

American Parents' Attitudes and Beliefs About Corporal Punishment: An Integrative Literature Review

Ellen M. Chiocca, MSN, CPNP, RNC-NIC

ABSTRACT

Research on American parents' beliefs about the use of corporal punishment (CP) shows widespread approval of this child-rearing practice. This review integrated 25 research articles to gain a better understanding of what American parents believe about the use of CP as a method of child-rearing, where they get their information about CP, and if American parents' beliefs about CP translate to the actual use of CP. The results showed that the main factors that influence a parent's endorsement of CP is the belief that CP is normative and expected when raising a child; is a necessary part of parenting, even for infants; and that certain stressors involving interactions between the parent, child, and environment can elicit the use of CP. Further research is needed to determine what methods are effective in changing parents' attitudes and beliefs about the use of CP. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2017) ■, ■-■.

Ellen M. Chiocca, Doctoral Student, University of Missouri, Columbia, Sinclair School of Nursing, Columbia, MO.

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Correspondence: Ellen M. Chiocca, MSN, CPNP, RNC-NIC, MU Sinclair School of Nursing, S235 School of Nursing, Columbia, MO 65211; e-mail: emcmt9@mail.missouri.edu.

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KEY WORDS

Spanking, corporal punishment, psychosocial risk factors, discipline, parental attitudes, physical punishment of children

INTRODUCTION

The social acceptability of corporal punishment (CP) as a method of child-rearing is widespread in the United States (*Child Trends, 2015*). A nationally representative survey conducted in 2014 showed that 76% of men and 65% of women ages 18 to 65 years agreed that a child sometimes needs a “good hard spanking” (*Child Trends, 2015, p. 2*). Straus defines CP as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing the child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior” (*Straus, 2001, p. 4*). In addition to most American adults approving of CP, most actually use it to correct their children's behavior. Over 90% of American parents report having used CP at least once, and 40% to 70% report having used CP in the past 6 months (*Straus, 2010*).

A significant body of research has shown that CP is not only ineffective (*Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Hineline & Rosales-Ruiz, 2012*) but harmful (*Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Gershoff, 2002, 2010, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004*). In a landmark meta-analysis of 88 studies on the effects of CP, *Gershoff (2002)* documented 11 negative outcomes associated with CP. *Gershoff's* analysis showed a link

between CP and increased child aggression; decreased moral internalization; increased delinquent, criminal, and antisocial behavior; decreased quality of parent–child relationship; increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children; and increased risk of family violence in adulthood. Subsequent research studies have reinforced the findings that CP is associated with antisocial behavior (Grogan-Kaylor, 2004); increased child aggression (Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010; Thompson et al., 2017); and increased risk of major depression, alcohol abuse or dependence, and externalizing problems in adulthood (Afifi et al., 2006). A more recent meta-analysis (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016) of 75 studies largely confirms the previous meta-analytic findings, identifying 17 separate detrimental child outcomes associated with the use of CP. These findings include immediate defiance, low moral internalization, aggression and antisocial behavior, increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors, mental health problems including alcohol and substance abuse, and low self-esteem. Other negative outcomes include impaired cognitive ability, decreased self-regulation, negative parent–child relationships, and increased risk for physical injury and abuse. The negative effects of CP continue beyond childhood, with an increased risk for experiencing mental health issues in adulthood including antisocial behaviors, alcohol, or substance abuse. This research also showed that children who have been hit are more likely to support the use of CP as adults (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

CP, when used in anger, often leads to physical injury even if the adult had no intent to harm the child (Clement & Chamberland, 2008; Gershoff, 2010; Jackson et al., 1999; Knox, 2010; Oburu & Palmerus, 2003). Given the negative effects of CP, coupled with the broad approval of CP among American parents, this integrative literature review was undertaken to answer three questions: (a) What is the state of interdisciplinary knowledge related to American parents' attitudes and beliefs about the CP of children? (b) Where do American parents get the information on which they base their beliefs? and (c) Do these beliefs translate to the actual use of CP?

METHODS

The literature was searched using the electronic databases CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature), MEDLINE (PubMed), and PsychINFO, each from its start date through June 2016. To be included in the present review, studies must (a) be empirical, not theoretical, editorial or opinion; (b) have been published in a peer-reviewed journal; (c) examine parent's attitudes and beliefs about the CP of children; and (d) involve a population of parents both born and raised in the United States. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were included.

Criteria for exclusion at both the abstract and full text review level were published works that studied (a) parental disciplinary practices in general; (b) beliefs about CP among children, adolescents, teachers, principals, or adults who were not parents; (c) the use of CP in schools; and (d) child physical abuse, or other types of child maltreatment, including verbal or emotional abuse or neglect. Abstracts and articles were also excluded if (e) the study population involved immigrant parents living in the United States or (f) the studies were conducted outside the United States. The rationale for these last two exclusion criteria relates to the lack of ability to account for cultural differences in the acceptability of CP overall and what type and degree of CP is acceptable between and among cultures.

The articles for review were identified using the following search terms entered alone or in combination: *corporal punishment*, *spanking*, *parents*, *attitudes*, and *beliefs*. The terms AND OR were used to narrow results. The literature search yielded 967 abstracts, of which 72 were selected for full text review. Twenty-five articles are included in this integrative literature review and were published between 1990 and 2014 (prospective studies, $n = 3$; correlational studies, $n = 3$; cross-sectional studies, $n = 9$; exploratory/descriptive studies, $n = 4$; mixed-methods studies, $n = 2$; and qualitative studies, $n = 4$). The keywords and search strategy are described in the Figure.

Articles that met the inclusion criteria were reviewed and evaluated using Whittemore and Knaff's (2005) methodology for integrative literature reviews. This involved reading, ordering, analyzing, categorizing, summarizing, and synthesizing the data gleaned from the articles that met the inclusion criteria into a unified conclusion. Included studies are summarized in the Table according to sample recruitment period and geographic location, participant characteristics, sample size, research design, purpose, and study findings.

FINDINGS

Influences on American Parents' Beliefs About the Use of CP

Several authors found evidence of external influences on parents' attitudes and beliefs about the use of CP. For example, both Socolar and Stein (1995) and Chung et al. (2009) found that mothers were more likely to support the use of CP if it was used on them as children. In a group of African American parents, Bradley (1998) found that parents believed in using CP only if nonphysical forms of discipline (e.g., giving a warning look) were ineffective when used first. Horn, Cheng, and Joseph (2004) also studied a group of African American parents and found that for parents in higher socioeconomic groups, CP was not endorsed as a first-line approach for correcting the child's behavior; rather, teaching and rewarding desired behaviors was

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