

# **Spare the Rod, Destroy the Child: Examining the Speculative Association of Corporal Punishment and Deviant Behavior among Youth**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this analysis is to examine the relationship between the utilization of corporal punishment and its relationship to subsequent deviant behavior among youth. Fundamental aspects regarding corporal punishment (e.g. definition of corporal punishment, supportive and opposing arguments, etc.) are discussed. Socio-demographic factors (e.g. race, religion, class, etc.) associated with individuals who utilize this child-rearing practice and suggested conditions associated with the use of this discipline are identified.*

## **Introduction**

Researchers studying parent-child relations and family interaction have long been interested in studying the methods in which parents discipline their children. A particular focus of research has been parental use of corporal punishment. This analysis is designed to examine the relationship between the utilization of corporal punishment and its proposed subsequent relationship to delinquency among youth. Specifically, this analysis will explore the various definitions of corporal punishment, studies which offer support and opposition regarding the use of corporal punishment, characteristics of individuals who support the use of corporal punishment, and suggested conditions associated with the use of corporal punishment.

## **Definitions of Corporal Punishment**

Despite the fact that a universal definition of corporal punishment does not exist, there are various sources which attempt to define this behavior. One study defines corporal punishment as a painful, intentionally inflicted physical penalty administered by a person in authority for disciplinary purposes. In addition, corporal punishment can occur anywhere, and whippings, beatings, paddling, and flogging are specific forms of corporal punishment (Cohen, 1984). Additional studies define corporal punishment as the intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior. It includes a wide variety of methods such as hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, choking, use of various objects (wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins, or others), painful body postures, use of electric shock, use of excessive exercise drills, or prevention of urine or stool elimination (Bauer et al, 1990).

More recently, corporal punishment is a form of discipline that has been defined as bodily punishment of any kind, and spanking is considered one of its forms (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996). It is interesting to note that many of the current definitions

regarding corporal punishment have included a wider scope of behavior associated with physical contact. To this end, it seems that any contact, regardless of context or intent, may be interpreted as corporal punishment or physical abuse.

### **Opposition to the Use of Corporal Punishment**

The majority of research associated with the use of corporal punishment has presented this child-rearing method in a negative light. Many of the studies suggest that the use of corporal punishment among youth is associated with future anti-social behavior. From a theoretical standpoint, proponents of the environmental model assume that when children are physically punished, they learn that violence is an acceptable strategy for solving interpersonal differences (Graziano, 1994). Moreover, it is believed that through experiencing corporal punishment, violent strategies are modeled or imitated and then added to the child's behavioral repertoire. In a similar vein, other studies suggest that physical punishments give children pain and may teach them it is all right to inflict pain on others (McCord, 1996).

Drawing from social learning theories and symbolic interactionist understandings of social life, Cast et al, (2006) suggest that physical punishment teaches aggressive and controlling strategies for solving the problems of living together and hinders the development of important problem-solving skills. The analysis reveals that individuals who were physically punished during childhood are more likely to engage in physical and verbal aggression with their spouses. In addition, they were more controlling with their spouses, and were less able to take their spouse's perspective (Cast et al, 2006).

In his book entitled, *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families*, Straus and Donnelly suggests that corporal punishment plays a role in multiple ills such as depression, domestic violence, suicide, child abuse, infant homicide, delinquency, school violence, bondage and masochistic sex, and alienation (Gustavsson, 1996). In latter studies, Strauss et al, (1997) suggested that some of the potential harmful effects of frequent and severe spankings include subsequent antisocial behavior of children (Straus et al, 1997).

In terms of attitudes regarding the failure to use corporal punishment, Davis (1999) examined the cessation of corporal punishment by parents who start out spanking their children and then make a concerted effort to stop. Although parents' reasons for quitting vary, cessation is generally associated with new meanings that turn old beliefs into excuses and that define non-spanking as progress. It is argued that cessation should be conceptualized as a social process and as part of a corporal punishment career and not simply as a behavioral omission (Davis, 1999).

Research conducted by Stratus and Kantor (1994) found that teens who experienced corporal punishment had an increased risk later in life of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, alcohol abuse and wife beating (Straus and Kantor, 1994). Research also reveals that the excessive use of corporal punishment has been associated with a number of adult social and psychological problems, including physical aggression and depression (Swinford et al, 2000).

With regards to the association between parental child-rearing practices and the development of delinquency, Haapsalo and Pokela (1998) reviewed six major American longitudinal studies of children and examined the relationship between offspring criminality and exposure to negative child-rearing practices. All six studies reported

parental punitiveness as crucial to the development of offspring antisocial behavior. The research indicated that styles of parenting including corporal punishment, power assertion, rejection, physical abuse and neglect were prime predictors of future criminal and antisocial offspring behavior. Other important factors were poor parental supervision and parent-child interaction, parental criminality and socioeconomic difficulties (Haapsalo & Pokela, 1998).

White and Smith (2004) conducted longitudinal study of the relationship between childhood victimization experiences and sexually coercive behaviors during adolescence. Their results indicate that males who were physically punished, sexually abused, or who witnessed domestic violence in childhood were at greater risk for sexual perpetration in high school (White and Smith, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, many of the studies assume that a significant relationship exists between corporal punishment and delinquent behavior among youth. From a critical standpoint, the majority of the studies fail properly define what constitutes corporal punishment. In many cases, there is no distinction between what is deemed corporal punishment and physical abuse. In addition, many of the studies do not consider other parent-related variables (e.g. swearing, poor or lack of parent-child interaction, etc.) that may cause delinquent behavior among youth.

### **Support for the Use of Corporal Punishment**

Even though there is unanimous agreement among experts that corporal punishment is detrimental for children, there is some debate about whether corporal punishment is associated with negative outcomes (Baumrind, 1997; Larzelere, 2000). According to Vockell (1991) corporal punishment does have some advantages. One advantage is the child or student perceives the event as unpleasant, thus minimizing the likelihood of repeated inappropriate behavior. Another positive associated with corporal punishment is that it can be administered and completed quickly. In addition, the implication associated with the use of this method is very clear and specific with respect to learned behavior and obvious consequences (Vockell, 1991).

With regards to the association between corporal punishment and deviant behavior, research indicates that it is not corporal punishment per se, but the disregard, inconsistency, and uninvolved that often accompany harsh corporal punishment that increases a child's risk for problem behaviors (Simmons et al., 1994). To that end, Baumrind (1994) argued that when physical punishment is used within a loving family environment, it is effective in reducing unwanted behavior without increasing aggression (Baumrind, 1994).

From a psychological standpoint, Paolucci and Violato (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of corporal punishment on affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. The authors included 70 studies published between 1961 and 2000 and involving 47,751 people. The results of their meta-analysis suggest that exposure to corporal punishment does not substantially increase the risk to youth of developing affective, cognitive, or behavioral pathologies (Paolucci & Violato, 1998).

Simmons et al. (2000) conducted a cross-cultural examination of the link between corporal punishment and adolescent antisocial behavior. Their results indicate that the level of parental warmth/control (i.e., support, monitoring, and inductive reasoning) was the strongest predictor of adolescent conduct problems, not corporal punishment

(Simmons et al, 2000). Wilson (2002) suggests there are six advantages for corporal punishment: cheap and easy to administer, effective deterrent, effective reform, adjustable pain, fair because of similar dislike of pain, no permanent damage (Wilson, 2002).

Despite the fact the literature which supports the use of corporal punishment is limited many of the studies which argue in support of such often consider the contextual factors associated with corporal punishment. The research suggests that the contextual conditions (i.e. giving warnings before punishment, tone of voice by the parent, emotional state of parent) associated with corporal punishment determine whether or not a child will engage in deviant behavior in the future.

### **Demographics of those who support Corporal Punishment**

A multitude of studies associated with the use of corporal punishment as a child-rearing technique seldom identify the characteristics (e.g. race, gender, etc.) of those who support the use of this practice. In terms of age and gender, studies have shown that older parents are less likely to use corporal punishment; and mothers spank more often than fathers although this may be an effect of the greater amount of time that mothers spend with children (Straus and Donnelly, 1994; Socolar and Stein, 1995). With respect to education, research reveals that mothers with more education are more likely to use teaching and verbal assertion as opposed to moderate or severe physical force than mothers with less education (Socolar, 1999).

With regards to race, various studies regarding the use of corporal punishment suggest that physical discipline may promote rather than deter antisocial behavior. Most of this research, however, has focused upon European American samples. Studies of African American families have reported a different pattern of results. These investigations have found either no relation or an inverse association between corporal punishment and child conduct problems (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Deater-Deckard et al, 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Wasserman et al, 1996). Such differences in findings for African American compared to European American families have led to the hypothesis that the meaning of corporal punishment varies by culture (Deater-Decker et al., 1996, Deater-Decker & Dodge, 1997; Whaley, 2000).

Despite the fact there is conflicting evidence regarding disciplinary styles in black families, a fair amount of evidence suggests that they tend to be more power-assertive and punitive controlling in relation to socioeconomic status (McLoyd et al, 1994). For example, Horn et al, (2004) conducted a study which described and compared disciplinary beliefs and practices among African American parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Their results reveal that lower and middle/upper parents were reasonably similar with respect to disciplinary beliefs and practices. Exceptions to this generalization were that lower class parents were more likely to endorse spanking as a response to an unsafe behavior on the part of the child, and middle/upper class parents reported higher levels of reward for positive behavior (Horn et al, 2004).

In reference to social class, lower socioeconomic status has been associated with more frequent **corporal punishment** (Straus and Donnelly, 1994). In a similar vein, Xu et al, (2000), examined and tested an integrated theoretical model to predict the likelihood of parental use of corporal punishment on children in two-parent families. Their study reveals that the use of corporal punishment is primarily determined by cultural, human,

and social capital that is available to, or has already been acquired by, parents (Xu et al, 2000). When considering religious beliefs, one study, conducted by Ellison et al (1996) generally confirms that parents with conservative scriptural beliefs use corporal punishment more frequently than parents with less conservative theological views (Ellison et al, 1996). Specifically, among parents who used corporal punishment, being Protestant had a relatively large relationship with its use (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007).

The aforementioned research suggests that demographics are important in considering and explaining the various results of corporal punishment among youth. Overall, when corporal punishment is generally perceived to be negative by various classes of individuals, the results is usually negative as well (e.g. delinquency, crime, etc.).

### **Conditions associated with the Effective Use of Corporal Punishment**

In studies which support the use of corporal punishment, there is limited evidence regarding the methods in which this child-rearing technique is exercised. Wissow (1996) found that although most parents accept corporal punishment as justified, they also express interest in finding alternative methods of punishment and discipline. Although it may be that parents want to increase their repertoire of disciplining practices, this finding may also be a result of the stigma and misunderstanding associated with disciplinary spanking. For instance, it is important to recognize that certain conditions must be met for any form of discipline to be effective, especially corporal punishment. Specifically,

1. it needs to be given by an adult with an affective bond to the child;
2. it should be consistent and close to the behavior needing change;
3. it must be perceived as "fair" by the child;
4. it should be developmentally and temperamentally appropriate; and
5. it should ultimately lead to self-discipline (Baumrind, 1996).

Under these circumstances, children tend to understand that the rights and responsibilities of children and parents are neither identical nor mutually exclusive, but rather are complementary. According to Domjan (2000), punishment can be an effective agent of behavioral change, but only under certain conditions. To be effective, it must occur:

1. immediately after every transgression;
2. be intense at least for the first transgression, and
3. not be signaled by a discriminative stimulus (e.g. a parent).

Other research suggests that spanking is typically preceded by a warning or threat (Buck et al, 2001). Such measures support the belief that punishment used in association with instruction promotes learning among youth. In general, the utilization of corporal

punishment is commonly understood to be effective when used under conditions which promote understanding and affection between parent and child. Due to the limited amount of information regarding the conditions associated with the effective use of corporal punishment further research is warranted.

### **Conclusion**

Considering that the United States and parts of Canada remain the only developed countries to allow corporal punishment, various measures should be created and developed to ensure effectiveness and safety regarding the use of corporal punishment among youth (Robinson et al, 2005). This would include establishing policies regarding the use of corporal punishment in public schools. Specifically, training should be provided which addresses critical aspects (e.g. clear expectations established between teacher and child) associated with the use of corporal punishment in school settings.

In addition, further research is needed in the areas of study which examine corporal punishment. In particular, the definition of what constitutes corporal punishment must be established in relation culture. As mentioned earlier, the distinction made between physical abuse and corporal punishment may be associated with the perceptions the individuals. Moreover, these perceptions, in many cases are influenced by one's cultural or racial background.

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