What predicts injury from physical punishment?
A test of the typologies of violence hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examined the power of child, perpetrator, and socio-economic characteristics to predict injury in cases of reported child physical abuse. The study was designed to assess the validity of the assumption that physically injurious incidents of child physical abuse are qualitatively different from those that do not result in injury, that their generative factors are distinctive, and that the quality of caregiving in these two types of incidents is different.

Method: A weighted, nationally representative sample of 8,164 substantiated punishment abuse cases in Canada was used. Various models were constructed and evaluated through logistic regression.

Results: Of six potential predictors – child age, perpetrator sex, child functioning, parent functioning, economic stress, and social stress – none predicted injury to the child.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that injurious and non-injurious physical abuse cannot be distinguished on the basis of the personal characteristics or circumstances of the child or perpetrator.

Practice implications: A common criterion for child welfare intervention into cases of suspected physical abuse is injury or risk of injury. This criterion assumes that injurious and non-injurious assaults are qualitatively different phenomena, predicted by different risk factors. In the present study an attempt was made to differentiate between injurious and non-injurious cases of punitive physical abuse on the basis of characteristics of the child, perpetrator, family, and social context. None of these factors explained the likelihood of injury, suggesting that the prediction of injury as an intervention criterion may be questionable.

Introduction

Throughout the literature on physical punishment, a recurrent theme is the perceived need to distinguish physical punishment from physical abuse. The point at which punishment begins to shade into abuse is subjectively and culturally defined, and the subject of considerable debate in many countries (Graziano, 1994). Some have attempted to draw this line on the basis of, for example, the caregiver's intent, the use of objects versus hands, or the part of the body struck. None of these criteria have proven to be useful (Durrant, 2002). In an effort to make this line "objective," many researchers have used

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physical injury to delineate the point at which punishment can be distinguished from abuse (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Kempe & Helfer, 1972; NCCAN, 1992; Rimer & Prager, 1998).

The equation of physical abuse with injury is predominant in the medical community (Tower, 2002) and in the courts (Wolfe, 1999). Injury, or risk of injury, also is a primary criterion for identifying a child in need of protection (George & Mains, 1979; McDonald & Marks, 1991; Sigurdson & Reid, 1996; Simons, Downs, Hurster, & Archer, 1966). Child protective service investigations, therefore, often require child welfare workers to assess the risk of harm to the child in making their decisions (Camasso & Jagannathan, 1995; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1994; Meddin, 1985).But how is this to be done? Are physically injurious incidents qualitatively different from those that do not result in injury? Are the generative factors that give rise to injurious and non-injurious incidents somehow distinctive? Is the quality of caregiving that forms the backdrop of these incidents different? Perhaps injury is more the result of chance, accident, or the child's relative size than of differences in caregiving or caregivers' qualities.

Theoretical perspectives on injurious child physical abuse

Theorists in the field of child maltreatment have presented two primary positions on the question of non-injurious versus injurious (or minor versus severe) violence. One position holds that most physical violence against children is generated from the same source – the use of physical force to control the child's behavior. According to this view, all physical violence against children, with rare exceptions, falls along a *continuum of force* used to discipline the child (Coontz & Martin, 1988; Gil, 1970; Graziano, 1994; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Parke & Collmer, 1975; Trocmé & McPhee, 1995; Trocmé et al., 2001). The other position holds that minor and severe violence are separate phenomena, originating in qualitative differences among caregivers' circumstances and motivations. According to this view, minor and severe assaults are different *typologies of violence* (Gelles, 1991; Strassberg, Dodge, & Pettit, 1994; Straus & Gelles, 1986).

The continuum of violence position

According to the *continuum of violence* position, the point at which punishment shades into abuse is subjectively and culturally defined (Graziano, 1994). This view holds that punishment and abuse cannot be distinguished on the basis of caregiver intent, the nature of the act, or other characteristics. Rather, punishment and abuse are inextricably linked and largely overlapping constructs (Bavolek & Henderson, 1990; Garbarino, 1977; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Gil, 1974; Greven, 1991; Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1991; Straus & Kantor, 1994; Vasta, 1982; Whipple & Richey, 1997). Wolfe (1999), for example, argues that abusive and nonabusive parenting are not qualitatively distinct; rather they exist along a hypothetical continuum of aversive control and self-restraint.

Support for this position comes from studies demonstrating that support for, and use of, physical punishment itself is a primary predictor of abusive behavior. For example, parenting stress predicts child abuse potential only among parents who believe in the value of physical punishment (Crouch & Behl, 2001). Other evidence suggests that the more physical punishment one experiences in childhood, the stronger is one's approval of interpersonal violence which, in turn, increases the likelihood that one will be physically abusive toward one's child (Straus, 1994).

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that most physical abuse takes place within the context of punishment (Coontz & Martin, 1988; Gil, 1970; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Parke & Collmer, 1975; Trocmé & Durrant, 2003; Trocmé & McPhee, 1995; Zigler & Hall, 1989). In a recent meta-analysis, Gershoff (2002) examined the relationships between physical punishment and eleven outcomes. The relation between physical punishment and physical abuse (defined as 'the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking or otherwise harming a child) had one of the largest effect sizes. A significant relationship was found between physical punishment and physical abuse in all of the ten studies examined (Gershoff, 2002).

Such findings suggest that physical punishment and child abuse are not separate phenomena, differently motivated and executed, but that they are constructs defined primarily in terms of the degree of physical harm sustained by the child. If this is the case, then injury may be dependent primarily on the size and strength of the child relative to the adult in any given incident involving physical punishment.

The typologies of violence position

In contrast, the *typologies of violence* position holds that there are two continua: one that operates when parents are rational and clear about the behavior they wish to change; and a second that operates when parents are out of control, and reacting to various factors and not to the child alone (Williams, 1984). According to this view, different patterns of factors underlie different types of violence. For example, Strassberg et al. (1994) examined the relation between parental spanking and other physical punishment of preschool children and children's aggressive behavior toward peers in kindergarten. The findings indicated that parents who spank have children who aggress toward peers more than children with nonspanking parents, but less than children with violent parents.

In a review of studies examining trends in violence toward children over time, Gelles (1991) concluded that the findings support the typologies position. For example, an analysis of two parent self-report surveys conducted 10 years apart (in 1975 and 1985) revealed no change in the rate of overall violence toward children, but a 47% decrease in very severe violence