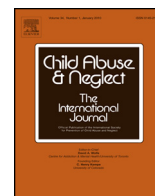




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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# How do parents label their physical disciplinary practices? A focus on the definition of corporal punishment

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### ABSTRACT

The lack of consensus about the definition of corporal punishment (CP) contributes to the varying research findings and fuels the debate surrounding its use. Related to the problem of definitional variability is also the possibility that some parents may not be aware that their physical disciplinary strategies (PDS) are forms of CP. As a first step to move beyond the debate and to tailor educational efforts to change cultural norms and parents' behaviors, the objective of the current study was to clarify what parents self-label as CP. Using a sample of 338 Canadian parents, the study assessed the relationship between endorsement of CP and self-reports of specific PDS ranging in level of severity. Predictors (i.e., cultural norms, attitudes toward and childhood experiences of CP) of this relationship were investigated. Results revealed that general questions on CP may best reflect parental use of milder forms of PDS, such as spanking ( $\Phi = 0.62$ ;  $r = -0.65$ ) and slapping on the hand, arm, or leg ( $r = -0.47$ ). Results also suggested that some parents (19.8%) do not endorse CP but use mild PDS. To move beyond the debate and to reach parents at risk of underreporting their use of CP, educational messages need to be tailored to specific and mild forms of PDS rather than to broad concepts such as CP. Moreover, factors such as attitudes toward corporal punishment ( $p < 0.001$ ) can help identify those parents who use PDS but who do not endorse CP.

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## 1. Introduction

Corporal punishment (CP) is a topic that generates much controversy. Since 1979, 51 countries have followed Sweden's lead to prohibit CP, covering about 10% of the global child population ([Global Initiative to End All CP of Children, 2017](#)). Although CP has been identified as a developmental risk factor that violates children's rights ([Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006](#)), it remains lawful in several countries (including Canada and the U.S.) and continues to be part of the disciplinary strategies of many parents. The debate over CP has been fueled in part by the lack of firm conclusions about its developmental impact and by the belief that only severe physical disciplinary strategies (PDS) are associated with detrimental outcomes ([Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005](#)). One methodological limitation that has contributed to the varying research findings on CP is the lack of consensus about its definition ([Benjet & Kazdin, 2003](#); [Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006](#)). Different terms, that are not necessarily synonymous, have been used interchangeably, including CP, physical punishment, spanking, slapping, hitting, harsh punishment, and punitive parenting ([Benjet & Kazdin, 2003](#); [Gershoff, 2002](#); [Hicks-Pass, 2009](#)). Moreover, in studies where parents report on their CP use, specific definitions are often not provided so parents must rely on their own

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conceptualization of CP. As an example, general terms of physical/CP were used in 32 of the studies included in Gershoff (2002)'s meta-analysis. Given that variability most likely exists among parents' definition of CP and the specific behaviors they perceive as forms of CP (e.g., spanking and slapping a hand may not be perceived by some parents as CP), this undoubtedly impedes interpretation of research findings.

The definitional variability found in the research literature creates equivocal findings and continues to divide opinion about whether CP is a detrimental or effective disciplinary practice. It prevents researchers from moving beyond the debate and from considering ways of changing cultural norms and policies of acceptable disciplinary practices. Moreover, if parents are not aware that some of their disciplinary behaviors are forms of CP (especially the milder ones such as spanking or slapping), then they may be less likely to change their attitudes toward and use of this disciplinary strategy. As a first step to address the definitional ambiguity and to tailor educational efforts to change cultural norms about CP, it seems imperative to gain a better understanding of how parents conceptualize this disciplinary practice (Gershoff, 2002; Oas, 2010) and what specific PDS are perceived as forms of CP. It is possible that certain groups of parents define CP in a systematically different way from others (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003). To tailor educational efforts, it would seem important to clarify the factors that differentiate groups of parents, such as cultural norms, attitudes toward CP, and childhood experiences of CP.

The broader cultural context in which families are situated provides different opportunities for the development of childrearing beliefs (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003). The combination of cultural beliefs, norms, and values can determine the meaning associated with parent-child relationships and parental disciplinary strategies (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). One can conceptualize cultural norms as the perceptions that parents have about the disciplinary behaviors of other parents in their cultural group and as the actual use of disciplinary strategies by parents in a given culture (Lansford et al., 2005). Indeed, perceived approval by professionals, family, and friends has been identified as a significant predictor of maternal reports on their own use of and positive attitudes toward CP (Lansford et al., 2005, 2015; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011). Perhaps out of perceived (or actual) social disapproval, parents may engage in certain child disciplinary strategies depending on the choice of other families rather than on their own attitudes. According to the social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986), transmission of behaviors within a cultural group could be explained through modeling and imitation of practices observed from other parents in one's surrounding environment (Cappa & Khan, 2011).

In addition to cultural norms, attitudes toward CP have consistently been found to be one of the strongest predictors of its use (Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Gagné, Tourigny, Joly, & Pouliot-Lapointe, 2007; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). According to the cognitive-instrumental perspective (Vasta, 1982), this would seem reasonable given that parents engage in CP because they believe it to be a useful and appropriate disciplinary strategy (Gagné et al., 2007). Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 2012) adds that positive expectations for outcomes of a behavior increase the likelihood of engaging in that behavior. Indeed, positive expected outcomes have been found to be a significant predictor of positive attitudes toward and use of CP (Taylor et al., 2011; Lansford et al., 2015). Despite findings linking attitudes toward CP with its use, several researchers have proposed a possible disconnect between attitudes and behaviors (Cappa & Khan, 2011; Lansford et al., 2010; Roberts, 2000). This suggests that attitudes might be moderated by other factors, such as perceived cultural norms and one's own childhood disciplinary experiences.

For childhood experiences of CP, research has shown that parents who experienced CP tend to approve of and use this disciplinary strategy with their own children (Bell & Romano, 2012; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Gagné et al., 2007). Gagné et al. (2007) found that individuals who believed that CP did not cause injury and who had also experienced frequent spanking in childhood (but did not report feeling threatened, humiliated, or ridiculed) were most in favor of spanking. Similar findings have been obtained in other studies; individuals reporting that they deserved the punishment they received as a child were more likely to indicate that they would use the same type of punishment with their own children (Bower-Russa, Knutson, & Winebarger, 2001; Rodriguez & Price, 2004). However, the link between parents' own childhood experiences and their attitudes toward and use of CP has not been observed in other studies. Specifically, Ateah and Durrant (2005) found no association between childhood disciplinary experiences and physical punishment use in a sample of 110 mothers of 3 year olds. Moreover, experiences of additional forms of violence (e.g., severe physical aggression, psychological aggression, exposure to violence in the home) have been found to be associated with less favorable attitudes towards spanking (Bell & Romano, 2012; Gagné et al., 2007).

The findings linking childhood CP with attitudes and actual use of CP can be explained from a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986) whereby individuals model and imitate behaviors to which they were exposed during childhood (Bower & Knutson, 1996; Muller, Hunter, & Stollak, 1995). Exposure to childhood CP may also serve to "legitimize" its use later in life (Bower & Knutson, 1996). However, results that show negative attitudes toward CP in parents who were exposed to this disciplinary strategy in childhood suggest that these childhood experiences could also reduce parental tolerance for this form of discipline. Nevertheless, attitudes are not the only factor contributing to CP use; emotional and impulsive behaviors during disciplinary moments are likely to also be important (Vasta, 1982; Vittrup et al., 2006). The potential limited emotion regulation skills on the part of parents during times of frustration and anger may impede their ability to respond non-aggressively toward their children during times of discipline (Durrant et al., 2014).

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