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Spanking, corporal punishment and negative long-term outcomes: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies☆

Christopher J. Ferguson *

Department of Psychology and Communication, Texas A&M International University, 5201 University Blvd., Laredo, TX, 78041, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Presents a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of negative effects of spanking.
- Spanking had a small but non-trivial negative effect on cognitive performance.
- Effects of spanking were largely trivial for other behavior problems.
- Spanking has not only few benefits, but also fewer negative consequences than often assumed.

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists continue to debate the impact of spanking and corporal punishment (CP) on negative child outcomes including externalizing and internalizing behavior problems and cognitive performance. Previous meta-analytic reviews have mixed long- and short-term studies and relied on bivariate *r*, which may inflate effect sizes. The current meta-analysis focused on longitudinal studies, and compared effects using bivariate *r* and better controlled partial *r* coefficients controlling for time-1 outcome variables. Consistent with previous findings, results based on bivariate *r* found small but non-trivial long-term relationships between spanking/CP use and negative outcomes. Spanking and CP correlated .14 and .18 respectively with externalizing problems, .12 and .21 with internalizing problems and −.09 and −.18 with cognitive performance. However, when better controlled partial *r* coefficients (*pr*) were examined, results were statistically significant but trivial (at or below *pr* = .10) for externalizing (.07 for spanking, .08 for CP) and internalizing behaviors (.10 for spanking, insufficient studies for CP) and near the threshold of trivial for cognitive performance (−.11 for CP, insufficient studies for spanking). It is concluded that the impact of spanking and CP on the negative outcomes evaluated here (externalizing, internalizing behaviors and low cognitive performance) are minimal. It is advised that psychologists take a more nuanced approach in discussing the effects of spanking/CP with the general public, consistent with the size as well as the significance of their longitudinal associations with adverse outcomes.

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* Tel.: +1 956 326 2636.
E-mail address: CJFerguson1111@aol.com.

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1. Introduction

Spanking, usually defined as a mild open-handed strike to the buttocks or extremities (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996; McLoyd & Smith, 2002), and corporal punishment, which also includes more severe use of physical punishments, such as striking the face, hitting with an object or shaking or pushing a child, have been issues for considerable debate in social science and in the general public. The American Academy of Pediatrics has counseled against the use of spanking as a disciplinary strategy, citing potential negative child outcomes such as increased aggressiveness and potential physical harm to the child (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998). Sweden was the first country to ban spanking, eventually leading the way for a total of 32 countries that do not allow the use of corporal punishment in the home (GITEACPOC, 2012).

Several prominent family violence scholars have been passionate in advocating against the use of spanking. Writing for the general public, psychologist Alan Kazdin (2008) claimed that spanking is linked with a host of negative outcomes ranging from aggression, poor academic performance and depression in childhood to "poor physical-health outcomes (cancer, heart disease, chronic respiratory disease)" in adulthood. Others such as sociologist Murray Straus (2008) have argued that corporal punishment is one of the key originating variables related to a wide range of violence related outcomes.

Despite calls against spanking and corporal punishment, these disciplinary practices remain in wide use, particularly within the United States where one recent study suggested that 65% of 3-year-olds had been spanked in the previous month (Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010). Yet, concerns have been expressed that causal links between spanking and negative outcomes may have been exaggerated (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002; Morris & Gibson, 2011), with problems in measurement and proper statistical controls inflating estimates of harm. Thus considerable debate remains regarding the impact of spanking and corporal punishment on long-term outcomes. The current study seeks to address some of the gaps in the literature by conducting a meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies of spanking and corporal punishment (CP).

2. The debate on spanking and corporal punishment (CP)

As noted in the first lines of this paper spanking and CP are not synonymous. Spanking generally is used to refer to relatively mild physical punishment using an open hand on the buttocks or extremities. Corporal punishment generally is used to refer to a broader class of behaviors. Spanking may be included within CP but CP generally also includes hitting with an object such as a switch, shaking, pushing, slapping the face, etc. Nonetheless it is further necessary to clarify that CP does not include highly injurious child abuse such as causing serious lacerations or broken bones. Therefore any conclusions about spanking and CP should not be extended to more serious forms of child abuse.

Although debates about spanking are not new (the American Psychological Association passed a resolution condemning corporal punishment in schools as far back as 1975) a useful starting point to understanding recent debates probably begins with Gershoff's (2002a) meta-analytic review of CP studies. As a technical note, Gershoff reported her results using the effect size index "d" although in most cases this was calculated from correlation (r) values. Effect sizes r and d are readily convertible from one to another, and as might be expected, randomized experiments on spanking/CP are very few. As such I use the effect size "r" consistently through the manuscript, converting from d where necessary for ease of communication. Gershoff linked CP with increased aggression ($r = .18$, i.e., $d = .36$) and decreased mental health ($r = -.24$) in childhood. Longer term effects on aggression appeared to remain consistent ($r = .27$), although deleterious effects on mental health declined long-term ($r = -.05$). However, these longer term effects are based on a combination of retrospective (89%) and longitudinal (11%) studies, and only 13% of all the effect sizes in the Gershoff meta-analysis were longitudinal in nature. A later meta-analysis by Paolucci and Violato (2004) found lower effect sizes ($r = .10$ for externalizing problems; $r = .10$ for internalizing problems and $r = .03$ for cognitive problems). Both meta-analyses concluded that CP could have small but significant deleterious effects on child outcomes. It is worth noting, however, that all the adverse effect sizes in Gershoff (2002a) and probably in Paolucci and Violato (2004) were based on bivariate r correlations, presumably to maintain homogeneity between the effect size estimates across all types of studies.

Several scholars have remained skeptical of claims of causal harm due to spanking and CP, however (Baumrind et al., 2002; Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 2006; Larzelere, 2008). For instance a further meta-analysis by Larzelere and Kuhn (2005) found that negative effects for spanking differ very little from other disciplinary strategies. Specifically, although overly severe CP was related to more negative outcomes than disciplinary alternatives, conditional spanking had better outcomes than 10 of 13 non-physical discipline alternatives such as ignoring or privilege removal. Concerns with Gershoff's analyses and many of the studies which underlie her analysis include:

1) Conflation of spanking with more severe forms of corporal punishment. It has been contended that measures, have not carefully distinguished between various types of physical punishment, particularly in earlier studies. Conflating severe forms of CP with spanking may result in inflated effect sizes.
2) The temporal order of spanking and negative outcomes is not well documented. From cross-sectional correlational studies, it is not possible to determine whether spanking and CP lead to negative outcomes, or whether children with greater problem behaviors are more likely to be spanked. One way of establishing the temporal order is through the use of longitudinal designs. If time-1 spanking/CP to be found to predict time-2 outcomes the argument that spanking/CP comes first in the temporal order is strengthened. Although both Gershoff (2002a) and Paolucci and Violato (2004) included longitudinal studies in their analyses, they consisted of a minority of their studies and their effect sizes were not well distinguished from cross-sectional or retrospective designs. In Gershoff, 13% of the reported effect sizes were from longitudinal studies, with 21.8% of the studies included in Paolucci and Violato being of longitudinal design.
3) Controlling third variables. As Baumrind et al. (2002) point out, effect sizes based on bivariate correlations (as those in Gershoff, 2002a, appear to be) run the risk of inflating effect size estimate due to failure to control for other relevant variables. The use of