

Childhood Corporal Punishment and Future Perpetration of Physical Dating Violence

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Objective To test whether experiencing childhood corporal punishment is linked to later perpetration of dating violence.

Study design Young adults (n = 758; 61% female; mean age of 20 years), originally recruited for a longitudinal study as 9th- and 10th-grade Texas high school students, were asked about their childhood experiences with corporal punishment and physical abuse, as well as current experiences with dating violence. A path model was used to determine whether childhood corporal punishment was related to recent perpetration of physical dating violence, while controlling for childhood physical abuse, age, sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Results In all, 19% of participants (n = 134) reported physical dating violence perpetration and 68% reported experiencing corporal punishment as children (n = 498). Analysis showed a significant positive association between corporal punishment and physical perpetration of dating violence (OR 1.30, 95% CI 1.07-1.59). Even after controlling for sex, ethnicity, age, parental education, and child physical abuse, childhood corporal punishment was associated significantly with physical dating violence perpetration (aOR 1.29, 95% CI 1.02-1.62).

Conclusions The finding that childhood corporal punishment was associated with perpetration of young adult physical dating violence, even after controlling for several demographic variables and childhood physical abuse, adds to the growing literature demonstrating deleterious outcomes associated with corporal punishment. (*J Pediatr* 2017;■■:■■-■■).

Approximately 10%-30% of youth experience dating violence.^{1,2} A plethora of behavioral, medical, and clinical research demonstrates the negative sequelae of dating violence, including poor mental health,³ substance use,⁴ risky sexual behavior,⁵ physical injury,⁶ and future victimization and perpetration of violence.^{3,7} Given the prevalence and potentially negative consequences, dating violence is an important public health concern. Attaining a better understanding of antecedents of dating violence is critical for preventive strategies seeking to mitigate dating violence among youth.⁸

The causes, correlates, and consequences of dating violence are complex and heterogeneous, with evidence continuing to mount that a multitude of factors contribute to violence within intimate relationships.⁹ These factors cut across various domains including affective (eg, emotion dysregulation, psychiatric disorder), cognitive (eg, attitudes toward women, beliefs about violence), demographic (eg, age, race, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status), interpersonal (eg, relationship satisfaction, problem solving skills), contextual (eg, availability of weapon, drug/alcohol use), as well as distal factors (eg, history of child abuse, exposure to family violence). One factor that merits additional attention is the association between a youth's history of experiencing corporal punishment and perpetration of dating violence.

In the empirical literature, corporal punishment is succinctly defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior."¹⁰ Corporal punishment is commonly practiced by parents, with an estimated 38% and 5% of American youth experiencing mild and severe corporal punishment, respectively.^{11,12} The use of corporal punishment remains a long-standing controversy among parents, the public, and researchers alike,¹³ as the effectiveness and appropriateness of corporal punishment are hotly debated. The preponderance of empirical evidence, however, clearly shows a link between corporal punishment and numerous detrimental outcomes, including childhood aggression,^{14,15} adolescent dating violence,^{16,17} and mental health problems in both childhood¹⁸ and adulthood.¹⁹

It is purported that corporal punishment is related to deleterious outcomes because it is confounded with more severe types of punishment, such as parent-to-child physical abuse. Indeed, research supports the clustering of victimization experiences²⁰ or "polyvictimization,"²¹ with approximately 22% of youth experiencing 4 or more victimizations in a single year. However, research also has shown that even after controlling for the presence of multiple types of child maltreatment, as well as other potential confounding factors such as maternal stress, depression, and substance use, increased use of corporal punishment leads to increased

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childhood aggression.^{14,15} There is need, therefore, for more fine-tuned research that controls for more severe parent-to-child violence (eg, child physical abuse) as distinct from corporal punishment as predictors of dating violence.

Considering the frequency of corporal punishment by US parents, its links with detrimental outcomes for children, and the limited research examining its relation to risk for later violence in romantic relationships, we examined the association between corporal punishment and future physical perpetration of dating violence among an ethnically diverse population of young adults. We hypothesize that young adults who experienced corporal punishment as children are more likely to report recent perpetration of physical dating violence against an intimate partner and that this association remains after controlling for potential confounds, including other victimization experiences.

Methods

We used data from our ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent risky behaviors.⁴ The original data (Wave 1: Spring 2010) included 1042 participants (female: 56%) who were recruited from 7 urban and suburban public high schools in southeast Texas (response rate: 62%) and were followed annually thereafter. To obtain a sample representative of the larger school, students were recruited from mandated classes (eg, English). Participants received increasing amounts of compensation as the study progressed (\$10-\$30). The current cross-sectional analyses include the 758 participants who completed Wave 6 (spring 2015); the first Wave in which corporal punishment items were included. Of these participants, 61% were female, with a mean age of 20.03 (SD = 0.76). Participants were Hispanic (32.6%), white (28.8%), African American (26.0%), and other (12.7%). Active parental consent and child assent were obtained, and consent was requested again when participants turned age 18 years. The first author's institutional review board approved this study.

The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory²² uses a yes/no format to assess dating violence in the past year using the following items: (1) I kicked, hit, or punched him/her; (2) I slapped him/her or pulled his/her hair; (3) I pushed shoved, or shook him/her; and (4) I threw something at him/her. Endorsement of one or more items was considered perpetration of physical dating violence.

With the premise, "think back to when you were a child," participants were asked the following question on a 4-point scale ranging from never (0), sometimes (1), often (2), and always (3): "How often did your parents/guardians discipline you by slapping, spanking, or striking you with an object?"

Statistical Analyses

We used a logistic regression with full information maximum likelihood method²³ for missing data using Mplus 7.0 (Muthen and Muthen, Los Angeles, CA)²⁴ because the outcome variable (ie, physical DV perpetration) was binary. ORs are

presented with 95% CIs around the estimates. To control for the association between physical perpetration of dating violence and experiences with corporal punishment, the variables sex, ethnicity, parental education (1 = less than high school, 2 = finished high school, 3 = some college, 4 = finished college), yearly alcohol use (1 = use and 0 = no use), and physical child abuse (Cronbach α = 0.78, mean = 1.42, SD = 0.59) were included in the regression model. Physical child abuse was measured with the following 5 items from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire²⁵ using a 5-point scale anchored by never true (1) and very often true (5): "I got hit so hard by someone in my family that I had to see a doctor or go to the hospital," "People in my family hit me so hard that it left me with bruises or marks," "I was punished with a belt, a board, a cord, or some other hard object," "I believe that I was physically abused," and "I got hit or beaten so badly that it was noticed by someone like a teacher, neighbor or doctor." We created dummy-coded variables for sex (female = 1 and male = 0) and ethnicity (African American = 1 vs others = 0, Hispanic = 1 vs other = 0, and white = 1 vs other = 0).

Results

Frequency, mean, and SD for relevant variables are presented in **Table I**. Nineteen percent of participants ($n = 134$) reported physical perpetration of dating violence, and more than one-half (68%) reported experiencing corporal punishment as children ($n = 498$, mean = 1.07, SD = 0.96). There was no significant association by sex ($\chi^2 [3] = 3.52$, $P = .32$), ethnicity ($\chi^2 [9] = 15.86$, $P = .07$), or parental education ($\chi^2 [9] = 9.38$, $P = .40$) differences in terms of corporal punishment (**Table II**). More African Americans endorsed experiencing corporal punishment "always," relative to Hispanic participants, $\chi^2 [1] = 3.96$, $P < .05$, but this difference did not emerge between African American and white participants, $\chi^2 [1] = 1.51$, $P = .22$.

A significant positive association emerged for the association between corporal punishment and physical perpetration of dating violence, with an OR of 1.30 (95% CI 1.07-1.59). In the multivariate analysis, controlling for sex, ethnicity, age, parental education, yearly alcohol use, as well as child physical abuse, corporal punishment remained a significant and robust predictor of perpetration of dating violence (aOR 1.29, 95% CI 1.02-1.62; **Table III**). Notably, sex and parent education

Table I. Frequency, mean, and SD for physical dating violence perpetration and corporal punishment

Variables	Mean = 1.07	SD = 0.96
Experiences of corporal punishment ($n = 734$)		
Never	236 (32.2%)	
Sometimes	286 (39.0%)	
Often	137 (18.7%)	
Always	75 (10.2%)	
Physical dating violence perpetration ($n = 705$)	134 (19.0%)	

Due to item missingness, the sample sizes for each variable may not match. Due to rounding up, total of percentage could be larger than 100.

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