



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect



Predictors of mothers' use of spanking with their infants[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 January 2007

Received in revised form 13 June 2007

Accepted 1 August 2007

Available online 20 June 2008

Keywords:

Infant

Spanking

Corporal punishment

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study describes mothers who report spanking their infants in the first 13 months of life.

Methods: Two hundred forty-six (246) mothers were interviewed in the Mother-Baby Unit of a large university-affiliated hospital in a large southeastern city of the United States. Ninety-three percent (93%) of those mothers were reinterviewed in their homes when infants were 6–13 months of age.

Results: Younger mothers, those who endorsed fewer alternatives to corporal punishment, and those who experienced their infants as “difficult” were significantly more likely to spank their infants.

Conclusions: The findings suggest the importance of more anticipatory guidance from physicians, nurses, social workers, and other professionals about discipline in the first few months of life, particularly given the risks associated with spanking infants and popular support for corporal punishment.

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There is considerable controversy among pediatricians and other professionals about the advisability of corporal punishment of children—the term “corporal punishment” or “physical punishment” is used here to refer to nonabusive “ordinary” physical punishment that does not cause injury (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003; Trumbull, Larzelere, Wolraich, & Trumbull, 1999). The topic was not even considered to be in the realm of pediatric professional concern up until the 1920s and 1930s and the advent of Freudian psychiatry and growing public awareness of research and practical applications from the child development field (Evans & Fargason, 1998). Even up until the 1950s and the popularity of Dr. Benjamin Spock's (1955) child-rearing advice, corporal punishment was accepted as an appropriate form of child guidance. After the 1960s and the “discovery” of child abuse, experts began to discuss negative emotional, behavioral, and relationship effects of corporal punishment, and Evans and Fargason (1998) note that the pediatric literature began to discuss the “permissible administration of physical discipline” (p. 365).

Currently, there is limited consensus among pediatricians and professionals about the advisability of corporal punishment, particularly for the developmental span of from toddlerhood through early adolescence; the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends encouraging parents to use other methods (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 1998). Nevertheless, professional consensus is not clear and, based partly on mixed research (Flynn, 1996a, 1996b), Baumrind (1996) declared that “A blanket injunction against disciplinary use of spanking is not warranted by the data” (p. 828).

[☆] This work was funded by grants from: the National Institute of Mental Health, NIH R24 MH53623, “Children's Mental Health Services Research Center”, the Mruz Family Foundation, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Problems, and the Office of Research and College of Social Work, University of Tennessee.

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Gershoff (2002) conducted 11 separate meta-analyses of relationships between corporal punishment (excluding studies that might have included physical abuse) and frequently associated child constructs, including both positive (immediate compliance, moral internalization, quality of parent–child relationship, and mental health) and negative constructs (aggression, criminal and anti-social behavior, abuse of own child or spouse, and victim of abuse by own parent). Based on 88 included studies of 36,309 total participants, she found corporal punishment to be associated with 10 undesirable outcomes: decreased moral internalization, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behavior, decreased quality of parent–child relationship, less optimal child mental health, increased victimization of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and anti-social behavior, less optimal adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. The only significant relationship with a positive outcome was with immediate compliance.

Despite lack of consensus about corporal punishment overall, however, there does appear to be agreement against the use of corporal punishment with infants. The American Academy of Pediatrics specifically warns against corporal punishment with infants (Consensus Statements, 1996) based on the risk of escalation and injury and the fact that infants cannot recognize the connection between behavior and punishment and thus are incapable of modifying their behavior in response. Others also cite risks to infants' sense of security and attachment to their parents associated with physical discipline (Coyl, Roggman, & Newland, 2002; Slade & Wissow, 2004). The AAP's Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health (1998) recommends that early discipline be based on the structuring of routines and the environment to keep infants safe. "A firm 'no' helps prepare an infant for reasoning, but parents should not expect it to control infants' and toddlers' behavior" (p. 723).

A review of recently published research about corporal punishment reveals very little specifically about the physical punishment of infants, but several studies indicate that a substantial minority of parents use spanking as a disciplinary method with infants. For example, Wissow (2002) reported from the Commonwealth Fund Survey of Parents with Young Children that 11% of parents of 6–11-month-old infants (and 2% of parents of infants younger than 6 months) reported spanking in the previous week. Slade and Wissow (2004) reported from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth that about 40% of parents of children from birth to age 2 reported spanking their children in the previous week. Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, and Halfon (2004) reported from the 2000 National Survey of Early Childhood Health that 6% reported spanking their 4–9-month-old infants and 29% reported spanking their 10–18-month olds.

On the other hand, there is evidence that American parents' opinions about and use of corporal punishment may be changing, partly in response to mass media campaigns against child abuse (Simpson, 1997). In 1997, Daro reported a 16% drop since 1988 in parents who reported hitting their children, but more recent national data do not appear to be available. In the face of perceptions of increases in youth violence due to public events such as Columbine, it is possible that opinions have shifted again toward stricter discipline in the home (Chenoweth & Just, 2000).

Research has provided little information about why parents use physical punishment with infants. Both Flynn's (1996a, 1996b) and Gershoff's (2002) reviews of the literature for children of all ages demonstrated that parents who were physically punished themselves as children and members of conservative Protestant churches, less educated and younger parents, and those who lived in the Southern region of the United States expressed more favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment.

Gershoff's (2002) meta-analysis of factors related to corporal punishment found inconsistent relationships between race and the approval and use of corporal punishment, with some studies showing that African-American and Hispanic parents are most likely to use corporal punishment, others showing European-Americans to be most likely, and others showing no relationship between corporal punishment and race/ethnicity. Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, and Pettinari (1999) assert that African-American culture is supportive of mild, non-abusive corporal punishment, eschewing a "reasoning" approach because of the potential for verbal abuse.

Socolar and Stein's (1995) research with mothers of infants and toddlers is consistent with the overall literature in showing maternal beliefs about corporal punishment to be powerful predictors of whether they spank their infants. They interviewed 204 eligible mothers of 1–4-year-olds in two pediatric waiting rooms, one public and one private. The mothers were 48% white, 26% Hispanic, and 21% African-American overall, with considerable diversity in marital status, age, education, and household income. Questions about beliefs were based on vignettes and a series of questions written by the authors.

The majority of mothers believed in spanking toddlers, but there was greater support for spanking older compared to younger children. (It is important to note that the children in this study were toddlers, rather than infants.) Mothers were more inclined to support spanking in response to dangerous child behaviors and if they themselves were spanked as children. Spanking behavior was related to belief in spanking, receiving care in the public site (a proxy for low income), older age of child, and maternal history of being spanked as a child.

Wissow's (2002) discussion of the Commonwealth Study of Parents of Young Children also addressed parents' motivations for using physical punishment. Parental depression, gender, marital status, employment, and race were not related to spanking children under 1 year of age. Controlling for other variables, parental age and education also were not related, though parents in the middle range of income were less likely to spank infants. The single most powerful predictor of spanking infants was parents' frustration or aggravation with their infants' behavior.

Vittrup, Holden, and Buck (2006) studied the emergence of various types of discipline over time. Beginning with 132 mothers, they surveyed mothers every 6 months (when children were from 12 months to 4 years of age) about their attitudes and use of physical punishment and other types of discipline. At 12 months of age, 14% of mothers reported spanking their infants with their hands, and another 21% reported slapping their children's hands. Positive attitudes toward corporal punishment at 12 months, as measured by the Parental Response to Child Misbehavior questionnaire (PRCM; Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995), significantly predicted spanking at each data collection point.

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