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Corporal Punishment by Parents: Implications for Primary Prevention of Assaults on Spouses and Children

MURRAY A. STRAUS
CARRIE L. YODANIS

The National Family Violence Surveys show that each year more than 3.4 million couples experience physical violence involving severe assaults such as punching, kicking, or biting¹ and that an additional 5.1 million couples are involved in less serious violence such as slapping or throwing things at a partner.² They also show that each year a minimum of 1.7 million children are severely assaulted by their parents and that an additional 5.4 million children are hit with objects.³ Given numbers of this magnitude, it is unlikely that sufficient resources can be allocated to deal with family violence through intervention.⁴ Family violence alone could require almost the entire current

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1. Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 104 (Simon & Schuster, 1988). See also Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, *Societal Change and Change in Family Violence from 1975 to 1985 as Revealed by Two National Surveys*, 48 *J Marriage & Fam* 465, 466-69 (1986); Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families* (Transaction, 1990).

2. Straus and Gelles, 48 *J Marriage & Fam* at 470 (cited in note 1).

3. *Id* at 466, 469; Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 103 (cited in note 1).

4. This lack of resources has hampered the efforts of child protective service agencies. Nationally, child protective service agencies fail to investigate about forty percent of child abuse reports because of limited resources. Susan J. Wells, *Screening and Prioritization in Child Protective Services Intake: Report to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect* (1989). The coverage ratio would be much lower if all abused children came to their attention. See Murray A. Straus, *The National Family Violence Surveys*, in Straus and

U.S. expenditure on the criminal justice and social service systems. Thus, it is important to focus at least part of the effort to end family violence on *primary prevention*.

The concept of primary prevention is borrowed from the fields of public health and mental health. To paraphrase a definition from Caplan, primary prevention lowers the incidence of family violence⁵ by counteracting harmful circumstances *before they have a chance to produce violence*.⁶ Primary prevention does not seek to prevent a specific person from committing a violent act; instead, it seeks to reduce the risk for a whole population. The outcome envisioned as a result of primary prevention is that although some individuals may continue to be violent, their numbers will be reduced.⁷

In this Article, we discuss the results of two studies on corporal punishment.⁸ The first study tests the hypothesis that corporal punishment of an

Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 3, 3-4 (cited in note 1) (noting that the number of spousal abuse cases reported is only a fraction of the number of spouses abused each year).

The mental health services system is also unable to provide help to more than a minute fraction of those in need since one-third of American families experience a physical assault over the course of a marriage. Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, *How Violent Are American Families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Resurvey and Other Studies*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 95, 96 (cited in note 1).

5. Because the terms "violence" and "abuse" are used in so many different ways in the literature, it is essential to define those terms clearly. We define violence as an act carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person. This definition deliberately leaves unspecified the amount of pain actually inflicted or the legitimacy of the act. Abuse is an act on a child that results in an injury, physical as well as psychological. For an explanation and evaluation of this definition, see Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus, *Determinants of Violence in the Family: Toward a Theoretical Integration*, in Wesley R. Burr, et al, eds, *Contemporary Theories About the Family* 549, 554, 564-69 (Free, 1979).

6. Gerald Caplan, *Principles of Preventive Psychiatry*, quoted in Emory Cowen, *Demystifying Primary Prevention*, in Donald G. Forgays, ed, *Primary Prevention of Psychopathology* 7, 8 (New England, 1978).

7. Additional discussion of primary prevention of family violence can be found in Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 189-206 (cited in note 1); Murray A. Straus and Christine Smith, *Family Patterns and Primary Prevention of Family Violence*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 507 (cited in note 1); Murray A. Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* 237-44 (Anchor, 1981).

8. No standard usage for corporal punishment or physical punishment exists. For this Article, "corporal punishment" is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain (but not injury) for purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior. The most frequent forms of corporal punishment are spanking, slapping, grabbing, or shoving a child "roughly" (i.e., with more force than is needed to move the child), and hitting with certain traditionally acceptable objects such as a hair brush, belt, or paddle. However, the definition of corporal punishment in this Article excludes hitting with an object on the grounds that this act poses a significant risk of causing an injury that needs medical treatment and therefore crosses the line from corporal punishment to physical abuse. This definition therefore differs from the laws of every state

adolescent increases the probability that the adolescent will physically assault a spouse later in life. The second study tests the hypothesis that corporal punishment of an adolescent increases the probability that the adolescent will physically abuse a child later in life. Both studies are relevant to a discussion of primary prevention because they investigate a circumstance that, according to the hypothesis, causes intra-family violence and because they are based on community samples rather than clinical samples. A clinical population is obviously essential for research intended to evaluate the effects of a treatment method.⁹ However, for intervention to prevent family violence in the first place, the most appropriate sample is a representative cross-section of the community in which the prevention steps are to take place.

I. Corporal Punishment and Adult Violence

Corporal punishment plays a crucial role in training people to accept violence in human relationships. One of the reasons for this is that it begins in infancy, even before speech is established.¹⁰ Thus, what is learned is built into the deepest layers of the child's emerging personality. Take the case of an eight month old child, crawling on the ground. The child puts something in her mouth. The parent removes it and says "No, no, you'll get sick." But a few minutes later the child puts something else in her mouth. This time the parent removes the object, repeats the admonition, *and* slaps the child gently on the hand. This presumably teaches the child to avoid a certain danger, but it also teaches some unintended lessons about violence.

First, corporal punishment establishes a connection between love and violence. Mommy and Daddy are usually the first and the only ones to hit an infant. Most children are hit by their parents throughout childhood.¹¹ Just over half of them are hit by their parents into adolescence.¹² A child therefore

in the U.S., which give parents the right to hit children with objects, provided no serious injury results. It also differs from traditional cultural norms, which sanction the use of objects such as hair brushes, belts, and paddles. Excluding hitting with objects can also be justified on the basis of the gradual reduction in the frequency and severity of corporal punishment in American society, which has led many people to regard hitting with such objects as physical "abuse" rather than corporal punishment.

Spanking is similarly ambiguous. To some, it means slapping a child repeatedly on the buttocks, and traditionally, on the bare buttocks. But for most contemporary Americans, we believe it means any slapping or hitting, probably the most frequent form of which is to slap a child's hand for touching something.

We will use the terms "corporal punishment," "physical punishment," "hitting," and "spanking" as synonyms. For a discussion of all these terms, see Murray A. Straus, *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families and Its Effect on Children* 8 (Lexington, 1994).

9. Murray A. Straus, *Injury and Frequency of Assault and the "Representative Sample Fallacy" in Measuring Wife Beating and Child Abuse*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 75, 86-89 (cited in note 1).

10. Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 9 (cited in note 8).

11. *Id.*

12. Murray A. Straus, *Ordinary Violence, Child Abuse and Wife Beating: What Do*

learns that those who love her the most are also those who hit her.

Second, because corporal punishment occurs when the earliest and deepest layers of the personality are being formed, it establishes a fusion, or a link, between love and violence that is so deeply embedded that it is easily mistaken for a biologically determined linkage. Love and violence become fused. Those you love are those you can hit.

Third, because corporal punishment is most often an act of concern for the child, it teaches not only that love and violence go together, but also that it is morally right to hit other members of the family.

The above suggests that early and continuing experience with corporal punishment lays the groundwork for the norms legitimizing violence of all types, particularly intra-family violence.¹³ Corporal punishment provides a role model—a specific “script” for violence.¹⁴

II. Prevalence of Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment is widely believed to be an effective and necessary form of discipline. Eighty-four percent of Americans believe that a “good hard spanking is sometimes necessary.”¹⁵ Moreover, parents who do not hit their children are perceived by their neighbors and relatives as ineffective, and their children are perceived as poorly behaved.¹⁶

Although several countries have made corporal punishment by parents illegal (but not criminal), a similar change in the United States could take many years for there is almost a conspiracy of silence about the harmful side effects of corporal punishment. Of ten widely used and recently published textbooks on child development, eight do not have an entry in the index or table of contents for “Corporal punishment,” “Spanking,” “Discipline, physical,” etc.¹⁷ Nine of the books do contain material on corporal punishment, but the space dedicated to the subject ranges from one sentence to a maximum of four pages and averages only 0.3 percent of total pages.¹⁸ Only one of the ten books unequivocally advises against using corporal punishment.¹⁹

They Have in Common?, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 403, 410 (cited in note 1). Adolescence is defined as age thirteen and over for purposes of this study.

13. Barbara A. Wauchope and Murray A. Straus, *Physical Punishment and Physical Abuse of American Children: Incidence Rates by Age, Gender and Occupational Class*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 133, 147 (cited in note 1).

14. For a discussion of the concept of socially scripted behavior, see John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* 19-20 (Aldine, 1973).

15. Murray A. Straus, *Discipline and Deviance: Physical Punishment of Children and Violence and Other Crime in Adulthood*, 38 Soc Probs 133, 140 (1991).

16. Barbara A. Carson, *Parents Who Don't Spank: Deviation in the Legitimation of Physical Force* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Hampshire, 1986).

17. Straus, *Beating the Devil at 12* (cited in note 8).

18. Id.

19. Id.

Even books on child abuse fail to discuss the place of corporal punishment in causing physical abuse.²⁰ These books ignore studies that show that most cases of physical abuse are the end point of a continuum that began with corporal punishment.²¹ One of the few exceptions is *Child Abuse: Implications for Child Development and Psychopathology* by David Wolfe, which clearly identifies corporal punishment as a risk factor for physical abuse.²²

Books for parents also fail to discuss the harmful side effects of corporal punishment. Benjamin Spock is widely assumed to have advised parents against spanking. Yet none of his many editions of *Baby and Child Care* completely rejects corporal punishment.²³ In addition, of thirty-one of the most widely read books for parents, eleven say nothing at all about corporal punishment and nine even encourage parents to use corporal punishment.²⁴ The remaining eleven do advise parents against using corporal punishment, but none of them unequivocally advises parents to never hit a child.²⁵

The authors of these books are probably against corporal punishment in principle, but they are ambivalent about it in practice. Dr. Robert M. Reece of both Children's Hospital in Boston and Boston City Hospital, for example, "oppose[s] all physical punishment as ineffective, potentially dangerous, and unfair."²⁶ Yet he also says that "[s]panks anywhere but a few light blows on the buttocks or using anything other than an open hand . . . are 'out of bounds' and signal abuse."²⁷ In short, the pediatrician responsible for child protection at two of the nation's leading hospitals endorsed "light blows on the buttocks with the open hand" while opposing all corporal punishment. His ambivalence reflects the depth of American cultural commitment to corporal punishment and a fear of losing rapport with parents if the use of corporal punishment is discouraged.

20. Straus, 38 Soc Probs at 141 (cited in note 15).

21. Alfred Kadushin and Judith A. Martin, *Child Abuse: An Interactional Event* 189, 198-99 (Columbia, 1981).

22. David A. Wolfe, *Child Abuse: Implications for Child Development and Psychopathology* 48-52 (Sage, 1987).

23. See, for example, Benjamin Spock and Michael B. Rothenberg, *Baby and Child Care* 338 (Dutton, 7th ed 1992); Benjamin Spock and Michael B. Rothenberg, *Baby and Child Care* 350-60 (Dutton, 6th ed 1985).

24. Carson, *Parents Who Don't Spank* at 25 (cited in note 16). Fortunately, there are some exceptions that did not fall within Carson's sample. One such author is Louise Bates Ames, *Don't Push Your Pre-Schooler* (Harper & Row, 1974). Note that if Carson's study were repeated today, there would be even more exceptions, such as Penelope Leach See's recent books, including *Children First: What Our Society Must Do and Is Not Doing for Our Children Today* (Random House, 1994).

25. Carson, *Parents Who Don't Spank* at 25 (cited in note 16).

26. Betsy A. Lehman, *Spanking Teaches the Wrong Lesson*, Boston Globe 27 (Mar 13, 1989) (emphasis added).

27. Id.

III. Method

Both of the studies reported in this Article were conducted using data from the National Family Violence Survey. The study of spousal abuse used the entire sample, whereas the study of physical abuse of children used the part of the sample that had a minor child living at home. Because many of the variables are the same, we present a single methodology section for both studies.

A. SAMPLES

We studied families that participated in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey.²⁸ To be included in the survey, a respondent had to be eighteen years old or older and fall into one of the following categories: (1) presently married; (2) presently living as a male-female couple; (3) divorced or separated within the previous two years; or (4) a single parent living with a child under the age of eighteen. For two-parent households, a random process was used to select either the male or female partner. For households with more than one child under the age of eighteen, a random process was used to select the referent child as the focus of the physical abuse questions.

The analysis of assaults on a spouse or partner in a cohabitating relationship is based on 4,401 couples.²⁹ The analysis of physical abuse of children is based on the 2,342 respondents who resided with a child under the age of eighteen.

B. STATISTICAL METHODS

Both studies tested a theoretical model that specifies corporal punishment and certain other variables as “exogenous” variables and other variables, such as attitudes approving violence and depression, as intervening variables. The model purporting to explain assaults on spouses was tested using logistic regression. The model purporting to explain physical abuse of children was tested using ordinary least squares regression.³⁰

C. VIOLENCE MEASURES

1. Corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intent to cause pain (but not injury) for purposes of correction or control. To measure the prevalence and frequency of corporal punishment, respondents were asked,

28. These surveys are described in detail in Straus, *The National Family Violence Surveys* at 3-16 (cited in note 4).

29. For brevity of exposition, we will use terms such as “spouse” and “marital” even though not all couples were married.

30. For tables showing the regression coefficients, odds ratios, standard errors, and other statistics, see Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 217-53 (cited in note 8).

"Thinking about when you yourself were a teenager, about how often would you say your mother or stepmother used physical punishment, like slapping or hitting you? Think about the year in which this happened the most."³¹ The response categories were "Never," "Once," "Twice," "3-5 times," "6-10 times," "11-20 times," and "More than 20 times." The respondents were asked a parallel question about corporal punishment by a father or stepfather. Adding the responses to both questions, we found that fifty-two percent of the sample was subjected to corporal punishment as teenagers (fifty-eight percent of the men and forty-four percent of the women).³² We also found that when parents hit teenagers it is not an isolated event: the mean number of times the respondents were hit as adolescents in a twelve month period is eight; the median is four.³³

2. Spousal assault.

Physical assaults by husbands on wives and by wives on husbands were measured using the violence scale of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS).³⁴ Each respondent was asked if any of the following acts occurred between her and her spouse in the past twelve months:

1. Threw something at one of the partners
2. Pushed, grabbed, or shoved
3. Slapped
4. Kicked, bit, or hit with fist

31. A limitation of this measure of corporal punishment is the use of recall data. Such data undoubtedly understate both the prevalence and chronicity of corporal punishment. However, the rates estimated using this data correspond to the rates estimated using contemporaneous data obtained by interviewing parents of teenage children.

The fact that the questions refer to corporal punishment in adolescence is not a limitation because this research is about the effects of corporal punishment at that age. However, respondents whose parents discontinued corporal punishment by the teen years were coded as having experienced no corporal punishment, whereas it is likely that almost all had been hit by their parents at earlier ages. Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 21-22 (cited in note 8). Thus, the "never" category means "never as a teenager."

32. The fact that so many American adults were hit by their parents when they were in their teens resolves a concern of many that the results of this study might have limited applicability because the group of people who were hit at this age represents only a small and deviant part of the population.

33. For detailed information on corporal punishment by parents of adolescents, see Murray A. Straus and Denise A. Donnelly, *Corporal Punishment of Adolescents by American Parents*, 24 *Youth & Soc'y* 419, 419-39 (1993).

34. Murray A. Straus, *Measuring Intrafamily Conflict and Violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales*, 41 *J Marriage & Fam* 75, 77-80 (1979); Murray A. Straus, *The Conflict Tactics Scales and Its Critics: An Evaluation and New Data on Validity and Reliability*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 49, 49-73 (cited in note 1).

5. Hit or tried to hit with something
6. Choked
7. Beat up
8. Threatened with a knife or gun
9. Used a knife or gun

A husband-to-wife or wife-to-husband assault was scored as present if the husband or wife carried out one or more of these nine acts in the twelve months before interview. We found that twelve percent of the men and thirteen percent of the women in the sample assaulted their partner using this measure.³⁵

3. Physical abuse of children.

Physical abuse of children was also measured using the CTS.³⁶ Respondents were asked to think about the problems and conflicts that they had with the referent child during the previous twelve months and then to respond to a list of questions about their behavior in those situations. The first three questions refer to acts, such as spanking, that are considered to be ordinary physical punishment. The remaining six questions refer to acts that constitute physical abuse because they have a higher risk of producing an injury: (1) kicked, bit or hit with fist; (2) hit or tried to hit with something; (3) beat up; (4) burned or scalded; (5) threatened with a knife or gun; and (6) used a knife or gun. If a parent reported engaging in one or more of these six acts, she was classified as having engaged in physical abuse.

35. The approximately equal rate of assaults by wives will surprise many readers because the focus of attention and condemnation has been on assaults by husbands. However, more than thirty different studies have found the incidence of abuse by husbands and wives to be similar. See Murray A. Straus, *Physical Assaults by Wives: A Major Social Problem*, in Richard J. Gelles and Donileen R. Loseke, eds, *Current Controversies on Family Violence* 67, 70 (Sage, 1993).

Assaults by wives are a serious problem for three reasons: (1) they may lead to retaliation by husbands; (2) they undermine the family; and (3) they are criminal acts. Nevertheless, there are also reasons why primary attention for remedial action and help for victims needs to be given to the problem of assaults by husbands. One reason is that assaults by husbands are much more likely to result in an injury that needs medical attention. Jan E. Stets and Murray A. Straus, *Gender Differences in Reporting Marital Violence and Its Medical and Psychological Consequences*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 151, 157 (cited in note 1).

36. Evidence of reliability and validity is presented in Straus, 41 *J Marriage & Fam* at 82-83, 85 (cited in note 34).

D. OTHER VARIABLES

1. Approval of marital violence.

Approval of violence was measured using two questions from a survey conducted for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.³⁷ Respondents were asked "Are there situations that you can imagine in which you would approve of a husband slapping a wife's face?" The question was repeated for a wife slapping her husband's face. Respondents who answered yes to either of these questions were categorized as approving marital violence.

2. Depression.

Identifying who is depressed is a difficult and controversial task. The method used in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey is based on the Psychiatric Epidemiological Research Instrument (PERI).³⁸ The PERI provides data on a number of different psychiatric problems and is much longer than could be included in the half-hour interviews that were conducted. The measure of depression used in this Article consists of four PERI items that Newmann found to be most indicative of depression:³⁹

1. Been bothered by feelings of sadness or depression
2. Felt very bad and worthless
3. Had times when you couldn't help wondering if anything was worthwhile anymore
4. Felt completely hopeless about everything

Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the past year they experienced each of these problems. The response categories were "Never," "Almost Never," "Sometimes," "Fairly Often," and "Very Often."

3. Marital conflict.

The extent of conflict in the respondent's marriage was measured by questions on how often the respondent and her spouse disagreed about (1) managing the money, (2) cooking, cleaning, or repairing the house, (3) social activities and entertaining, (4) affection and sex relations, and (5) issues related to children.

37. David M. Owens and Murray A. Straus, *The Social Structure of Violence in Childhood and Approval of Violence as an Adult*, 1 *Aggressive Beh* 193, 202-03 (1975).

38. See Barbara Snell Dohrenwend, et al, *Exemplification of a Method for Scaling Life Events: The PERI Life Events Scale*, 19 *J Health & Soc Beh* 205 (1978).

39. J. P. Newmann, *Sex Differences in Symptoms of Depression: Clinical Disorder or Normal Distress*, 25 *J Health & Soc Beh* 136, 138 (1984).

IV. Study 1: Corporal Punishment and Spousal Abuse

There is considerable evidence for the theory that frequent corporal punishment of a person as a child increases the probability of that person assaulting a spouse later in life. Gelles studied eighty families and found that those who had been hit frequently (i.e., monthly to daily) as children had a higher rate of marital assault than those who had not been hit.⁴⁰ Similarly, Carroll studied ninety-six couples and found that "36.6 percent of those who had experienced a high degree of parental punishment reported assaulting a spouse compared to 14.5 percent of those who had not."⁴¹ Other researchers report similar results. In his study of sixty-one abusive men and forty-four non-abusive men, Johnston found that experiencing corporal punishment as a child is significantly related to both minor and severe spousal abuse as an adult.⁴² Straus analyzed 2,143 American couples and found that the more corporal punishment husbands and wives had experienced, the higher the probability of their assaulting a spouse.⁴³ Kalmuss analyzed Straus's sample using more adequate statistical methods and found that experiencing corporal punishment as a teenager more than doubled the probability of husband-to-wife and wife-to-husband assaults.⁴⁴ Finally, Straus and Kaufman Kantor analyzed 3,229 couples and found that corporal punishment is a significant risk factor for assaults on wives, even when other potentially influential variables, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, witnessing violence between parents, and alcohol use, are controlled.⁴⁵

A. THEORIES LINKING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND SPOUSAL ASSAULT

We examined three possible explanations for the relationship between corporal punishment as a child and an increased probability, as an adult, of physically assaulting a spouse: (1) modeling of implicit cultural norms, (2) problem solving skill deficit, and (3) depression.

40. Richard J. Gelles, *The Violent Home: A Study of Physical Aggression between Husbands and Wives* 169-70 (Sage, 1972).

41. Joseph C. Carroll, *The Intergenerational Transmission of Family Violence: Long-Term Effects of Aggressive Behavior*, 3 *Aggressive Beh* 289, 294-95 (1977).

42. Mildred E. Johnston, *Correlates of Early Violence Experiences among Men Who Are Abusive toward Female Mates*, Presentation to the 2d Natl Conference for Family Violence Researchers (May 4, 1984).

43. Murray A. Straus, *Ordinary Violence, Child Abuse, and Wife-Beating: What Do They Have in Common?*, in David Finkelhor, et al, eds, *The Dark Side of Families: Current Family Violence Research* 213, 229-31 (Sage, 1983).

44. Debra Kalmuss, *The Intergenerational Transmission of Marital Aggression*, 46 *J Marriage & Fam* 11, 15 (1984) (finding that parental corporal punishment doubles the probability while actually being hit increases the probability by one and a half times).

45. Murray A. Straus and Glenda Kaufman Kantor, *Corporal Punishment by Parents: A Risk Factor in the Epidemiology of Depression, Suicide, Alcohol Abuse, Child Abuse and Wife Beating*, Adolescence (forthcoming 1994).

1. Modeling of implicit cultural norms.

Although physically assaulting a spouse is a criminal act, American culture legitimizes such behavior. National surveys show that at least a quarter of the population approves of slapping a spouse under some circumstances.⁴⁶ In part, this attitude is a carry-over from a previous historical era when husbands did have the legal right to "physically chastise" an errant wife.⁴⁷ The courts began nullifying this common law principle in the late nineteenth century, but it has survived in the culture of the criminal justice system. For example, a New Hampshire judge, in accepting a plea bargain from a man who stabbed his wife, admonished him that he should have slapped her instead.⁴⁸

More than twenty years ago, one of us documented the multitude of ways in which the actions and inactions of the criminal justice system legitimized spousal abuse.⁴⁹ The criminal justice system has since made remarkable progress, largely due to the efforts of the women's movement. For example, instead of advising police officers to avoid interfering in "domestic disturbances," most police departments now require or recommend arrest.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the criminal justice system continues to tolerate domestic assaults.⁵¹ In our view, it does so partly because of corporal punishment by parents. Corporal punishment teaches children that hitting is a morally correct way of dealing with improper behavior. It also teaches that there are circumstances in which it may even be "necessary" to hit a spouse, just as almost all Americans believe that there are circumstances in which it is "necessary" to hit a child.

2. Problem solving skill deficit.

This explanation assumes that the more parents rely on corporal punishment to deal with misbehavior, the less opportunity the child has to observe, participate in, and learn non-violent modes of influencing the behavior of another

46. Murray A. Straus, Glenda Kaufman Kantor, and David W. Moore, *Trends in Cultural Norms Approving Marital Violence from 1968 to 1994 in Relation to Gender, Class, and Other Social Characteristics*, Presentation to the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Aug 1994). We believe that a much larger percentage actually hold such beliefs than are willing to express approval in response to survey questions.

47. Robert Calvert, *Criminal and Civil Liability in Husband-Wife Assaults*, in Suzanne K. Steinmetz and Murray A. Straus, eds, *Violence in the Family* 88 (Dodd Mead, 1974).

48. *Darts and Laurels*, Portsmouth Herald D1 (June 8, 1993).

49. Murray A. Straus, *A General Systems Theory Approach to a Theory of Violence between Family Members*, 12 Soc Sci Info 105, 115 (1973).

50. Lawrence W. Sherman and Ellen G. Cohn, 23 L & Soc'y Rev 117, 125 (1989).

51. Ann Jones, *Next Time, She'll Be Dead: Battering and How to Stop It* 140-42 (Beacon, 1994); Glenda Kaufman Kantor and Murray A. Straus, *Response of Victims and the Police to Assaults on Wives*, in Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence in American Families* 473, 482 (cited in note 1); Kathleen J. Ferraro, *Policing Woman Battering*, 36 Soc Probs 61, 71-72 (1989); Pam Waaland and Stuart Keeley, *Police Decision Making in Wife Abuse: The Impact of Legal and Extralegal Factors*, 9 L & Human Beh 355, 364 (1985).

person or modifying her own behavior to adapt to the situation. To the extent this assumption is correct, children whose parents frequently used corporal punishment will, as adults, have less skill in managing conflict and therefore a higher level of unresolved conflicts with their spouses. A high level of conflict in turn increases the risk of violence.⁵²

3. Depression.

This explanation is based on research showing that depression and aggression are correlated⁵³ and that depression is associated with subsequent marital violence.⁵⁴ This research in no way contradicts our earlier research, which shows that depression is a consequence of marital violence.⁵⁵ Both processes are likely to occur. However, because corporal punishment as an adolescent has been shown to be associated with an increased probability of depression as an adult,⁵⁶ we reasoned that at least part of the cause of depression is not traceable to being physically assaulted by a spouse.

B. FINDINGS

We tested these three theories using logistic regression because we were interested in whether there was an assault in the respondent's family in the twelve month period preceding the interview.⁵⁷ We present two sets of results below. The first set uses the occurrence of an assault by the husband on the wife as the dependent variable. The second set uses the occurrence of an assault by the wife on the husband as the dependent variable.

1. Corporal punishment and approval of violence.

Figures 1 and 2 show that holding constant all exogenous variables, the more corporal punishment a person experienced as an adolescent, the greater the probability that person will approve of assaulting a spouse. This relationship applies to both men (Figure 1) and women (Figure 2) and to those who witnessed violence between their parents (the upper line in each graph) and those who did not (the lower line).⁵⁸

52. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 97-152 (cited in note 7). Children whose parents used corporal punishment are also more likely to use physical force because they believe that hitting a spouse is sometimes appropriate.

53. Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: Its Causes, Consequences, and Control* 62 (Temple, 1993).

54. Steven R. H. Beach, et al, *Depression in Marriage: A Model for Etiology and Treatment* 75 (Guilford, 1990).

55. Stets and Straus, *Gender Differences* at 163-64 (cited in note 35).

56. Murray A. Straus, *Corporal Punishment of Children and Depression and Suicide in Adulthood*, in Joan McCord, ed, *Coercion and Punishment in Long Term Perspective* (Cambridge, forthcoming 1994); Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 90 (cited in note 8).

57. Logistic regression is designed for estimating models in which the dependent variable is a dichotomy. John H. Aldrich and Forrest D. Nelson, *Linear Probability, Logit, and Probit Models* 12-13 (Sage, 1984); Lawrence C. Hamilton, *Regression with Graphics: A Second Course in Applied Statistics* 217-48 (Brooks/Cole, 1992).

58. These "conditional effect plots" were computed following the procedures in Hamil-

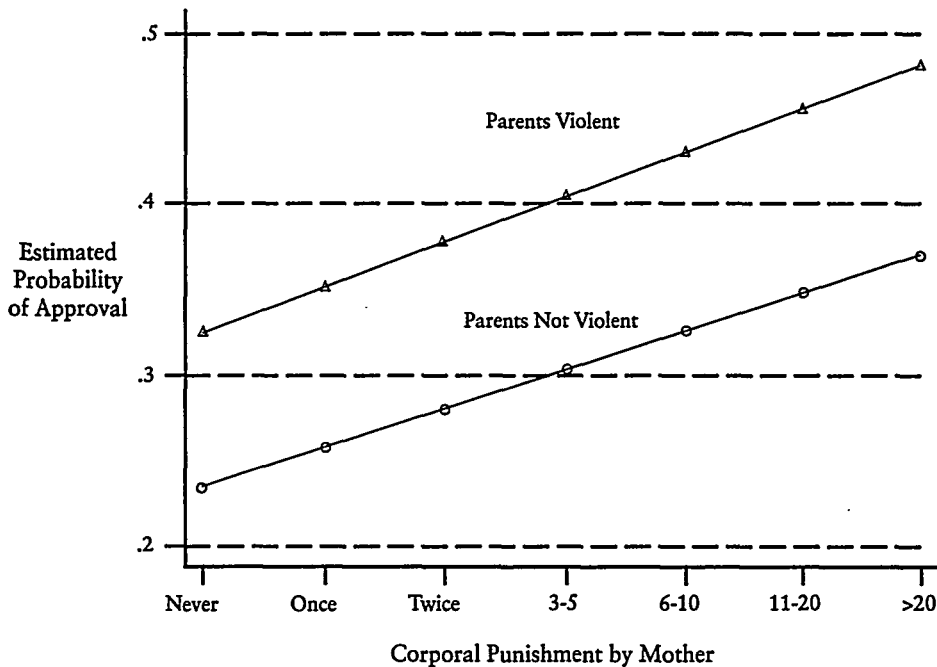


Fig. 1. Approval of marital violence by men by corporal punishment by mothers

2. Tests of the theoretical model.

We tested the three explanations for the relationship between corporal punishment as a child and an increased probability, as an adult, of physically assaulting a spouse. In this subsection, we report the results of those tests. The results are presented in the form of path diagrams, which are based on logistic regression analyses.⁵⁹ The diagrams follow the conventions for path analysis based on ordinary least squares regression. However, because the diagrams are based on the logistic regression results, the numbers on each path are the odds ratios.⁶⁰ A path is shown only if it is statistically significant at the .05 level (one-

ton, *Regression with Graphics* at 158-63 (cited in note 57). It is important to note that they show the predicted probabilities, i.e., the regression line, rather than observed probabilities. Tables giving the regression coefficients and tests of significance are in Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 217-53 (cited in note 8).

59. The logistic regression analyses are reported in Murray A. Straus and Carrie L. Yodanis, *Corporal Punishment in Adolescence and Physical Assaults on Spouses Later in Life: What Accounts for the Link*, Presentation to the American Society of Criminology (1993).

60. The odds ratio is a ratio of the odds at two different values of X. It is often used

tailed test).

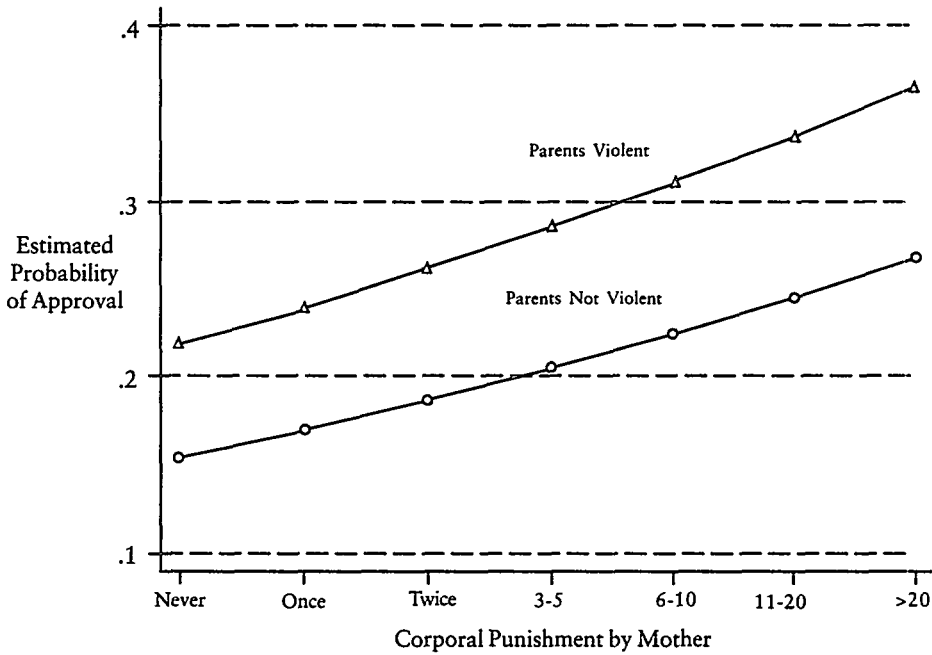


Fig. 2. Approval of marital violence by women by corporal punishment by mothers

comparatively to describe the strength of an effect. See Hamilton, *Regression with Graphics* at 230 (cited in note 57). Since the numbers on each path are not standardized regression coefficients, they cannot be multiplied to obtain indirect path coefficients.

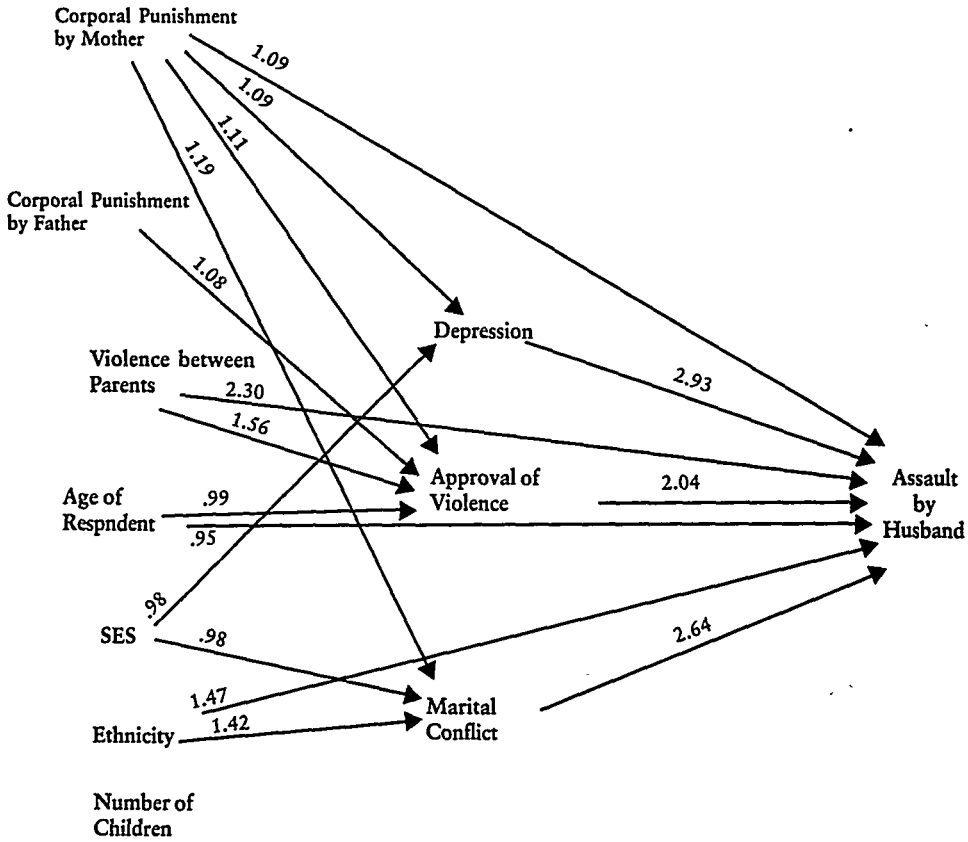


Fig. 3. Path analysis of husband-to-wife overall assault index based on logistic regression analyses (N=1,844 men). Numbers are odds ratios.

a) *Assaults by husbands.* Figure 3 diagrams the model estimated using assaults by husbands as the dependent variable. The upper path shows a direct relationship between corporal punishment by mothers and husband-to-wife assault. The odds ratio of 1.09 indicates that each increase of one category in the seven-category corporal punishment index multiplies the odds ratio by 1.09 or nine percent. Because the odds ratio is from a model that specifies other variables, it is a net relationship after controlling for the effect of the other variables in the model.

We, however, were mainly interested in the *indirect* paths through depression, approval of violence, and marital conflict. The path in Figure 3 from corporal punishment to depression indicates there is a significant relationship between experiencing corporal punishment as a teen and being depressed later in life. The odds ratio on the path indicates that each increase of one unit of corporal punishment by mothers multiplies the odds of depression by 1.09 or nine percent. In turn, the path from depression to assaults by husbands indicates that there is also a significant relationship between depression and physical assault. Depression is associated with almost triple the odds of an assault by a husband (odds ratio of 2.93). Thus, the findings support the theory that the link between corporal punishment and marital violence occurs partly because corporal punishment increases the probability of depression later in life.

We also found significant indirect paths from corporal punishment by each parent through approval of violence. The odds ratios on these paths show that each increase of one unit of corporal punishment by mothers multiplies the odds of approval of violence by 1.11, or eleven percent. Similarly, the odds of approving violence in marriage are multiplied by 1.08 for each increase of one unit in corporal punishment by a man's father. In turn, the path from approval of violence is associated with more than double the odds of an assault by the husband (odds ratio of 2.04). These findings are consistent with the theory that corporal punishment teaches the moral legitimacy of hitting someone who misbehaves, which in turn increases the probability of actually hitting.

In addition, we found support for the theory that corporal punishment increases the probability of a high level of marital conflict. There is a significant odds ratio of 1.19 on the path from corporal punishment by mother to marital conflict and an odds ratio of 2.64 for the path from marital conflict to assault by husband.

b) *Assaults by wives.* Figure 4 diagrams the model using assaults by women on their partners as the dependent variable. The findings are similar to those in the model that uses assaults by husbands as the dependent variable. The link between depression and corporal punishment is supported by the paths linking corporal punishment to assault through depression. Each increase of one category in corporal punishment by the mothers of the women in this study multiplies the odds of depression by 1.13 or thirteen percent. Similarly, the odds ratio of 1.10 on the path from corporal punishment by father indicates that each increase of one category in corporal punishment by a woman's father multiplies the odds of depression by an average of ten percent. In turn, the odds ratio of 2.07 on the path from depression shows that a high level of depression more than doubles the probability of an assault by the wife.

Figure 4 also shows that corporal punishment by a woman's mother multiplies the odds of her approving of violence by 1.13. Approval of violence in turn is associated with a doubling of the odds of a wife assaulting a husband. Finally, corporal punishment of adolescent females by their mothers multiplies the odds of couple conflict by 1.10, and a high level of marital conflict multiplies the odds of a woman assaulting her partner by 3.43.

3. Replicating the results using severe assaults.

We also investigated the possibility that the above findings might be different if the dependent variable were "severe" assaults, i.e., assaults that are associated with a greater risk of causing injury than slapping, shoving, or throwing things. Severe assaults include kicking, hitting, choking, beating up, threatening with a knife or gun, and using a knife or gun. The results using severe assaults are parallel to those reported above.

C. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We tested three explanations of why corporal punishment increases the risk of assaulting a spouse later in life: (1) social learning of implicit cultural norms approving of hitting other family members, (2) a high level of unresolved marital conflict resulting from truncated opportunities to learn non-violent conflict resolution skills, and (3) depression-based aggressiveness.

The approval of violence explanation is based on the assumption that corporal punishment teaches children that when a person misbehaves and "won't listen to reason," it is appropriate to hit that person. Parents think that this applies only to *their* hitting a child who misbehaves. However, research shows that children who are spanked tend to apply that principle to other children who misbehave as they see it.⁶¹ We extended that research by investigating the pos

61. Straus, *Ordinary Violence, Child Abuse, and Wife Beating* at 406-07 (cited in note 12).

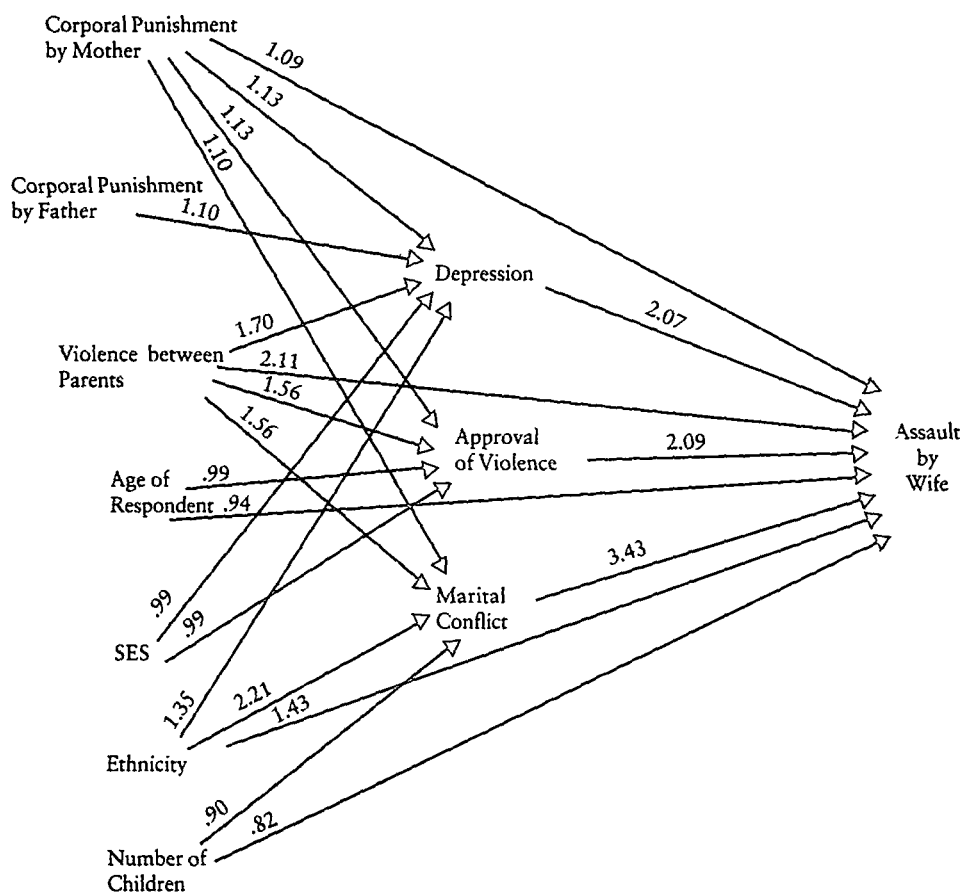


Fig. 4. Path analysis of wife-to-husband overall assault index based on logistic regression analyses (N=2,557 women). Number are odds ratios.

sibility that the lessons learned may persist into adulthood and marital relationships. In our view, this possibility arises because it is almost inevitable that, sooner or later, a spouse will "misbehave" and not "listen to reason" as the partner sees it. We hypothesized that when this occurs, husbands and wives who have been hit as adolescents for misbehavior are more likely as adults to hit a spouse who misbehaves.

The problem-solving skill deficit explanation is based on the idea that the more parents use corporal punishment in conflicts with their children, the less opportunity children have to participate in and learn non-violent modes of conflict resolution. From this, we hypothesized that the more corporal punishment a child experiences, the greater the probability that her marriage would be characterized by a high level of unresolved conflict later in life, which, in turn, increases the risk of physical violence.

The depression-based aggression explanation is based on research showing that corporal punishment is associated with an increased risk of depression and research showing that depression increases the risk of aggression.⁶²

We found that just over half of American adults were hit by their parents when they were adolescents. We also found that the more often they were hit, the greater the probability of their assaulting a spouse. In addition, we found support for all three explanations of why corporal punishment increases the risk of assaulting a spouse later in life.

Surprisingly, we found stronger effects associated with corporal punishment by mothers than by fathers. We hypothesize that this greater effect may be due to the fact that mothers are more involved in child care. We also hypothesize that it may be due to a tendency in American culture to assume that women, especially mothers, uphold moral standards. Under the approval of violence explanation, the stronger effects of corporal punishment by mothers may occur because hitting by mothers is more powerful as a model than hitting by fathers in legitimizing violence for what the perpetrator sees as a morally desirable end.⁶³

V. Study 2: Corporal Punishment and Physical Abuse of Children

The thin line between "physical abuse" and corporal punishment has often been noted.⁶⁴ A number of leading researchers including David Gil have argued that there is a causal connection between spanking and physical abuse:⁶⁵

62. Berkowitz, *Aggression* at 63-64 (cited in note 53).

63. See Franklin E. Zimring, et al, *Intimate Violence: A Study of Intersexual Homicide in Chicago*, 50 U Chi L Rev 910 (1983).

64. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 13-15 (cited in note 7).

65. Rodger W. Bybee, *Violence toward Youth: A New Perspective*, 35 J Soc Issues 1, 11 (1979); Deborah Daro, *Confronting Child Abuse: Research for Effective Program Design* 29-31 (Free, 1988); Norma D. Feshbach, *Tomorrow is Here Today in Sweden*, 9 J Clinical Child Psych 109, 110 (1980); Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 194-95 (cited in note 1); Kadushin and Martin, *Child Abuse* at 189, 198-99 (cited in note 21); Adah Maurer, *Institutional Assault on Children*, 29 Clinical Psych 23, 23-25 (Winter

Since culturally determined permissive attitudes toward the use of physical force in child-rearing seem to constitute the common core of all physical abuse of children in American society, systematic educational efforts aimed at gradually changing this particular aspect of the prevailing child-rearing philosophy, and developing clear-cut cultural prohibitions and legal sanctions against the use of physical force as a means for rearing children, are likely to produce over time the strongest possible reduction of the incidence and prevalence of physical abuse of children.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the idea that spanking puts a parent at risk of “going too far” and engaging in physical abuse has largely been ignored. Both the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect and the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect have failed to discuss corporal punishment in their publications. The National Committee on Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA) has mounted a campaign against corporal punishment, but it has focused on corporal punishment by teachers rather than by parents.⁶⁷

Although these omissions indicate the extent to which corporal punishment has been ignored in the literature of prevention and treatment agencies, they do not indicate whether scholarly analyses of physical abuse also ignore corporal punishment. However, books on child abuse do in fact ignore corporal punishment.⁶⁸ Of 120 books on child abuse, fifty-seven percent contain no discussion of corporal punishment as a risk factor for physical abuse, twenty-two percent mention corporal punishment as a possible risk factor but do not advise parents to avoid corporal punishment, and nine percent recommend avoiding physical discipline but qualify the recommendation with such phrases as “if possible.”⁶⁹

1976); Ross D. Parke, *Theoretical Models of Child Abuse: Their Implications for Prediction, Prevention, and Modification*, in Raymond H. Starr, Jr., ed, *Child Abuse Prediction: Policy Implications* 31, 36-37 (Ballinger, 1982); Steinmetz and Straus, eds, *Violence in the Family* at 3 (cited in note 47); Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 237 (cited in note 7); Gertrude J. Williams, *Child Abuse Reconsidered: The Urgency of Authentic Prevention*, 12 *J Clinical Child Psych* 312 (1983); Edward Zigler and Nancy W. Hall, *Physical Child Abuse in America: Past, Present, and Future*, in Dante Cicchetti and Vicki Carlson, eds, *Child Maltreatment: Theory and Research on the Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect* 38, 56-58 (Cambridge, 1989).

66. David G. Gil, *Violence against Children: Physical Child Abuse in the United States* 141 (Harvard, 1970).

67. However, the NCPCA may be moving toward such an approach because it recently started distributing pamphlets on “discipline” that advise against corporal punishment. Nevertheless, no NCPCA literature mentions corporal punishment as a risk factor for physical abuse.

68. Murray A. Straus and Carrie L. Yodanis, *Physical Abuse*, cited in Straus, *Beating the Devil* 81, 81-87 (cited in note 8). In an analysis of thirty-one books, Carson found that about one-third of parental advice books discourage the use of corporal punishment and that none unambiguously advises parents to never hit a child. Barbara A. Carson, *Advice of Child-Rearing Manuals on the Use of Physical Punishment*, Presentation to the 3d International Conference of Family Violence Researchers (June 1987).

69. Straus and Yodanis, *Physical Abuse* at 83 (cited in note 68).

Only twelve percent of the books make an unambiguous recommendation against corporal punishment.⁷⁰

A. REASONS FOR IGNORING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

How can we explain the discrepancy between the respected scholars who conclude that corporal punishment is a major risk for child abuse and the lack of attention paid to corporal punishment in the majority of books on child abuse and in the literature of major child abuse organizations? We investigated four possibilities: (1) inconclusive evidence, (2) a contradiction of deeply embedded cultural norms, (3) a misperception of typical abuse cases, and (4) an absence of a linking processes theory.⁷¹

1. The evidence is inconclusive.

A review of the literature on child-rearing shows mixed evidence. Comparisons of the amount of corporal punishment used by abusing and non-abusing parents show that although the abusing parents use more corporal punishment, the difference is not great.⁷² On the other hand, clinical studies of abusive parents show that most physical abuse originates as an attempt to correct and control behavior through corporal punishment.⁷³ When a child does not comply, or in the case of older children, hits back or curses the parent, the resulting frustration and rage leads some parents to increase the severity of the physical attack. Kempe and Kempe, for example, state that abusive parents "may be discouraged when spanking obviously brings no success, but they truly see no alternative and grow depressed by both their own behavior and their babies' responses. Helplessly, they continue in the same vicious circle: punishment, deteriorating relationship, frustration, and further punishment."⁷⁴

Wolfe, et al, call this sequence "child precipitated abuse" because it begins when a child misbehaves.⁷⁵ If corporal punishment is not effective, abusive parents increase the severity of the punishment until the child is injured.⁷⁶ Marion argues that corporal punishment creates a false sense of successful discipline because of the temporary end it puts to undesirable behavior.⁷⁷ She also

70. Id.

71. Id at 87-89.

72. This is probably because almost all parents use corporal punishment, Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 103 (cited in note 1), and only a sub-group allows corporal punishment to escalate into physical abuse.

73. Zigler and Hall, *Physical Child Abuse in America* at 57 (cited in note 65).

74. Ruth S. Kempe and C. Henry Kempe, *Child Abuse* 15 (Harvard, 1978).

75. David Wolfe, et al, *The Child Management Program for Abusive Parents: Procedures for Developing a Child Abuse Intervention Program* 26-27 (Anna, 1981).

76. Devenson and Marion reach similar conclusions on the basis of clinical evidence. Anne Devenson, *Violence in Society*, in Kim Oates, ed, *Child Abuse: A Community Concern* 231, 235-36 (Brunner/Mazel, 1982); Marian Marion, *Primary Prevention of Child Abuse: The Role of the Family Life Educator*, 31 *Fam Relations* 575, 576 (1982).

77. Marion, 31 *Fam Relations* at 576 (cited in note 76).

cites research that shows that corporal punishment tends to *increase* undesirable behavior in children.⁷⁸ Thus, parents who rely on corporal punishment must continually increase its intensity.

Empirical research also supports the escalation theory. Frude and Gross studied 111 mothers and found that mothers who worry about hurting their children tend to use corporal punishment frequently.⁷⁹ Gil studied 1,380 abused children and found that sixty-three percent of the abuse incidents were an "immediate or delayed response to [a] specific act of [the] child."⁸⁰ Straus interviewed a sample of 902 parents and found that the more they approved of corporal punishment, the greater the probability that they had actually gone beyond corporal punishment and severely assaulted a child.⁸¹

Kadushin and Martin's study of sixty-six abusive parents is probably the most direct test of the escalation theory. They describe a number of specific situations in which escalation occurs, such as when a child fails to respond to the punishment or attempts to fight back or run away, or when a parent becomes frustrated and enraged while using corporal punishment, as in the following two examples:

Then I started to spank her and she wouldn't cry—stubborn, she's just like I am, she wouldn't cry—like it was having no effect, like she was defying me. So I spanked her all the harder.⁸²

It all started when Camille [age fourteen] slammed the door on her little sister's leg. Camille was in the bathroom and realized there was no toilet tissue. She asked her little sister, the 9-year-old, to get some tissue, which she did do, and apparently her sister wasn't rushing out of the bathroom fast enough and Camille kind of pushed the door, and in the process, she caught her sister's leg in the door, and with the child screaming as she did from the pain, it got me very angered. . . . And I think at that moment I lost control completely, and I went over and I swatted Camille with me—you know, my hand, and Camille turned around and she swung back to strike me, which she did do and that got me even more aggravated. And before I knew what really was going on, I had pounded Camille several times. She had run a tub of bath water to take a bath, and suddenly I realized I had knocked Camille into the bathtub. And apparently I had struck her in the face, which by no means was intentional. But she had a swollen eye, and she didn't say anything to me that night.⁸³

78. *Id.*

79. Neal Frude and Alison Gross, *Parental Anger: A General Population Survey*, in C. Henry Kempe, et al, eds, *The Abused Child in the Family and in the Community* 331, 332 (Pergamon, 1980).

80. Gil, *Violence against Children* at 126 (cited in note 66).

81. Straus, 38 *Soc Probs* at 140 (cited in note 15).

82. Kadushin and Martin, *Child Abuse* at 173 (cited in note 21).

83. *Id.* at 175.

2. Contradicts deeply embedded cultural norms.

Within the space limitations of this Article, we can only point to five of the many indicators of the degree to which corporal punishment is a culturally expected aspect of parental behavior. First, corporal punishment is legal in every state.⁸⁴ Second, at least eighty-four percent of Americans believe that "a good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary."⁸⁵ Third, over ninety percent of American parents use corporal punishment on toddlers,⁸⁶ and more than half continue it into a child's adolescence.⁸⁷ Fourth, child abuse laws passed in all fifty states in the 1960s explicitly excluded corporal punishment. And finally, parents who do not spank received both direct and indirect suggestions to use corporal punishment from neighbors and relatives.⁸⁸

3. Misperception of typical abuse cases.

Another reason why corporal punishment may be ignored as a cause of physical abuse is the distorted perception of physical abuse that comes from the mass media's emphasis on cases involving sadistic and mentally ill parents who burn, maim, or kill their children. Such cases are unforgettable, and they tend to be rooted in psychopathology. But ninety-five percent of physical abuse cases do not involve severe injuries,⁸⁹ and they are typically rooted in corporal punishment rather than in psychopathology. In fact, psychopathology is involved in no more than ten percent of physical abuse cases.⁹⁰

4. Absence of a linking processes theory.

Another possible reason might be the absence of a theory describing the process by which corporal punishment results in physical abuse. That does not seem likely, though, since the researchers who have written about corporal punishment as a risk factor for physical abuse have almost always also given a theoretical account of the possible intervening processes. One of these theories—escalation in response to non-compliance or retaliatory aggression by the child—was discussed earlier. In the following sections, we review three other theories and present a theoretical model that integrates all four theories.

84. Straus and Donnelly, 24 *Youth & Soc'y* at 439 (cited in note 33).

85. Straus, 38 *Soc Probs* at 140 (cited in note 15).

86. Wauchope and Straus, *Physical Punishment and Physical Abuse of American Children* at 133 (cited in note 13).

87. Straus and Donnelly, 24 *Youth & Soc'y* at 427-29 (cited in note 33).

88. Carson, *Parents Who Don't Spank* at 181-84 (cited in note 16).

89. James Garbarino, *Can We Measure Success in Preventing Child Abuse? Issues in Policy, Programming and Research*, 10 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 143, 150-51 (1986).

90. Gelles, *The Violent Home* at 16 (cited in note 40); Kempe and Kempe, *Child Abuse* at 68 (cited in note 74).

B. OTHER LINKING PROCESSES AND A THEORETICAL MODEL

1. Cultural spillover theory.

The basic premise of the cultural spillover theory is that cultural norms that legitimize violence for socially approved purposes, such as the use of violence to discipline children or the execution of murderers, tend to carry-over to other non-legitimate purposes, such as the use of violence to obtain sex, i.e. rape.⁹¹

2. Depression.

A second theory that might explain the link between corporal punishment and physical abuse specifies depression as the intervening variable. Straus found that the more corporal punishment a person experiences as a child, the more likely it is that person will be depressed and suicidal as an adult.⁹² Depression and suicide have traditionally been thought of as internally directed aggression, but recent research shows that many depressed persons are also highly aggressive toward others.⁹³ Thus, depression could be an intervening link between those victimized by corporal punishment and those physically abusive to children.

3. Marital violence.

A final theory is suggested by research showing that the more corporal punishment a person experiences as a child, the more likely it is that person will engage in marital violence later in life.⁹⁴ Because marital violence increases the probability of physical abuse against children,⁹⁵ this research suggests that the intervening process linking corporal punishment to physical abuse is marital violence.

These three theories along with the escalation theory presented earlier are likely to be complementary rather than alternative explanations. Figure 5 therefore brings them together in the form of a path model.

4. Model tested.

Using data from the National Family Violence Survey, we tested a model that in some ways is more complete, but in other ways less complete, than the model in Figure 5. The model was more complete because it specified eight additional exogenous variables, such as socio-economic status and whether there was also violence between parents, to control for the confounding effects of corporal punishment experienced by parents. It was less complete because it specified only the effects of corporal punishment experienced by parents when they were children. Earlier, we hypothesized that the processes linking corporal

91. Larry Baron and Murray A. Straus, *Four Theories of Rape in American Society: A State-Level Analysis* 147 (Yale, 1989).

92. Straus, *Corporal Punishment of Children* (cited in note 56).

93. Berkowitz, *Aggression* at 64 (cited in note 53).

94. Straus, 38 Soc Probs at 142-43 (cited in note 15).

95. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 115 (cited in note 7).

punishment and physical abuse operate at least partly by increasing approval of violence to correct misbehavior and by increasing the probability of marital violence and depression. Additional research is needed to test the other parts of the model.⁹⁶

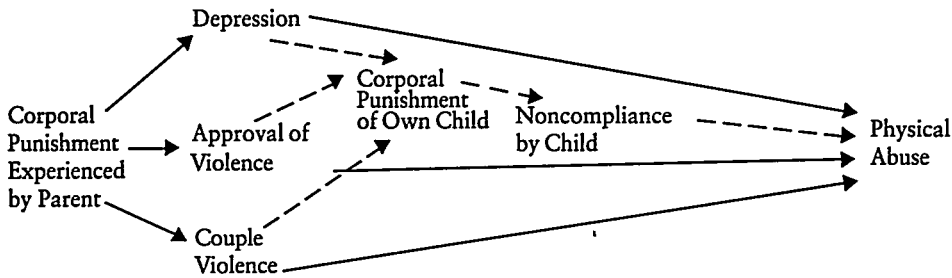


Fig. 5. Theoretical model of links between corporal punishment experienced by parents and abuse of their own children

C. FINDINGS

Figure 6 summarizes the results of the path analysis conducted to test the model shown in Figure 5.⁹⁷ The path at the top of Figure 6 of 0.128 from corporal punishment to depression shows that, as hypothesized, there is a significant indirect effect of corporal punishment on physical abuse on the path traced through depression. This is consistent with the theory that corporal punishment increases the risk of depression, which in turn increases the risk of physical abuse.

96. We could not test the parts of the model that deal with non-compliance by the child because the data set for this study does not include that information. We also could not directly test the part of the model that addresses escalation from the use of corporal punishment because all the abusing parents also used ordinary corporal punishment such as spanking and slapping. Consequently, including socially acceptable forms of corporal punishment in the model would amount to regressing the dependent variable onto itself.

97. The standard errors, tests, and other statistics are in Murray A. Straus and Carrie L. Yodanis, *Corporal Punishment in Adolescence and Physical Assaults on Spouses Later in Life: What Accounts for the Link*, Presentation to the American Society of Criminology (1993).

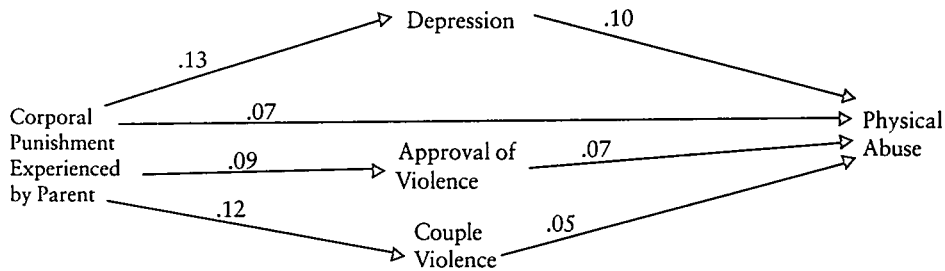


Fig. 6. Path analysis testing key parts of fig. 5

Figure 6 also shows the hypothesized indirect paths from corporal punishment to physical abuse through approval of violence and through marital violence. That is, corporal punishment is associated with an increase in attitudes favorable to violence and an increase in the level of violence between the respondent and her spouse, which in turn are associated with an increased risk of physical abuse against children.

D. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

During the past twenty-five years, many well-respected scholars have argued that the use of corporal punishment in child rearing increases the risk of physical abuse.⁹⁸ But corporal punishment has been virtually ignored as a risk factor for physical abuse by government and private agencies and by authors of books on child abuse. In our view, corporal punishment is ignored because it is so deeply ingrained in American culture that the idea of eliminating it is regarded as ridiculous or impractical. Regardless of whether this conclusion is correct, more theoretical and empirical research on the connection between corporal punishment and physical abuse is needed. We intend for this Article to be a starting point.

On the theoretical side, our analysis shows that corporal punishment can escalate into physical abuse by a process that works at several levels. At the *immediate incident* level, the escalation occurs within a specific sequence of interaction between parent and child: a parent spansks a child, the child rebels

98. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 237 (cited in note 7); Zigler and Hall, *Physical Child Abuse in America* at 56 (cited in note 65).

rather than complies, and the now doubly-angered parent attacks the child in a way that crosses the boundary between legal corporal punishment and physical abuse. Viewed developmentally, the more corporal punishment is used, the greater the risk of escalation. This is so because corporal punishment tends to be used by parents with less knowledge about child development on children who are more physically aggressive.⁹⁹ Thus, the more parents rely on corporal punishment, the more they will have to use it over time, and the greater the probability that the child will hit back,¹⁰⁰ thus further increasing the risk of escalation to physical abuse.

At the *inter-generational* level of analysis, corporal punishment is associated with an increase in variables that are associated with increased risk of physical abuse, such as approval of interpersonal violence and a tendency to engage in physical aggression.

At the *macro-cultural* level, corporal punishment creates a social climate approving of violence to correct wrongdoing, thus making the public more tolerant of physical abuse. This tolerance is illustrated by the New Hampshire Supreme Court's decision that held that a child with welts visible five days after his mother beat him with a belt was not an "abused child."¹⁰¹

In this Article, we examined corporal punishment at the inter-generational level. We analyzed 2,342 parents who participated in the 1985 National Family Violence Survey. We found that more than half of these parents recalled one or more instances in which they had experienced corporal punishment during their teenage years. Using path analysis, we found that the more corporal punishment these parents experienced as youths, the greater their approval of interpersonal violence, the more marital violence in their current marriage, and the higher their score on a depressive systems index. We also found that each of these three variables is associated with physical abuse against children.

VI. Concluding Remarks

A. THREATS TO VALIDITY

The statistical analysis for the two studies controlled for a number of possible sources of spurious findings such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and prior exposure to violence between parents. Nevertheless, some other potential threats to the validity of this research need to be evaluated.

1. Inadequately specified model.

There is a possibility that some unspecified variable might explain the results. For example, the connection between corporal punishment and approval of

99. Marion, 31 Fam Relations at 575-76 (cited in note 76); Robert R. Sears, Eleanor C. Maccoby, and Harry Levin, *Patterns of Child Rearing* 259-61 (Stanford, 1976); Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 157-59 (cited in note 8).

100. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors* at 119-20 (cited in note 7).

101. *In re Ethan H.*, 135 NH 681, 609 A2d 1222, 1222 (1992).

violence might occur because parents who slap teenagers may also approve of slapping their spouses. We could not control for this possibility because we lack data on attitudes of the respondents' parents toward slapping a spouse. However, we were able to specify a variable that might be at least a partial proxy—whether the parents of the respondent actually slapped or hit each other. Even assuming that this is an adequate proxy, the fact remains that there could be other specifications that are necessary but unrealized. Only experimental research can rule out this threat to validity.

2. Selective recall of corporal punishment.

The data on corporal punishment were obtained by asking adults about being hit by their parents when they were adolescents. It is possible that there is selective recall by those respondents who hit their spouse. The fact that more than half of the population recalls being hit at this age makes it unlikely that only those who are predisposed to violence recalled such events, but it does not remove this threat to validity.

3. Confounding with physical abuse.

The respondents who report a high level of corporal punishment as children were probably also physically abused by their parents. This confounding with physical abuse could explain at least part of our findings. However, research that excludes those physically abused as children shows that corporal punishment has significant harmful side effects.¹⁰² Thus, confounding with physical abuse does not necessarily account for the findings.

4. Findings are not applicable to corporal punishment of younger children.

It can be argued that the findings of this research are not applicable to corporal punishment of toddlers. But even if this is true, it is not a threat to the validity of the findings because we argue only that the findings describe the more than half of the population who were hit as adolescents. However, that “limitation” does not preclude the possibility that corporal punishment of younger children can have similar effects. First, almost all of these adolescents were probably subjected to corporal punishment for many years prior to their teens, probably since infancy.¹⁰³ It could be that the strongest influence occurred during those formative years. Second, numerous studies have shown that corporal punishment of toddlers is associated with higher rates of aggression by those children.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, preliminary results from a large longitudinal sample of three- to five-year-old children show that corporal punishment does not result in

102. Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 167 (cited in note 8); Yvonne M. Vissing, et al, *Verbal Aggression by Parents and Psychosocial Problems of Children*, 15 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 223, 233 (1991); Carrie L. Yodanis, *Corporal Punishment and the Fusion of Love and Violence* (1992) (unpublished MA thesis, University of New Hampshire).

103. Straus, *Beating the Devil* at 9 (cited in note 8).

104. See, for example, Sears, Maccoby, and Levin, *Patterns of Child Rearing* at 259-61 (cited in note 99).

an increased probability of aggression until two years after its use.¹⁰⁵

5. Findings are not applicable to those who were hit only once or twice.

It is often argued that if corporal punishment is used only occasionally or "in moderation," it is not harmful. The harmful side effects occur only when it becomes so frequent as to be "physical abuse." This argument assumes that occasionally hitting a teenager is not abuse, whereas the assumption that we tested is that any hitting of a teenager is abuse in the sense that it has harmful side effects. A statistical version of the idea that corporal punishment is only harmful when done "excessively" is that these high-frequency cases dominate the regression line. To examine this possibility, we computed analyses of covariance to compare the observed difference between those who were never hit, hit only once, hit only twice, hit three times, etc. We found that each increase in corporal punishment of an adolescent is associated with an increase in approval of violence as well as an increase in assaults against a spouse and severe violence against a child. Thus, even one instance of being hit by parents as an adolescent is associated with an increased probability of assaults against a spouse or child as an adult.

B. IMPLICATIONS

The most direct policy implications of this research stem from the fact that more than half of American parents continue to hit adolescent children. To the extent that such corporal punishment of adolescents is a risk factor for assaulting a spouse later in life, eliminating this widespread practice can significantly contribute to a reduction in marital violence.

There may, however, be even broader implications. Although this research focused on marital violence, we believe that the findings on approval of violence and conflict have wider applications. It is not unreasonable to believe that the same process also serves to increase the level of violence in non-family situations. Moreover, the findings on the link between corporal punishment and approval of violence suggest that corporal punishment may also contribute to perpetuating implicit norms in the criminal justice system that tolerate marital assaults. If so, the fact that corporal punishment continues into adolescence for more than half of the U.S. population may help explain why, more than a century after the common law right of husbands to "physically chastise" a wife was withdrawn, and despite two decades of recent effort to stop assaults on wives, violence between spouses continues to permeate American society. Members of the police and other criminal justice institutions are, of course, among the more than half who have witnessed the violence that results from corporal punishment, and a reluctance to address their experiences directly may be part of the reason why members of those institutions avoid dealing with all but the most egregious cases

105. David Sugarman, Murray A. Straus, and Jean Giles-Sims, *Corporal Punishment and Anti-Social Behavior: A Longitudinal Analysis* (1994) (unpublished manuscript).

of marital assault. To the extent that these interpretations are correct, it suggests that ending the use of physical violence in child rearing can be an important step toward changing cultural norms and *de facto* institutional practices that support marital and other types of violence.

A great many social-environmental characteristics converge to cause the high rates of intra-family violence found in many societies.¹⁰⁶ In this Article, we focused on the hypothesis that one of them is corporal punishment by parents. Corporal punishment needs to be one of the targets of primary prevention for three reasons. First, almost the entire population experiences it. Therefore, remedial steps will benefit many people. Second, because corporal punishment is an act of violence itself, eliminating it is desirable even if it has no preventative effect on spousal abuse or the physical abuse of children. Third, reducing or eliminating corporal punishment, in our opinion, is a practical and attainable step.

C. THE PROSPECTS FOR ENDING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Perhaps the most questionable of these three justifications is whether eliminating corporal punishment is really "a practical and attainable step." One indication of the possible difficulty is the absence from most child abuse literature of any mention of corporal punishment as a risk factor for physical abuse. Similarly, parent education programs, such as *STEP* and *PET*, and advice books for parents, such as those written by Spock,¹⁰⁷ do not *explicitly* take a stance against corporal punishment. Perhaps these authors avoid the issue because of their own ambivalence concerning corporal punishment. Or, perhaps they fear that telling parents not to use corporal punishment will raise the anxiety level of their readers, causing them to lose rapport and sales. Whatever the reason, a first step in moving the U.S. away from the predominant pattern of using violence to socialize children is for experts to clearly tell parents that a child should never, under any circumstance, be spanked or hit in any way.

On a more optimistic note, Sweden enacted legislation in 1979 making all corporal punishment by parents illegal.¹⁰⁸ The other Scandinavian countries and Austria have since followed the Swedish example. Sweden's abolition of corporal punishment was greeted by derisive cartoons and editorials. Had it been up to the public at large, the change might not have occurred. In passing the law, the Swedish parliament evidently responded to the "claims makers"¹⁰⁹ who

106. For U.S. statistics, see Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 108-10 (cited in note 1); Straus and Gelles, eds, *Physical Violence* at 3-5 (cited in note 1).

107. See, for example, Spock and Rothenberg, *Baby And Child Care* at 338 (7th ed) (cited in note 23).

108. Adrienne Ahlgren Haeuser, *Banning Parental Use of Physical Punishment: Success in Sweden*, Presentation to the 8th International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect (Sept 2-6, 1990)

109. Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems* 78-79 (Cummings, 1977).

were concerned about what appeared to be a dramatic increase in child abuse.¹¹⁰ They sought to redefine what was then legally and morally acceptable behavior carried out by most parents, such as spanking, as a social problem that needed to be remedied. The objections and ridicule were gradually replaced by acceptance and appreciation of the law. Seventy-one percent of Swedes now favor rearing children without corporal punishment, compared to only sixteen percent of Americans.

One of the reasons the public has come to accept and welcome the no-spanking law is that it is part of the civil code, not the criminal code. There are no criminal penalties for punishing parents who spank. Thus, the fear that thousands of parents could be hauled into court for using corporal punishment has never occurred. The Swedish law was intended to establish a new national standard, to educate, and to help parents and children. For example, after the Swedish government passed the law, it sent all parents of children under three years of age a booklet on discipline without corporal punishment.¹¹¹

Another reason for the change in public opinion is the assistance provided to parents under the no-spanking law. Parents who use corporal punishment are not labelled and defined as mean or cruel. The law assumes that all parents occasionally have trouble rearing their children. Therefore all parents need help in that difficult task. Many kinds of assistance are extended to help these parents learn how to manage their children without hitting. Since most parents can use help at one time or another, the law has come to be appreciated rather than resented. Thus, one of the reasons Swedes have come to embrace the new law is that the public has learned that the law can help them in one of the most difficult and important of all tasks faced by a typical citizen.

A third reason why the law has been successful is that it aims to educate children as well as parents. Children are told in school and through the mass media that parents are not allowed to hit them. This provision of the law may sound underhanded or even sinister to most Americans. But that perception is due to the depth of the American commitment to corporal punishment. It does not sound sinister or underhanded to Americans when children are told that everyone should wear a seat belt, that no one should smoke, and that adults are not allowed to touch children's genitals. Americans enthusiastically support the idea that a child should tell someone if a parent or other adult tries to have sex with her, but they are shocked by the idea that a child should do the same if a parent commits a physical assault. The difference is a matter of the activities that society defines as wrong. Sex with children is defined as wrong—as it should be—but hitting children is not.

Why is hitting children also not defined as a wrong? One of the reasons is that hitting children to correct and train them reflects a deep but rarely perceived cultural approval of violence to correct many types of wrongs. It shows up in both subtle and obvious ways. For example, seventy percent of Americans

110. Feshbach, 9 *J Clin Child Psych* at 110 (cited in note 65).

111. *Id* at 110-11.

endorse the idea that "when a boy is growing up it is important for him to have a few fist fights."¹¹² Most Americans also believe that murderers should be killed.¹¹³ Most Americans supported the Vietnam War, the Panama Invasion of 1989, and the Gulf War of 1991, all of which were examples of politically-sanctioned violence. Given this deep-seated commitment to violence as a means of correcting wrongs, passing a law is not likely to have the same effect as in Sweden. Thus, American culture also needs to change in some fundamental ways.¹¹⁴

Finally, the experience with Sweden's ban on corporal punishment gives us hints about the long-term effects of such a law. There is no data about the extent to which actual hitting of children has decreased since Sweden enacted the new law. Swedish public opinion, however, has changed drastically, and this likely reflects at least some change in the behavior of the public. If change in attitudes is an important step toward changing behavior, the Swedes have taken that step.

The history of other humanitarian social changes is similar. There is vehement opposition at first, as was the case with slavery in the United States (which escalated into a war), and sometimes there is only derision and foot dragging, as was the case with voting rights for women. The civil rights gains of the 1960s and the gains in women's rights in the 1970s depended on a mobilized minority. Had they been put to a popular vote at the time, as was the Swedish law on corporal punishment, these accomplishments may never have occurred. In fact, the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution did not pass. Today, although there is lingering opposition, the overwhelming majority of Americans favor equal rights for women as well as African Americans and other minorities. Corporal punishment of children is as deeply ingrained an aspect of American society as was the idea that African Americans and women were inferior human beings. It will take the determined efforts of a mobilized minority to end this ancient evil. If that can be done, it is likely to make a major contribution to the prevention of many other social and psychological problems, reducing rates of depression, suicide, and violent behavior both in and outside of the family.

112. Rodney Stark and James McEvoy III, *Middle-Class Violence*, *Psych Today* 52, 54 (Nov 1970).

113. Gelles and Straus, *Intimate Violence* at 198 (cited in note 1).

114. Baron and Straus, *Four Theories* at 150-60 (cited in note 91); Charles C. Bebbler, *Increases in U.S. Violent Crime during the 1980s Following Four American Military Actions*, 9 *J Interpersonal Violence* 109, 112 (1994).