

Moving Research Beyond the Spanking Debate

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Abstract

Despite numerous studies identifying a broad range of harms associated with the use of spanking and other types of physical punishment, debate continues about its use as a form of discipline. In this commentary, we recommend four strategies to move the field forward and beyond the spanking debate including: 1) use of methodological approaches that allow for stronger causal inference; 2) consideration of human rights issues; 3) a focus on understanding the causes of spanking and reasons for its decline in certain countries; and 4) more emphasis on evidence-based approaches to changing social norms to reject spanking as a form of discipline. Physical punishment needs to be recognized as an important public health problem.

Few topics in child development give rise to such polarized views as the use of spanking as a form of discipline. Despite recent evidence suggesting a decline in the use of physical discipline (Ryan et al., 2016), spanking and other forms of physical punishment remain widespread. In one survey of six countries, past-year rates of spanking (hitting with open hands on the buttocks) ranged from 15% in an educated community in India to 76% in the Philippines; the US rate was 44% (Runyan et al., 2010). According to a UNICEF report based on data from 54 countries, 44% of children between the ages of two to 14 years experienced spanking or hitting with a bare hand in the past month (UNICEF, 2014). At the same time, data from some sixty countries suggest that only a minority of adults think that physical punishment is a necessary child disciplinary practice (UNICEF, 2014).

Hundreds of studies and at least five meta-analyses have investigated the association between physical punishment and negative outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gerschoff, 2002; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005; Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Ferguson, 2013). While there is less than complete agreement on the strength of the association between physical punishment including spanking and a broad range of impairments, it is clear that children's exposure to spanking does more harm than good through increased risk of emotional, behavioural and cognitive problems. In the most recent meta-analysis, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) address two key issues that have previously led some to refute such evidence. The authors demonstrate that this negative relationship: 1) exists even when a narrow definition of spanking is examined, which clearly distinguishes it from more abusive practices; and 2) does not vary by strength of methodologic design. They acknowledge that the main limitation of the meta-analyses is the difficulty in determining a causal link between spanking and negative child outcomes because it is not ethical to conduct randomized trials of physical discipline. Given this ongoing methodological challenge in examining the link between spanking and adverse outcomes for children, and its widespread use on a global basis, we offer the following four recommendations as ways to move the field forward.

Use of research designs and methodologic techniques that allow for stronger causal inference – such as the cross-lagged studies, fixed effect regressions, mediator analyses recommended by Gerschoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) – would increase our confidence that this link is indeed causal. A series of studies, soon to be published by Gardner and Leijten (Gardner et al., in preparation) may shed light on this link. These studies aim to identify those components of parenting interventions, which lead to reductions in child behaviour problems and harsh parenting/child maltreatment. Drawing on a combination of meta-analysis, “decomposing” trials, micro-trials, and mediational analyses within trials, they conclude that some of the most effective components for reducing child disruptive behaviour are non-violent disciplinary strategies – such as ignoring, time-out and natural and logical consequences. Drawing on Qualitative Comparative Analysis, interventions to reduce child maltreatment were most successful when they focused on one manageable ‘suite’ of techniques (such as alternative non-violent disciplinary strategies), or combined a variety of techniques with parental self-management strategies (Melendez-Torres et al., in prep). In addition to these innovative research designs and analyses, there is a need for better measures, especially with regard to children’s exposure to spanking and child outcomes. Measurement of children’s self-report of adverse experiences including physical abuse as well as spanking can assist in clarifying potential overlap of these important variables, rather than simply relying on parental report of behaviour. It is also important to obtain children’s reports about their own behaviour, especially internalizing symptoms, since parents rating both their discipline styles and children’s behaviour may lead to a response bias (Mackenbach et al., 2014).

A second area that could help move the field forward is more persuasively making the case that the harm caused by spanking, regardless of its magnitude, is not the only reason to avoid its use. There are moral and human rights reasons for taking a stance against spanking that go beyond the associated harms. Human rights are repeatedly invoked in the struggle to ban physical punishment; we are

regularly reminded that children are people too and as such should enjoy the same rights as adults to be free from physical assault. Yet seldom are the grounds for these rights explained. Making such a case could draw on literature about the justification of human rights, founded on conceptions of human agency and autonomy (Gewirth, 1982; Griffin, 2008) and justice (Rawls, 1999) that are not directly reducible to harm. Lenta (2012) has set the stage for the case against physical punishment of children arguing that such punishment violates the right not to suffer degrading punishment and is unfairly discriminatory – as well as causing assorted harms. Zolotor and Puzia (2010) propose a framework made up of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice, which could be further developed to make a more persuasive moral- and rights-based case against spanking. Of note, at the present time, at least seven different international human rights instruments implicitly or explicitly state that corporal punishment of children violates international human rights law. Comment No. 8 of the Convention on the Right of the Child, issued in 2006, removed any ambiguity about how the convention should be interpreted: “Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence and the State must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate them.” (CRC/C/GC/8: Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, para. 18).

The third area that could help advance the field is gaining a better understanding of the causes of spanking and of its apparent decline in several countries. This would promote the development of interventions that are more effective in preventing the use of spanking and build on those forces that are driving rates down. Little research has been done on the risk factors for physical punishment as distinct from physical abuse, although existing literature suggests considerable overlap (Straus, 2010). In one of the few recent systematic reviews of risk factors for child physical abuse, Stith et al. (2009), focused only on risk factors at the level of the individual and family; there is a need to identify community- and societal-level risk factors as well.

Finally, a greater emphasis on interventions aimed at changing social norms that are supportive of spanking could provide important information. Relative to research on parenting programs that teach parents non-violent disciplinary skills to reduce harsh parenting, evaluation of interventions aimed at changing norms has been neglected. Much has been written about whether legislation banning corporal punishment primarily contributes to declines in the support for – and use of – physical punishment or results from such declines (e.g. Zolotor and Puiza, 2010; Durrant, 2003; Bussman, Erthal, & Schroth, 2009). Many programs to reduce harsh parenting have been evaluated and several recent meta-analyses of these studies are available (e.g. Chen & Chan, 2015; Euser, Alink, Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2015; Knerr, Gardner & Cluver, 2013), even if few carefully differentiate between spanking/physical punishment and physical abuse. But far fewer outcome evaluations of interventions aimed at changing parenting norms supportive of physical punishment have been carried out. Yet they are potentially cheaper and easier to deliver than parent training sessions. A 2009 review of review of child maltreatment prevention programs found only five such evaluations (Mikton & Butchart, 2009); a 2014 systematic review of universal campaigns targeting child physical abuse identified 17 studies (Poole, Seal, & Taylor, 2014), however both reviews assessed the evidence as inconclusive due to a lack of strong research designs. Evidence for the effectiveness of mass media campaigns to change behaviours in other areas of public health – such as tobacco, nutrition and physical activity, birth rate reduction, road safety – is mounting, particularly when campaigns are combined with complementary policy decisions that support opportunities for change (Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010). This would suggest that media-disseminated parenting advice and information may have significant and, as yet, largely untapped, potential to alter parenting norms (Sanders & Calam, 2016).

In summary, there are compelling reasons to move beyond the spanking debate in determining evidence-based approaches to reduce children's exposure to physical punishment – at individual, family, community and societal levels. This can occur while we continue to examine its occurrence, risk and

protective factors and associated impairment. Fortunately, there is increasing willingness to take a stand against physical punishment including spanking, based on existing evidence and from a human rights perspective. As of November 2016, 51 countries have banned all forms of corporal punishment in all settings, including in the family home. Mongolia, Paraguay, and Slovenia are the countries to have most recently adopted such legislation. This means, however, that some 75% of countries have not yet enacted such bans (<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/>). It is high time we move ahead with both research and policies aimed at reducing physical punishment and recognize it for the important public health problem that it is.

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