



## Repeated exposure to high-frequency spanking and child externalizing behavior across the first decade: A moderating role for cumulative risk



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### ABSTRACT

This study used the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study to examine the effects of repeated exposure to harsh parenting on child externalizing behavior across the first decade of life, and a moderating role for cumulative ecological risk. Maternal report of harsh parenting, defined as high frequency spanking, was assessed at age 1, 3, 5, and 9, along with child externalizing at age 9 ( $N = 2,768$ ). Controlling for gender, race, maternal nativity, and city of residence, we found a cumulative risk index to significantly moderate the effects of repeated harsh parenting on child behavior, with the effects of repeated high-frequency spanking being amplified for those experiencing greater levels of cumulative risk. Harsh parenting, in the form of high frequency spanking, remains a too common experience for children, and results demonstrate that the effects of repeated exposure to harsh parenting across the first decade are amplified for those children already facing the most burden.

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The experience of harsh parenting, in the form of frequent physical punishment, has been consistently found to be associated with later externalizing behavior (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff, 2002; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012, 2013; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010). The importance of increasing our understanding of the links between harsh parenting and downstream child behavior is underscored by the ongoing use of frequent spanking as a parenting tool in families (Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Straus & Stewart, 1999), beginning as early as the first year of life (MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2011). This disconnect between the findings on behavioral outcomes associated with spanking and the persistent reliance on it as a tool by families has led to explicit calls in the United States and Canada for the healthcare and child welfare communities to work with families on alternative modes of discipline and positive parenting (Fletcher, 2012; Wolraich, Aceves, & Feldman, 1998).

Whether spanking per se constitutes child maltreatment is a matter of some debate (Brooks-Gunn, Schneider, & Waldfogel, 2013), but it is clear that frequent spanking, particularly in early childhood may signal elevated risk for child maltreatment (Bugental & Happaney, 2004; Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011; MacKenzie, Kotch, Lee, Augsberger, & Hutto, 2011; MacKenzie, Nicklas, et al., 2011). A range of research has demonstrated that high frequency use of physical discipline may indicate an increased likelihood of child abuse, as parental physical discipline practices escalate to abuse (Gershoff, 2002; Gil, 1973). Associations have also been found between parental beliefs in corporal

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punishment, reported stress, and physical child abuse potential (Crouch & Behl, 2001; Gershoff, 2002; Haskett, Scott, & Fann, 1995; Rodriguez, Russa, & Harmon, 2011), and child maltreatment reports (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2013).

An area where important knowledge gaps remain is in potential moderators of the association between frequent harsh parenting and externalizing behavior. In particular, the potential for broader measures of cumulative family burden and socioeconomic risk to interact with harsh parenting in its association with downstream increases in aggression and rule breaking behavior important to the onset of Conduct Disorder has been little studied. Maltreatment research has highlighted the need for considering the cumulative effects of ecological risk on the etiology of harsh parenting (Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011; Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 1998; Nair, Schuler, Black, Kettinger, & Harrington, 2003), and in our thinking about the downstream behavioral sequelae associated with maltreatment (MacKenzie, Nicklas, et al., 2011). More recently, these cumulative risk perspectives have begun to also inform our understanding of the etiology and sequelae of high frequency spanking early in development (MacKenzie et al., 2012, 2013).

Emerging from research on the etiology of heart disease (Dawber, Meadors, & Moore, 1951), the cumulative risk perspective has informed understanding of developmental psychopathology (Rutter, 1979; Sameroff, Bartko, Baldwin, Baldwin, & Seifer, 1998), and been applied across a variety of social and cognitive domains (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Dong et al., 2004; Felitti et al., 1998; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1994; Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993; Whitaker, Orzol, & Kahn, 2006). The cumulative risk perspective has provided cross-domain evidence that the total level of risk differentiates those who are at risk for a given outcome better than any single risk factor (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013; Pressman, Klebanov, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012).

The cumulative risk perspective is in keeping with important theoretical models that speak to the connection between risk and disrupted parenting processes, such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1977). Bronfenbrenner's conceptualization of the nested systems of the family's ecology suggested, particularly in early childhood, that more distal macro- and exo-system risks only impact the child to the extent that they disrupt more proximal micro-system processes, such as parenting behaviors and harshness and sensitivity. In keeping with this approach and conceptualizations of cumulative ecological risk models of child maltreatment (MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011a), the current study attempts to address current shortcomings in our understanding of the effects of frequent spanking over time, and to examine whether the effects are more detrimental in contexts of greater social risk by integrating cumulative models of ecological risk into prospective longitudinal research.

Examining the potential moderating role of cumulative ecological risk on the association of high frequency spanking with downstream child externalizing behavioral outcomes across the first decade of life represents a potentially significant step forward in our ability to understand the consequences of harsh parenting for child outcomes and the contexts in which children are likely to be most affected.

## Method

### Sample

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCW; Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). FFCW is a longitudinal birth cohort study of children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 medium to large U.S. cities. The sample is diverse and when weighted is representative of births in medium to large U.S. cities.

Baseline in-person interviews took place in the hospital shortly after the focal child was born. Follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone when the focal child was approximately 1 year-of-age, again when the child was approximately 3 years-of-age, and also when the child was approximately 5 and 9 years-of-age. In addition, in-home interviews and visits were held with the mothers and children at age 3 and 5 to supplement the phone interviews. Our study's analytic sample is limited to families in which there were valid responses on the key variables from these interviews including the 9 year-old externalizing behavior outcome variable. The resultant sample included 2,768 children and their families.

### Measures

**Harsh Parenting.** Exposure to harsh parenting was defined as the number of assessment waves where mothers reported high frequency spanking, in order to best capture the child's experience of repeated harsh parenting through age 9. Spanking was measured by a question asked of the mother at the first three waves at age 1, 3 and 5, asking; "... (i)n the past month, have you spanked (CHILD) because (HE/SHE) was misbehaving or acting up?." Mothers who reported spanking in the past month were also asked about their frequency of spanking in the past week, and those who spanked two or more times per week were considered high frequency and placed in the harsh parenting group for that particular assessment wave.

At year 9, these items were not available. However, the spanking item from the Conflict Tactics Scale for Parent and Child (CTSPC; Straus, Hamby, & Finkelhor, 1998) was available. The question asks whether the parent spanked the child with hand on bare bottom in the past year and if so, how often. The two responses representing the highest frequency of spanking (11–20 times, or more than 20 times in the past year) were coded as high frequency spanking, placing the family in the harsh parenting category.

Children could be coded as having experienced harsh parenting at 0, 1, 2, 3, or all 4 of the four assessment waves by age 9. While earlier research has demonstrated high levels of continuity of any use of spanking across the first decade, when

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