



Research article

Changing attitudes about spanking among conservative Christians using interventions that focus on empirical research evidence and progressive biblical interpretations



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ABSTRACT

This study examined how interventions that include either empirical research evidence about spanking, progressive biblical interpretations, or both, affect attitudes and intentions about spanking. A sample of 129 college students (70% female; 30% male; $M_{age} = 19$) attending a private, Christian university was randomly assigned to one of three intervention conditions: (1) Research Only, (2) Religion Only, or (3) Research and Religion. Four weeks prior to the intervention sessions, students completed a Demographic Form, the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Spanking (ATS) scale. Following the intervention, students completed the ATS scale a second time. A two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for the intervention condition and an interaction effect between intervention condition and religious fundamentalism, indicating that positive spanking attitudes declined most significantly in the Research and Religion intervention condition ($F(2, 123) = 4.05, p = .02, hp^2 = .06$) with the greatest change in attitudes among the Religious Fundamentalism Group in that condition ($F(2, 123) = 4.50, p = .01, hp^2 = .07$). A second two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for Conservative Protestant Affiliation ($F(2, 123) = 4.39, p = .04, hp^2 = .03$) indicating that positive spanking attitudes declined most significantly for participants identifying with a conservative religious affiliation. Overall, the findings suggest that, especially among Conservative Protestants, interventions that focus on both empirical research and progressive biblical interpretations of scripture can reduce positive attitudes toward, and intentions to use, spanking. This study has implications for decreasing spanking use among Conservative Christians and for the development of training programs to reduce parents' use of spanking.

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1. Introduction

Physical punishment of children, defined as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort” (UNCRC, 2007, p. 4), is common around the world (UNICEF, 2014). Spanking is the most common form of physical punishment of children and typically refers to hitting a child with an open hand. Spanking is particularly common and culturally accepted in the U.S. In the 2014 General Social Survey, for example, almost three-fourths of Americans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good,

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hard spanking” (Smith, Hout, Marsden, & Kim, 2015). In addition, the vast majority of American parents have spanked their children at some point during childhood. In a national survey, Gershoff and colleagues found that 80% of mothers of 3rd graders reported spanking their child at some point, and 27% reported spanking their child in the previous week (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012).

Although spanking is common, particularly among U.S. parents, it has been the focus of significant attention by social scientists, mostly because of concerns about its impact on children’s development. Historically, social science researchers have hotly contested research findings in this area (see Ferguson, 2013; Gershoff, 2010, 2013; Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010). In recent years, however, the controversy over the effects of spanking appears to be waning. A comprehensive review of the research evidence on physical punishment of children in general, and spanking in particular, suggests that not only is physical punishment ineffective, or at least no more effective than non-physical punishment, but it is also potentially harmful to children’s development (for reviews see Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Straus, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014). Spanking and hitting children is associated with adverse effects on such important outcomes as children’s aggressive behavior, mental health, and relationships with parents (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). In addition, spanking is associated with increased risk for physical abuse (i.e., physical injury). In a recent meta-analysis examining 50 years of research on outcomes associated with spanking, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) found that of all of the outcomes studied, physical abuse victimization was linked most strongly with spanking. These conclusions are based on recent studies that include methodologically sophisticated research designs that control for directionality of effects (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). There are those who continue to argue that the negative effects of spanking are exaggerated, that a causal link between spanking and behavioral problems is yet to be established (i.e., arguing, essentially, that spanking is the effect, not the cause, of behavioral problems), and that the positive effects are ignored (Ferguson, 2013; Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010). In general, however, the research suggests that although a single variable’s cause and effect relation does not always work universally for complex matters related to human development and behavior, the preponderance of evidence suggests that physical punishment places children at risk for negative developmental outcomes.

For some, the issues of potential harm and ineffectiveness are secondary to a larger issue: physical punishment of children is a violation of their human rights (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Melton, 2008). In other words, these scholars are suggesting that children have a *right* not to be hit. A number of international conventions and charters have condemned physical punishment as a form of violence against children (Bitensky, 2006; Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Newell, 2013). For example, Article 19 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted in 1989 by the UN General Assembly, obligates ratifying states to take “all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). More than 50 countries now prohibit all physical punishment, including in the home (Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment of Children, 2017).

In large part as a result of research findings and human rights arguments, organizations concerned with the welfare of children and their members have voiced concerns about the use of physical punishment. In a survey of members of the American Psychological Association, for example, Miller-Perrin (2016) found that 86% of psychologists indicated that psychologists should never recommend that parents spank their children. Furthermore, the same survey found that the majority (77%) believed it was unethical for a mental health professional to suggest spanking to a parent. Several professional organizations have issued statements, based on the empirical research evidence related to spanking, recommending that parents not physically punish their children, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (1998), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2012), and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (2016). There is, therefore, growing agreement among professionals who work with children that parents should avoid using physical punishment and adopt more constructive and effective approaches. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently called for educational initiatives to reduce support for and use of physical punishment (Fortson, Kleven, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016).

1.1. Interventions directed at changing attitudes about spanking

Since pro-spanking attitudes strongly predict use of physical punishment (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006), changing attitudes about spanking is an important strategy to help prevent it. Several studies, all of them randomized controlled trials, suggest that access to new information can alter attitudes about physical punishment (Holden, Brown, Baldwin, & Caderao, 2014; Holland & Holden, 2016; Reich, Penner, Duncan, & Auger, 2012; Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005; Romano, Bell, & Norian, 2013). Although each of these research-driven interventions has met with some success, none of them addresses contextual factors that are associated with spanking such as various cultural and/or religious beliefs and practices. Spanking attitudes and behaviors vary by race, ethnicity, and religion (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Gershoff et al., 2012; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2011).

Religious affiliation and belief is one cultural variable that has been strongly associated with spanking but has been largely understudied. Christians generally, and conservative Protestants specifically, are significantly more likely than other parents to support and practice physical punishment (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007; Vieth, 2014). Several Bible verses, primarily in the Old Testament book of Proverbs, have been paraphrased and interpreted by some Christians as a mandate to spank: “he who spares the rod, spoils the child” (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). In addition, many conservative Protestants believe that children are prone to egocentrism and sinfulness, and parents must therefore shape

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