

# Quarterly

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## Parenting without physical punishment

### OVERVIEW

Toward violence-free  
childhood

### REVIEW

Discipline doesn't  
have to hurt





## Children's Health Policy Centre

### About the Children's Health Policy Centre

We are an interdisciplinary research group in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. We aim to improve children's social and emotional health and reduce health disparities starting in childhood. To learn more about our work, please see [childhealthpolicy.ca](http://childhealthpolicy.ca).

### About the *Quarterly*

The *Quarterly* provides summaries of the best available research evidence on a variety of children's mental health topics, prepared using systematic review and synthesis methods adapted from the *Cochrane Collaboration* and *Evidence-Based Mental Health*. Our goal is to improve outcomes for children by informing policy and practice. The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development funds the *Quarterly*.

### Quarterly Team

Scientific Writer

Christine Schwartz, PhD, RPsych

Scientific Editor

Charlotte Waddell, MSc, MD, CCFP, FRCPC

Research Manager

Jen Barican, BA, MPH

Research Assistant

Caitlyn Andres, BSc, MPH

Production Editor

Daphne Gray-Grant, BA (Hon)

Copy Editor

Naomi Pauls, MPub



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#### Preventing eating disorders

Anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder can have devastating consequences for young people. We review what can be done to prevent these eating disorders.

### How to Cite the *Quarterly*

We encourage you to share the *Quarterly* with others and we welcome its use as a reference (for example, in preparing educational materials for parents or community groups). Please cite this issue as follows:

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## Toward violence-free childhood

*There's got to be some other ways to discipline rather than hitting kids. You never forget what happened when you were younger.*

— Fourteen-year-old girl<sup>1</sup>

*When I saw her smacking that doll, she couldn't have been more than 16 or 18 months. I went ... and told my husband we are not going to do this.*

— Mother of two<sup>2</sup>

A primary task of parenthood is teaching children how to manage their own behaviour. Still, no matter how skilled the parenting, children will inevitably misbehave. When parents respond by using appropriate discipline, and using it consistently, they support their children in two important ways. They protect their children from engaging in potentially dangerous behaviour and they help them develop critical skills such as self-control.

Many Canadian parents use effective disciplinary strategies, including modelling positive behaviours, negotiating limits and setting age-appropriate expectations. Some parents also resort to physical punishment.<sup>3</sup> Spanking is the most common type.<sup>4</sup> Slapping, pinching, twisting ears and even placing bad-tasting substances in the child's mouth are sometimes used as well.<sup>4-5</sup>

### How common is physical punishment?

In a 1999 representative population survey of more than 1,600 Canadian parents of children under six, 51% acknowledged using some form of physical punishment at least occasionally.<sup>6</sup> Compared to those who never used physical punishment, parents who did also displayed less warmth toward their children, managed their children's behaviour less effectively, and used other punitive strategies more often, such as yelling or calling their children "bad."<sup>6</sup> Parents who used physical punishment also had lower levels of education, more children in the home, and more challenging family interactions, such as people not getting along well.<sup>6</sup>



Physical punishment has been linked to children experiencing poorer mental health and cognitive outcomes.

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A more recent (2012–13) survey of more than 2,300 Canadian parents of two- to 12-year-olds found that only 26% of respondents reported spanking their children.<sup>7</sup> This survey also found that the use of spanking was associated with the following variables: positive attitudes toward this form of punishment, children being younger, parents having lower levels of education, and low family income.<sup>7</sup> Still, it needs to be recognized that many mothers and fathers who do experience disadvantages skillfully and capably parent their children.

It's also important to understand that these figures likely underestimate the true rate of physical punishment. This is because the two surveys depended on parent reports, and parents may not recall things accurately — or may not admit to using physical punishment.<sup>5</sup>

The available evidence from other countries suggests that the use of physical punishment is on the decline — based on child reports. For example, a nationally representative survey of German adolescents found that “light” slaps in the face decreased from 81% to 69% and severe slaps decreased from 44% to 14% between 1992 and 2002.<sup>8</sup> Notably, this decline coincided with the German legal ban in 2000 on the use of physical punishment.<sup>8–9</sup>

Similarly, a representative sample of Finns born between 1931 and 1970 found that 35% had been slapped during their childhood.<sup>10</sup> This number decreased to 23% for those born between 1971 and 1996, a reduction that coincided with a 1983 law banning the use of physical punishment.<sup>10</sup>

## Good reasons for avoiding physical punishment

There are many compelling reasons for parents to not use physical punishment. Key is the fact that physical punishment has been linked to children experiencing poorer mental health and cognitive outcomes. A recent and rigorous systematic review of 45 longitudinal studies examined differences between children who had been physically punished and those who had not.<sup>11</sup> The researchers categorized physical punishment as either spanking or other forms of physical punishment, such as pushing, shoving and slapping. They found the following significant associations:

- Spanking was associated with children experiencing emotional problems.
- Spanking and other forms of physical punishment were associated with children experiencing behaviour problems.
- Other forms of physical punishment were associated with children experiencing reduced cognitive performance.<sup>11</sup>

Although effect sizes were quite small (ranging from 0.07 to 0.11), the findings were particularly compelling given this review's rigour. Specifically, most studies controlled for factors that could have affected the relationship between physical punishment and later negative outcomes. These factors included differences in levels of emotional support and cognitive stimulation that parents provided, as well as differences in families' socio-economic status.<sup>11, 15</sup>

## Physical punishment or physical abuse?

There is no universal standard defining the point when physical punishment becomes physical abuse.<sup>5</sup> Even when researchers study physical abuse, definitions vary. For example, one Canadian study included acts such as pushing, grabbing or shoving in their definitions of physical abuse but excluded slapping and spanking.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, another Canadian study included slapping on the face, head or ears.<sup>13</sup>

Government guidelines for defining physical abuse also vary. In BC, physical abuse is defined as “a deliberate physical assault or action by a person that results in, or is likely to result in, physical harm to a child.”<sup>14</sup> The BC guidelines also specifically note that physical abuse includes “the use of unreasonable force to discipline a child.”<sup>14</sup>

Although consensus may still be lacking on when physical punishment becomes physical abuse, it is nevertheless clear that there are more humane and safer ways to guide children's behaviour than through the use of physical punishment.

Physical punishment also puts children at risk for serious physical injuries. A Canada-wide survey of substantiated physical abuse cases found that for 74%, child maltreatment occurred within the context of physical punishment.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a survey of American mothers found that children who were spanked were nearly three times more likely to also be seriously physically abused (i.e., beaten, burned, kicked or shaken), compared with children who were not spanked.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the harms to children, research evidence suggests that physical punishment is simply ineffective. A recent review of existing studies evaluating the efficacy of physical punishment found that it was not more effective than other disciplinary methods.<sup>18</sup> In fact, one study from this review found that an average of eight spankings was needed before children would comply.<sup>19</sup> On balance, the available data suggest that not only is physical punishment ineffective in modifying child behaviour, but also parents may escalate their use of it when children do not immediately comply.<sup>5</sup>

## Legislating better parenting

Legislation likely influences parents' use of physical punishment. Currently, more than 40 countries have laws prohibiting the use of physical punishment (see sidebar, below).<sup>9</sup> While most of these countries are European, nations from around the globe are represented. Notably, Canada is not.

Although the legislation in those countries varies considerably, the typical intent is to support families, not to criminalize parents.<sup>4</sup> A review of such legal bans found that they were closely associated with decreases in the actual use of physical punishment, as well as decreases in popular support for it.<sup>4</sup> Still, it remains unclear whether legal bans actually precede declines in popular support for physical punishment or follow from it.<sup>4</sup> Either way, this approach has clearly benefited children.

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*Beyond the harms to children, research evidence suggests that physical punishment is simply ineffective.*

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### Countries with legal bans on physical punishment

As of January 9, 2015, the following 45 countries have legally banned physical punishment:<sup>9</sup>

Albania	Denmark	Luxembourg	South Sudan
Angola	Estonia	Macedonia	Spain
Argentina	Finland	Malta	Sweden
Austria	Germany	Moldova	Togo
Bolivia	Greece	Netherlands	Tunisia
Brazil	Honduras	New Zealand	Turkmenistan
Bulgaria	Hungary	Nicaragua	Ukraine
Cabo Verde	Iceland	Norway	Uruguay
Congo	Israel	Poland	Venezuela
Costa Rica	Kenya	Portugal	
Croatia	Latvia	Romania	
Cyprus	Liechtenstein	San Marino	

## What more can be done?

Given that some children continue to be physically punished, more needs to be done to prevent this harmful approach. How might we achieve this goal? Educating parents would be a helpful starting point. For example, public awareness campaigns could provide information on the harm that physical punishment causes children, as well as its ineffectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Education efforts could also target specific groups. For instance, training programs for health care providers could include information about the research evidence on physical punishment.<sup>20</sup> As well, public health practitioners and primary care providers could provide expectant and new parents with information about the harms associated with physical punishment. These efforts could also highlight effective ways of supporting children and managing their behaviour. Our upcoming [Review](#) article highlights some particularly successful parenting programs.

Finally, Canada could follow the lead of the many nations protecting children from physical violence through federal legislation.<sup>5</sup> This would involve enacting laws that prohibit all forms of physical punishment with children. Similar to the legislation enacted in many other countries, the focus needs to be on informing and supporting parents to use non-violent approaches.<sup>3</sup> 🙌

### Most vulnerable, least protected

In 1892, the first Criminal Code of Canada provided a legal defence to adults who used physical force against a child. Since then, there have been very few changes to the law (Section 43), which states that “every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child ... if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances.”<sup>21</sup>

Still, concerned citizens have made efforts to give children the same legal protection against physical violence that adults have. A 2004 Supreme Court challenge led to some additional limitations on the use of physical punishment – namely, restricting the application of physical punishment to a child’s head and restricting the use of objects such as belts.<sup>21</sup> As well, children under two and those with particular disabilities were granted protection from physical punishment as they were deemed unable to have the capacity to understand and benefit from “the correction.”<sup>21</sup> Because the justices also recognized that physical punishment can induce aggressive or antisocial behaviour in adolescents, they, too, were protected.<sup>21</sup> But the court failed to offer the same rights to children between two and 12 years of age, despite the evidence of harm that can occur for these children, too.<sup>11, 16</sup>

Some provinces have taken additional steps. For example, BC has banned the use of physical punishment by foster parents and in provincially licensed child care programs and schools.<sup>5</sup> Still, additional legislative changes need to occur if Canada is to uphold its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandates the protection of all children from all forms of physical violence.<sup>21</sup>

## Discipline doesn't have to hurt

Can parenting programs reduce the use of physical punishment with children? Beyond this, can these programs help parents learn new approaches to discipline? And do they have a positive impact on children's mental health? To answer these questions, we conducted a systematic review of parenting interventions, seeking randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluations that included measures of parents' use of physical punishment and children's well-being. (Please see our [methods](#) for more information.)

We accepted five evaluations assessing three programs:

- *Chicago Parent Program* (researchers combined data from two separate RCTs into a single evaluation)<sup>22-24</sup>
- *Incredible Years* (one RCT using the standard program and one using an enhanced version)<sup>25-29</sup>
- *Triple P — Positive Parenting Program* (this program has five levels, ranging in intensity from level 1, comprising media campaigns, to level 5, comprising intensive parenting programs.<sup>30</sup> One RCT used level 3 and one used level 4.)<sup>31-35</sup>

All three programs included parenting sessions aimed at helping mothers and fathers reduce negative interactions with their children. Specifically, facilitators taught parents to consistently use positive discipline strategies and encouraged them to reduce their use of coercive discipline.<sup>24</sup> All three programs also aimed to help participants develop confidence in their parenting skills.<sup>24</sup> These participating parents did not have a history of perpetrating child maltreatment. (For information on interventions aimed at preventing maltreatment, please see our past issue [Preventing and Treating Child Maltreatment](#).) Despite these similarities, program intensity varied considerably, with the number of parenting sessions ranging from four (for *Triple P*) to 27 (for an enhanced version of *Incredible Years*).

### Targeted or universal?

All three programs were delivered in targeted formats, focusing on parents whose children were either at risk of developing behaviour problems or already had them. Risk was based on families living in low-income communities (*Chicago Parent Program* and standard *Incredible Years*),<sup>24, 29</sup> families having an older child in the justice system (enhanced *Incredible Years*),<sup>27</sup> or children having established behavioural problems (standard *Incredible Years* and level 3 *Triple P*).<sup>29, 35</sup> Level 4



Parenting programs can reduce the use of problematic discipline.

### Teaching parents in culturally acceptable ways

The *Chicago Parent Program* was specifically designed for African-American and Latino families. To ensure that parenting strategies being taught were culturally acceptable, developers sought input from parents within these communities.<sup>22, 24</sup> As well, when delivering the parenting sessions, facilitators addressed concepts in culturally sensitive ways. For example, as part of the dialogue on stress management, parents were encouraged to speak about the effects of racism and its impact on parenting.<sup>22</sup> In BC, with our diversity of communities — including First Nations, Asian and South Asian families — practitioners could take similar approaches in checking with participants and carefully incorporating their feedback to ensure that programs are culturally sensitive and acceptable.

*Triple P* was the only program delivered in a universal format.<sup>33</sup> Table 1 provides additional information about the programs and the participants.

<b>Table 1: Program and Participant Characteristics</b>		
<b>Program</b>	<b>Components<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>Child ages</b>
<b>Country</b>		<b>Number of parents</b>
<b>Targeted</b>		
<b>Chicago Parent Program</b> <sup>22,24</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 <i>group parenting sessions</i> (2 hrs each) on building positive parent-child relationships by teaching behavioural management, problem-solving + stress management skills using videotaped vignettes, group discussions + homework assignments</li> </ul>	2–4 years
United States		330 intervention + 283 control
<b>Incredible Years (Standard)</b> <sup>29</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12 <i>group parenting sessions</i> (2.5 hrs each) on promoting positive child behaviours by teaching behavioural management strategies using videotaped vignettes, group discussion + role plays</li> <li>10-week <i>literacy program</i> teaching parents to foster children's reading skills using role play, family literacy workshops + 2 home visits by facilitator</li> </ul>	5–6 years
United Kingdom		61 intervention + 51 control <sup>ii</sup>
<b>Incredible Years (Enhanced)</b> <sup>27–28</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>27 <i>group parenting sessions</i> (1.5 hrs each) as described above</li> <li>27 <i>guided parent-child sessions</i> (30 mins each) with facilitators coaching parents on using specific skills, such as praise + time outs</li> <li>12 <i>home visits</i> (1.5 hrs each) by facilitators to help parents implement skills</li> <li>1 <i>school visit</i> (2 hrs) by facilitator to assist children's transition to school</li> <li>Additional contact (as needed) to respond to family requests for support</li> </ul>	2–5 years
United States		47 intervention + 45 control <sup>iii</sup>
<b>Triple P (Level 3)</b> <sup>34–35</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 <i>individual parenting sessions</i> (30 mins each) on managing a specific behavioural problem by teaching behavioural tracking + by developing + implementing a parenting plan using advice, rehearsal + self-evaluation</li> </ul>	9–11 years
Netherlands		47 intervention + 46 usual care <sup>iv</sup>
<b>Universal</b>		
<b>Triple P (Level 4)</b> <sup>31,33</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 <i>group parenting sessions</i> (2 hrs each) on promoting positive parenting by teaching behaviour management skills + self-regulation using dyadic instruction + a workbook</li> <li>4 <i>phone calls</i> (15 mins each) by facilitators were offered to discuss progress, address challenges + respond to questions</li> </ul>	2–6 years
Germany		186 intervention + 94 control
<p>i Number of regular sessions/visits as well as booster sessions/visits, when applicable.</p> <p>ii Control group parents had access to a telephone hotline, which provided information about addressing behaviour concerns.</p> <p>iii Control group parents were provided with brief monthly phone calls, including referrals when needed.</p> <p>iv Usual care consisted of community nurses providing parenting support, ranging from advice to four home visits.<sup>35</sup></p>		

## Teaching more than parenting

While all three programs focused on parenting skills, three of the five RCTs included supplemental interventions. Given the link between poor reading ability and behaviour problems, the standard *Incredible Years* evaluation added a 10-week program to teach parents ways to improve their children's literacy skills.<sup>29</sup>

The enhanced *Incredible Years* evaluation, meanwhile, enriched the basic program by adding 10 more sessions and by adding five booster sessions to help maintain gains.<sup>27</sup> Researchers further enriched the program by adding 27 facilitator-guided parent-child sessions to bolster parents' use of specific skills, such as giving praise.<sup>27</sup> Facilitators also provided 12 home visits to help parents



implement their new skills.<sup>27</sup> During these visits facilitators helped parents develop and follow behavioural plans to address common hurdles, such as creating safe play environments.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the level 4 *Triple P* evaluation supplemented parenting sessions with up to four phone calls from facilitators to address any challenges participants were experiencing.<sup>33</sup>

## Benefits to children with improved parenting

The *Chicago Parent Program* led to many significant improvements for both parents and children compared with controls. One year after completing the program, intervention parents used less physical punishment, used positive discipline more consistently, and felt more confident in their skills.<sup>24</sup> Children of intervention parents also had fewer behavioural problems (by teacher ratings, although not by parent or researcher ratings) and fewer emotional problems.<sup>24</sup> As well, the behavioural challenges these children did experience were less intense.<sup>24</sup>

Standard *Incredible Years* coupled with child literacy programming also led to significant gains for both parents and children compared with controls. Four months after completing the program, intervention parents used less problematic discipline (e.g., spanking and prolonged exclusion) and were less critical of their children.<sup>29</sup> Intervention parents also increased their use of positive discipline — including making more attempts to gain their child’s cooperation as well as using rewards, praise and time outs more frequently.<sup>29</sup> (See adjacent sidebar for more information on how *Incredible Years* teaches the time-out technique.) Intervention parents also paid more attention to their children, played with them more, and showed more warmth toward them.<sup>29</sup> Children of intervention parents, meanwhile, were nearly 1.7 times less likely to be diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder compared with controls (31% versus 53%).<sup>29</sup> They also had fewer attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and behaviour symptoms and their reading improved.<sup>29</sup>

Enhanced *Incredible Years* also produced significant improvements for parents and children compared with controls. Eight months after the program ended, intervention parents were more responsive, including using more praise and rewarding their children’s good behaviour more often.<sup>27</sup> As well, intervention children used aggression five times less frequently (by researcher ratings, although not by parent ratings).<sup>27</sup>

The gains made by families in all three of these evaluations were remarkable given that attendance rates ranged from only 50% to 55%.<sup>24, 27, 29</sup> Parent satisfaction with the programs was not likely the problem because despite the low attendance, most parents still described their experience with the groups as positive.<sup>24, 29</sup>

### How to give a time out

In recent years, the time-out technique has been controversial. Some organizations have expressed concern about it being used inappropriately, for example, for overly long time periods or with very young children.<sup>36</sup> To ensure that parents use this technique safely and effectively, the *Incredible Years* curriculum specifically teaches parents how to use time outs appropriately. Parents are taught to ensure that time outs are brief (e.g., four to five minutes only for a child between the ages of four and eight). As well, parents are taught to praise the child for their first positive behaviour after a time out.<sup>37</sup>

*Parenting programs can significantly enhance children’s mental health.*

## When gains were limited

Outcomes for the two *Triple P* evaluations were less promising. One year after parents completed the targeted level 3 version of *Triple P*, neither they nor their children made any significant gains compared to “control” parents who received support from community nurses.

Four years after parents completed the universal level 4 version of *Triple P*, all parents — both intervention and control — engaged in less “positive parenting” over the follow-up period, such as cuddling with their child. However, for *Triple P* fathers (but not mothers), this decline was significantly less than for control fathers. The studies found no other significant differences between intervention and control parents or children. Table 2 summarizes all parent and child outcomes at final follow-up for each RCT.

## Teaching better ways to discipline

The results of this systematic review allow us to answer several questions about improving the way parents use discipline. First, parenting programs can reduce the use of problematic discipline. The *Chicago Parent Program* resulted in parents using less physical punishment — even though the program emphasized a range of alternative strategies rather than specifically discouraging physical punishment.<sup>24</sup> Standard *Incredible Years* also reduced problematic discipline, including spanking.

Second, these programs can lead to parents using more effective and positive forms of discipline. The *Chicago Parent Program* resulted in parents being more consistent in their use of discipline. Both versions of *Incredible Years* also led to parents using more praise and rewards and giving their children more attention.

Finally, parenting programs can significantly enhance children’s mental health. Children of parents who took the *Chicago Parent Program* had fewer emotional and behaviour problems. Similarly, children of parents who participated in both versions of *Incredible Years* made gains. After parents took standard *Incredible Years*, diagnostic rates of oppositional defiant disorder dropped by nearly half and ADHD symptoms reduced. Meanwhile, the enhanced *Incredible Years* resulted in children being less aggressive.

### Taking a closer look at *Triple P*

Both *Triple P* evaluations featured in this review failed to produce significant improvements in either parents’ use of discipline or children’s outcomes. There were two likely reasons for this. With the targeted *Triple P* RCT, parents in the comparison group actually received an intervention — four sessions with a community nurse. So while parenting skills and children’s behaviours did improve for *Triple P* families, working with a community nurse led to similar gains.<sup>35</sup>

With the universal *Triple P* RCT, some participants may not have needed the program because they already had effective parenting skills, or because their children had no behaviour problems. Producing even small effects can be a challenge with universal programs.<sup>38</sup> As well, this evaluation assessed outcomes four years after the program ended, which was at least three years longer than for the other evaluations. So it is possible that program benefits faded over time. (Earlier publications may have reported different findings, but these were not available in English and were therefore outside the scope of our review.)

It is also important to recognize that *Triple P* has shown significant positive benefits in other RCTs. (For example, two RCTs did not meet criteria for our systematic review because they did not include a measure of physical punishment, although one assessed the broader category of child maltreatment.) Specifically, a Swiss RCT found that *Triple P* reduced parents’ use of overly authoritarian discipline.<sup>39</sup> As well, an *American RCT* found that *Triple P* decreased rates of substantiated child maltreatment and out-of-home placements.<sup>40</sup> So *Triple P* can have positive benefits for both parents and children.

<b>Table 2: Program Outcomes</b>		
<b>Program (Follow-up)</b>	<b>Significant improvements compared with controls<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>No significant differences compared with controls</b>
<b>Targeted</b>		
<b>Chicago Parent Program</b> <sup>24</sup> (1 year)	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Physical punishment</li> <li>↑ Consistency in discipline</li> <li>↑ Confidence in parenting skills</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Behaviour problems (teacher rated only)</li> <li>↓ Intensity of behaviour problems</li> <li>↓ Emotional problems</li> </ul>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warmth toward child</li> <li>• Number of commands to child</li> <li>• Praise of child</li> </ul>
<b>Incredible Years (Standard)</b> (4 months) <sup>29</sup>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Problematic discipline (observer rated only; e.g., spanking + prolonged exclusion)</li> <li>↓ Criticism of child</li> <li>↑ Attempts to gain child's cooperation</li> <li>↑ Use of rewards</li> <li>↑ Playing with child</li> <li>↑ Praise of child</li> <li>↑ Warmth toward child</li> <li>↑ Attention toward child</li> <li>↑ Use of time outs</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Oppositional defiant disorder diagnoses</li> <li>↓ Behaviour problems (parent rated only)</li> <li>↓ Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms</li> <li>↑ Reading ability</li> </ul>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate discipline + positive involvement</li> <li>• Use of consequences</li> <li>• Number of commands issued to child</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional problems</li> </ul>
<b>Incredible Years (Enhanced)</b> (8 months) <sup>27</sup>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Responsive parenting (e.g., using praise and affection)</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Aggression (observer rated only)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematic discipline (e.g., spanking + raising voice)</li> </ul>
<b>Triple P (Level 3)</b> (1-year) <sup>35</sup>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <p>None</p> <p><b>Child</b></p> <p>None</p>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematic discipline (e.g., spanking + long lectures)</li> <li>• Response to difficult parenting situations</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour and/or emotional problems</li> </ul>
<b>Universal</b>		
<b>Triple P (Level 3)</b> (4 years) <sup>33</sup>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Decline in positive parenting (father rated only; e.g., cuddling with child)</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <p>None</p>	<p><b>Parenting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematic discipline (e.g., spanking + long lectures)</li> </ul> <p><b>Child</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour problems</li> </ul>
<p><sup>i</sup> Most studies used multiple informants to rate outcomes, including children, parents, teachers and/or observers. We indicate who provided the rating only where there were multiple informants and where the outcome was significant for one informant but not others.</p>		

Overall, there is strong evidence that programs such as the *Chicago Parent Program* and *Incredible Years* can be highly effective in teaching practical parenting skills. These programs not only reduced the use of harmful forms of discipline, such as physical punishment, but also provided parents with better ways of guiding their children's behaviour — with concomitant improvements in children's mental health. These programs therefore offer a way to “spare the rod” and avoid the harms that come with it for children.

## From research to policy and practice

Physical punishment can cause considerable harm to children. So it is welcome news that interventions such as the *Chicago Parent Program* and *Incredible Years* can be highly effective — not only reducing physical punishment and other problematic forms of discipline, but also enhancing positive parenting. The direct benefits for children's mental health were evident with both of these targeted programs, along with an academic benefit (reading) in the one RCT that assessed this. *Triple P*, in contrast, did not significantly influence the use of physical punishment in either targeted or universal formats.

Two crucial characteristics likely contributed to the success of these programs:

1. Being delivered in targeted formats to parents experiencing disadvantages such as low income
2. Being intense and multi-faceted, providing between 12 and 27 parenting sessions, coupled with supplementary interventions such as home visiting and child literacy programming

What should the next steps be for policymakers and practitioners concerned with reducing physical punishment of children? The *Chicago Parent Program* has not been tested outside the US, where baseline health and social services differ markedly from those in Canada. So evaluations are warranted if the program is implemented here. But evaluations of *Incredible Years* have not been limited to the US. The program has also been tested in the UK, where baseline services are more similar to those in Canada. So implementation could proceed here. For communities that cannot directly deliver these programs, efforts should at least be made to emulate their crucial characteristics.

The main reason for implementing effective programs to reduce child physical punishment is ethical: this form of discipline harms children. Furthermore, this review demonstrates that parents can learn effective alternatives. In addition, parenting programs such as those we describe here have the potential to reduce or prevent children's mental health problems, a major population health and clinical goal.<sup>41</sup> Economic arguments should not be required when children's well-being and safety is at stake. But effective programs could also contribute to fewer children needing mental health services. Costs associated with delivering these higher-intensity parenting programs could therefore potentially be recouped over the long term. 🖐️


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*The main reason for implementing effective programs to reduce child physical punishment is ethical: this form of discipline harms children.*

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We conducted a comprehensive search to identify high-quality research evidence on the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing parents' use of physical punishment and improving children's well-being. We used methods adapted from the *Cochrane Collaboration* and *Evidence-Based Mental Health* and applied the following search strategy:

<b>Table 3: Search Strategy</b>	
<b>Sources</b>	• CINAHL, ERIC, Medline, PsycINFO and Web of Science
<b>Search Terms</b>	• Child rearing, corporal punishment, punishment and prevention
<b>Limits</b>	• Peer-reviewed articles published in English • Children aged 18 years or younger • Randomized controlled trial (RCT) methods used

We then searched for RCTs on specific well-known parenting programs, such as *Triple P* and *Incredible Years*. We also hand-searched reference lists of relevant articles to identify additional RCTs. Using these approaches, we found 48 RCTs. Two team members then assessed each study, finding only five that met all our inclusion criteria, detailed in Table 4. 

<b>Table 4: Inclusion Criteria for RCTs</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interventions aimed at parents with no history of child maltreatment</li> <li>• Clear descriptions of participant characteristics, settings and interventions</li> <li>• Random assignment to intervention and control groups at study outset</li> <li>• Follow-up of three months or more (from the end of intervention)</li> <li>• Attrition rates below 20% at follow-up or use of intention-to-treat analysis</li> <li>• Outcome indicators included both physical punishment and children's well-being</li> <li>• Reliability and validity of all primary outcome measures documented</li> <li>• Levels of statistical significance reported for primary outcome measures</li> </ul>

**For more information  
on our research methods,  
please contact**

Jen Barican  
[chpc\\_quarterly@sfu.ca](mailto:chpc_quarterly@sfu.ca)  
 Children's Health Policy Centre  
 Faculty of Health Sciences  
 Simon Fraser University  
 Room 2435, 515 West Hastings St.  
 Vancouver, BC V6B 5K3

BC government staff can access original articles from [BC's Health and Human Services Library](#).

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