



Using baby books to change new mothers' attitudes about corporal punishment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Research has found corporal punishment to have limited effectiveness in altering child behavior and the potential to produce psychological and cognitive damage. Pediatric professionals have advocated reducing, if not eliminating its use. Despite this, it remains a common parenting practice in the US.

Methods: Using a three-group randomized design, this study explored whether embedding educational information about typical child development and effective parenting in baby books could alter new mothers' attitudes about their use of corporal punishment. Low-income, ethnically diverse women ($n = 167$) were recruited during their third trimester of pregnancy and followed until their child was 18 months old.

Results: Findings from home-based data collection throughout this period suggest that educational baby books compared with non-educational baby books or no books can reduce new mothers' support for the use of corporal punishment (respective effect sizes = .67 and .25) and that these effects are greater for African-American mothers (effect sizes = .75 and .57) and those with low levels of educational attainment (high school diploma, GED, or less) (effect sizes = .78 and .49).

Conclusion: Given their low cost and ease of implementation, baby books offer a promising way to change new mothers' attitudes and potentially reduce the use of corporal punishment with infants and toddlers.

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US parents have long supported corporal punishment as a method for disciplining children (Paolucci & Violato, 2004) and surveys have typically found that the use of corporal punishment is widespread (Gallup Organization, 1995). Corporal punishment often begins as early as infancy and, in a 1995 survey of 991 households, Straus and Stewart (1999) found that 32% of parents reported spanking their infants and 72% spanked their toddlers. This same survey found that the frequency and severity of corporal punishment peaked when children were between 3 and 5 years of age. Furthermore, younger parents, those with lower socio-economic status, and mothers in particular were more likely to use corporal punishment with their children.

While the use of corporal punishment is common, research has found negative consequences of its use for children (Slade & Wissow, 2004). A meta-analysis found corporal punishment, defined as the use of physical force in an effort to control behavior and without intention to cause harm, to be associated with increased child and later adult aggression, increased delinquent, antisocial, and criminal behavior, increased risk of abusing one's own child or spouse, reduced moral

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internalization, increased risk of being a victim, and decreased adult mental health (Gershoff, 2002). The only beneficial effect found was that corporal punishment was associated with immediate compliance.

Given the association of corporal punishment with poor psychological and behavioral outcomes, more effort has been placed on discouraging parents from using corporal punishment, especially for younger children. For instance, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that other forms of discipline be used (such as time out and redirection) and that corporal punishment not be used with infants (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998). Given its common use, and evidence of its negative impact, ways to change parents' attitudes about the use of corporal punishment appear to be warranted. One possible mechanism for reducing the use of corporal punishment, especially with very young children, could be through parental education.

Previous studies have found parent education to be beneficial for changing parental attitudes and practices about the use of corporal punishment. For instance, the Parents as Teachers program found that the use of regular parent group meetings and home visits by a certified parent educator could significantly change parental attitudes about physical forms of discipline (Wagner, Spiker, & Linn, 2002). Similarly, Nicholson, Anderson, Fox, and Brenner (2002) found that, after a 10-week parent education program, the intervention group used significantly fewer verbal and physical forms of discipline than the comparison group. Fennell and Fishel (2007) found that the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP), a 9-week parent education program, to be effective in changing parents' attitudes about their child and support of physical modes of discipline. The Nurturing Parenting Program, a program designed for adult and adolescent parents, reduced parents' support of the use of corporal punishment (Kaplan & Bavolek, 2007). Numerous other programs have found parent education to be effective in reducing the use of corporal punishment and occurrence of child maltreatment (e.g., Dubowitz, Feigelman, Lane, & Kim, 2009; Duggana et al., 2004; Huebner, 2002). However, these educational interventions tend to be time intensive and expensive to implement, suggesting that other mechanisms for educating parents should be explored.

Characteristics associated with the use of corporal punishment

Survey and intervention studies have found support for the use of corporal punishment to be greater for certain types of parents (Socolar & Stein, 1995; Straus & Stewart, 1999). In particular, African-American parents and those with low educational attainment are more likely to believe in the effectiveness of physical discipline and to use it with their children (Flynn, 1996; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007; Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998). Further, research has found that interventions focused on reducing the use of corporal punishment and increasing the use of non-physical forms of discipline may be more effective for European-American and upper and middle-class families as compared to African-American and lower class families (Heffer & Kelley, 1987). For instance, in an evaluation of Early Head Start, researchers found that, overall, the program reduced parents' use of corporal punishment as compared to families in the control group. However, when race was considered, this difference did not hold for African-American families (Administration on Children, 2001, 2002). Taking a subset of this evaluation sample, Ispa and Halgunseth (2004) found that African-American mothers often believed that corporal punishment was highly effective, that newly taught methods could be used to supplement corporal punishment but not replace it, that toddlers would not outgrow problem behavior without physical discipline, and that physical discipline would help keep children safer.

Although belief in physical discipline may be stronger in some groups, parenting interventions specifically targeting low-income and minority families have proven to be effective in reducing support of corporal punishment. For instance, Gross et al.'s (2009) 11-week program involving video taped vignettes, facilitated parent groups, and weekly homework assignments resulted in reduced use of corporal punishment for low-income, Latino and African-American parents. Similarly, Nicholson et al.'s (2002) 10-week parent program involving weekly, 90 minute facilitator-led parent groups for low-income, predominately African American parents increased knowledge about effective discipline and reduced parental stress. Myers et al.'s (1992) 15-week parent education program was effective in reducing beliefs in the use of corporal punishment for African American families. While beneficial, these parent education programs are time intensive and reliant on a facilitator to provide the intervention.

In light of the promising benefits of parent education for reducing the use of corporal punishment, this study tested whether providing educational information in the form of baby books could alter new mothers' attitudes about both parenting in general and the use of corporal punishment in particular. Baby books are relatively low cost and are not reliant on a researcher or facilitator to provide the information. Also, in light of the higher endorsement of physical discipline by African-American and less educated families, this study explored if educational baby books would be more effective in changing beliefs about corporal punishment for these specific types of parents.

Method

The NICHD-funded Baby Books Project tests whether baby books—books read by mothers to babies—are an effective way to educate new mothers about injury prevention, effective parenting, and typical child development. Taking content from the *Bright Futures Guidelines for Health Supervision* (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2008), the project embeds age-appropriate educational material into professionally illustrated books. Because baby books are written at a low reading level, have pictures to supplement the content, and tend to be read over and over again, we hypothesized that this medium would be

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