mongolia at the lower end (48 and 49%, respectively) and Bangladesh and Iraq (89 and 81%, respectively) at the upper end. Surprisingly, the same report from UNICEF (2014) found that a minority of adults do not think that corporal punishment is a necessary disciplinary practice.

### **Prevalence of Corporal punishment laws throughout the world**

With the known negative outcomes associated with the use of corporal punishment and the high prevalence rate of corporal punishment throughout the world, the need for governmental bans on the use of corporal punishment is essential. However, this is not the case. Sweden was the first country to adopt a law prohibiting corporal punishment in 1979 and the number of countries had only risen to 5 by 1996. However, the rate of increase in countries adopting such laws has been increasing with a total of 15 countries having adopted laws by 2004, 28 by 2008, and 24 by 2012. As of 2018, 54 countries have now prohibited all corporal punishment of children with 2 more having committed to do so. While this growth is encouraging, this still means that only 10% of the world's children are currently living in a country with a law that prohibits corporal punishment (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment, 2019). As will be seen in the following section, the effectiveness and importance of a country-wide ban on corporal punishment cannot be overstated.

### **A Case Study on the Impact of a Ban on Corporal Punishment**

In 1983, Finland became the second country, after Sweden, to adopt a law prohibiting corporal punishment on children by their parents. After 28 years, the country conducted a study in Western Finland to examine the outcomes of the ban with findings subsequently published by Österman and colleagues (2014). These researchers found that there was a significant drop in the experience of corporal punishment only after the law had been passed and not in the years leading up to the ban suggesting that “a decline in physical punishment of children does not occur automatically but that the implementation of a law is necessary” (pg. 578). The study also revealed significant mental health impacts with both men and women who had experienced corporal punishment in childhood reporting more mental health problems, depression, suicidal ideation, abuse of alcohol, and marital problems resulting in divorce. These negative outcomes associated with the experience of corporal punishment further support the findings reported earlier in this paper. In total, the case study from Finland demonstrates the immense power and importance of a government banning the use of corporal punishment to promote the safety, security, and healthy development of children.

### **Effective Parenting Programs to teach non-violent discipline**

It is clear that one mechanism to protect children from the experience of corporal punishment is through legal intervention at the State-level. However, there is also evidence that parenting programs can shift attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment. For example, researchers have demonstrated that a brief intervention can reduce favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment through a written or reading assignment (Griffen, Robinson, & Carpenter, 2000; Holden, Brown, Baldwin, & Croft Cadera, 2014; Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005),

providing educational books about corporal punishment (Reich, Penner, Duncan, & Auguer, 2012), and a video-based psychoeducation to promote alternative disciplinary strategies (Scholer, Hamilton, Johnson, & Scott, 2010). One study expanded on these brief interventions to provide an hour-long motivational interview approach to mothers of children ages 3 to 5 that aimed to understand a person's perspective and promote a change in that perspective about corporal punishment (Holland & Holden, 2016). This study resulted in a decrease in favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment and intention to use corporal punishment that continued to decrease even after a 1-month follow-up. Future research, must examine whether these types of interventions can be effective in changing parental behavior in addition to attitudes and intentions. Despite a lack of research demonstrating that these interventions have reduced the use of corporal punishment, previous research has demonstrated that attitudes toward corporal punishment are highly associated with reports of spanking use (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995) and thus interventions to target attitudes remains a promising direction of intervention and research.

## **Conclusions**

The use of corporal punishment is a serious problem for the health, safety, and security of children throughout the world. Past research has clearly linked the use of corporal punishment to a multitude of both short- and long-term negative outcomes in childhood and adulthood, and the use of corporal punishment by parents increases the risk of physical abuse. It is clear that the use of violence has deleterious effects on children and States should take the initiative to pass legislation that prohibits the use of corporal punishment. Indeed, while the number of States that have passed such legislation has increased dramatically in recent years, there are still ~90% of children world-wide who are not fully protected from violence in the home (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment, 2019). This failure to achieve the goals of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and SDG 16.2 must be addressed and corrected in order for a productive and successful society.

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