



Wait until your father gets home? Mother's and fathers' spanking and development of child aggression



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether fathers' and mothers' spanking contributed to development of child aggression in the first 5 years of life. We selected parents ($N = 1,298$) who were married or cohabiting across all waves of data collection. Cross-lagged path models examined fathers', mothers', and both parents' within-time and longitudinal associations between spanking and child aggression when the child was 1, 3, and 5 years of age. Results indicated that mothers spanked more than fathers. When examining fathers only, fathers' spanking was not associated with subsequent child aggression. When examining both parents concurrently, only mothers' spanking was predictive of subsequent child aggression. We found no evidence of multiplicative effects when testing interactions examining whether frequent spanking by either fathers or mothers was predictive of increases in children's aggression. This study suggests that the processes linking spanking to child aggression differ for mothers and fathers.

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1. Introduction

Most American parents use spanking, defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling a child's behavior,” (Donnelly & Straus, 2005, p. 3) to discipline children. Studies show that spanking often begins early and occurs frequently. In one study that used the dataset examined in the present study (Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, or FFCWS), approximately one-third of mothers reported that they had spanked their 1-year-old child in the past month (Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012). Other research showed that 70% of mothers indicated they had spanked their child at least once by the time he or she was 2-years-old (Zolotor, Robinson, Runyan, Barr, & Murphy, 2011). In another FFCWS study that examined frequency of spanking by both mothers and fathers, the majority of three-year-olds (68%) were spanked at least once in the previous month by a parent, with a third of children spanked 1 to 2 times and two thirds of children spanked 3 or more times in the previous month (Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013). By age 9 or 10, up to 94% of children have been spanked at least once in their lifetime (Straus & Stewart, 1999). For the most part, prior studies examining the effects of spanking on child wellbeing have focused on mothers' use of the practice (for exceptions see Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013); much less is known about the potential impacts of fathers' use of discipline. In the current study we address this gap and utilize a transactional parent-child framework to extend

prior research regarding the nature of mother, father, and child relationships in the first five years of life.

1.1. Transactional models across the first five years

A growing body of empirical research indicates that spanking is associated with the development of children's aggressive and antisocial behavior (Berlin et al., 2009; Gershoff, 2002; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004; Lansford et al., 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). A recent FFCWS study showed that early maternal spanking is linked to children's behavioral problems through the first decade of life (MacKenzie et al., 2013). One reason for this link may be that parents' use of spanking models the use of aggression to solve problems (Bandura, 1973), and children imitate their parents' use of aggression to solve their own conflicts or disagreements with peers and siblings. Furthermore, family coercion theory suggests that when parents use aggression or other forms of coercion to deal with problems, children may, over time, become resistant to its effects. As a result, the use of spanking is likely to escalate in frequency and severity, partly in response to children's increased misbehavior, whether real or perceived by the parent (Patterson, 1982).

Such coercive family processes are developed and maintained through transactional processes between parent and child that unfold over time (Sameroff, 2009). Indeed, empirical evidence supports the presence of transactional mechanisms. First, after accounting for the child's initial level of aggressive behavior or difficult temperament,

prior studies using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study's Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) and FFCWS have shown that spanking is associated with subsequent increases in child aggression in the first few years of life (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). This is true in studies with direct pathways accounting for the influence of child behavior on mothers' parenting (Gershoff et al., 2012; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012) and in the context of a parenting relationship high in maternal warmth (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013). Similar transactional processes have been shown in studies of the Child Development Project and the Pitt Mother-Child Project with respect to the use of spanking and harsh discipline and increased risk for child antisocial behavior during the elementary and middle school years (Lansford et al., 2011).

Second, mothers appear to use more spanking with children whom they rate as having difficult temperaments, and mothers increase their use of spanking over time in response to children's increased aggression. A study by Berlin et al. (2009) showed that child fussiness at age 1 was related to more spanking and verbal punishment of the child at age 3. Similarly, negative child emotionality at age 1 has been associated with increased maternal spanking at age 3, and higher levels of child aggression at age 3 have been found to predict maternal spanking at age 5 (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). Such studies provide evidence supporting the basic tenets of the coercive family-process model (Patterson, 1982). Children respond to mothers' greater use of physical discipline by becoming more aggressive, and it appears that mothers subsequently increase their reliance on spanking in response to children's aggressive misbehavior.

However, prior transactional processes studies of spanking and the development of child aggression have not included fathers (e.g., Berlin et al., 2009; Gershoff et al., 2012; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, children in two-parent families are likely to be spanked by both parents (Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010). In addition, there is reason to believe that fathers' disciplinary practices have a significant influence on children's wellbeing. For example, one study showed fathers' permissive discipline, but not mothers', was associated with preschool children's higher levels of externalizing behavior problems (Jewell, Krohn, Scott, Carlton, & Meinz, 2008). In two prior studies that examined fathers separately (i.e., not accounting for maternal influences), fathers' spanking was associated with increased child aggression in pre-school (Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013) and adolescence (Prinz, Onghena, & Hellinckx, 2006). However, these studies did not examine mothers' and fathers' spanking together, and so could not isolate the relative contribution of each parent. Since mothers' and fathers' use of spanking is correlated (Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013) not estimating the effects of both together may potentially overestimating the influence of one or the other parent's use of spanking.

Furthermore, although traditional gender roles position mothers as nurturing caregivers and fathers as breadwinners and disciplinarians (Ferrari, 2002), studies suggest that mothers spank more frequently than fathers (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Straus & Stewart, 1999). This may be due to the fact that mothers spend more time with young children (Craig, 2006; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001) and therefore have more opportunities to engage in discipline than do fathers. However, even though fathers seem to spank less than mothers, it is not known whether fathers' use of spanking has equal salience given the perception of their roles as differing from that of mothers—particularly the perception of their role as disciplinarian within the family context.

1.2. The current study

Given that the literature on spanking has almost exclusively focused on mothers, our primary research question was to examine whether

paternal spanking predicts increased child aggression over time, and whether paternal spanking is reactive to children's aggression in the same way that maternal spanking has been found to be (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). Our first step was to extend prior studies that showed links between fathers' spanking and child aggression by analyzing the extent to which father-child associations may be transactional or reciprocal, that is, the extent to which fathers' use of spanking is influenced by changes in child aggression. We used cross-lagged path models to examine whether changes in fathers' use of spanking between ages 1 and 3 had a significant influence on the development of child aggression at age 3 and changes in child aggression between ages 3 and 5, and the extent to which child aggression at age 3 influenced changes in fathers' use of spanking between ages 3 and 5. We control for child temperament because even in infancy some parents react to difficult or "fussy" child temperament with spanking and harsh punishment (Martorell & Bugental, 2006). Guided by theory and prior studies showing strong evidence of transactional processes in mother-child associations, we hypothesized that fathers' use of spanking would be associated with increased child aggression at subsequent ages, and that higher levels of child aggression would be predictive of fathers' more frequent use of spanking at subsequent ages.

We also show these transactional processes for mothers in our sample of two-parent families. We present this model as a point of comparison for our father models, noting that our model replicates prior research that has established the existence of transactional mother-child processes (e.g., Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Maguire-Jack et al., 2012). The current sample differs from prior studies in that it included only mothers who were in two-parent families.

In our final research question, we examined whether spanking by fathers had associations with child aggression that explained unique variance in child aggression *beyond* effects of maternal influences. To answer this question, we tested a model that included cross-lags between paternal and maternal spanking and children's aggression over time. We also examined multiplicative and additive effects of fathers' and mothers' spanking, specifically whether frequent spanking by either parent was predictive of increases in children's aggression and whether more spanking by both parents lead to more child aggression. With very little prior research examining both fathers' and mothers' spanking and potential differential effects by gender of parent, our analyses were guided by the expectation that the influence of fathers and mothers would be similar.

Even in two-parent households, mothers spend more time with children (Craig, 2006; Yeung et al., 2001), and mothers and fathers may differ in their estimates of fathers' involvement (Mikelson, 2008). Therefore, we control for fathers' and mothers' self-reports of their involvement in daily activities with the child, including routine caregiving and play. We control for symptoms of depression as well as parenting stress and alcohol consumption because studies of mothers (Farmer & Lee, 2011; Silverstein, Augustyn, Young, & Zuckerman, 2009; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009) and fathers (Davis, Davis, Freed, & Clark, 2011; Lee, Perron, Taylor, & Guterman, 2011; Reeb et al., 2014; Wilson & Durbin, 2010) have linked these factors to poorer parenting and physical punishment of young children. Furthermore, maternal distress and depression (Ciciolla, Gerstein, & Crnic, 2013; Goodman et al., 2011; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010) are direct and mediating factors linked to the development of child aggression. Given the nature of our sample, which consisted of two-parent families, we also controlled for parental IPV, or the presence of psychological aggression between parents (Taylor et al., 2010) and lower overall parental relationship quality (Taylor et al., 2010; Verhoeven, Junger, van Aken, Dekovic, & van Aken, 2010) are associated with greater spanking and punishment of children; these factors have also been linked to higher levels child aggression (Ehrensaft & Cohen, 2012; Kim, Lee, Taylor, & Guterman, 2014). To the extent possible with the FFCWS data, we used fathers' report of his behavior. Although mothers are mostly accurate in their

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