

**Should Discipline Hurt? Shifting American Spanking Beliefs and Implications for School
Corporal Punishment Policies**

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Abstract

American opinion on spanking has shifted. Most Americans agreed with the necessity of sometimes spanking children, but proportions disagreeing increased 15 percentage point (94% overall) between 1986 (16%) and 2010 (31%). Growing proportions disagreed with spanking in each consecutive decade for all significant generational cohorts, with the greatest increase against spanking for Silent Generation. In a logistic regression model, Poverty Level became an insignificant predictor for agreement with spanking. Top predictors in the logistic regression model employed in the current study were South Central Region of United States ($b=.835$), African American Race ($b=.795$), Rural Residence Type ($b=.565$), Male Gender ($b=.446$), and High School Diploma or Less Educational Attainment Level ($b=.422$). Findings inform corporal punishment policies affecting thousands of students.

Should Discipline Hurt? Shifting American Spanking Beliefs and Implications for School Corporal Punishment Policies

Corporal punishment (CP) policies develop within a macro context of American spanking beliefs (Figure 1). A central purpose of the study was to investigate American spanking beliefs over time. An apposite opportunity for examining spanking beliefs was presented by the survey prompt: “Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard, spanking?” (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 1972-2010). Spanking was described as an old-fashioned behavior (Gershoff, 2010), and survey responses were investigated by generational cohort and decade. A secondary query regarding associations between spanking and a rich collection of predictors was also investigated. Three research questions guided the investigation:

1. Do a majority of Americans agree it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child “with a good, hard, spanking” (Smith, et al., 1972-2010), and how have opinions changed over time?
2. How do American beliefs on spanking change by generational cohort and over time within generational cohorts?
3. What associations are evident between belief in spanking and Educational Attainment Level, Gender, Number of Children, Poverty Level, Race, Region of United States, and Residence Setting (i.e., rural, urban)?

Literature Review

Many generations-old practices and parenting techniques were antiquated by changing times, but physically disciplining children is a withstanding hallmark of old-fashioned American childrearing (Gershoff, 2010). Twenty-one states in the United States permit CP in schools, and

223,190 American students in 2005-2006 were subjected to spanking or paddling at school at least once (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2011). Eighty-five percent of American middle and high school students were physically disciplined by parents (Gershoff, 2010), and most parents report spanking their children (Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010; Marinescu, 2010; Straus & Paschall, 2009). A majority of Americans agrees spanking or paddling children is sometimes a necessity (Lansford, Wager, Bate, Pettit, & Dodge, 2012; Marinescu, 2010; Nolen, 2010; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994).

American tolerance of CP in schools is at odds with 106 nations, including 19 European countries, banning CP (ACLU/Human Rights Watch, 2008; Nolen, 2010). The Council of Europe, the European Union, the United Nations, as well as 45 American organizations—including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Council of Exceptional Children, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine—oppose CP of students (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2008). An estimated one to two percent of students disciplined with CP, approximately 10,000-20,000 students, will sustain injuries requiring medical treatment (Greydanus, et al., 2003; Poole, et al., 1991; Wasserman, 2011). Higher incarceration rates, lower ACT composites, and lower graduation rates are associated with states permitting CP (The Center for Effective Discipline, 2008a). According to Nolen (2010), detrimental effects of CP for the individual child include “increased crime, suicidal thoughts, individual fear, racial prejudice, gender bias, and child abuse” (p.526). Straus and Paschall (2009) observed a relationship between the physical discipline of children and lagging cognitive ability. An association between spanking and increased aggression has frequently been reported (Bates, 1994; Greydanus, et al., 2003; Hicks-Pass, 2009; Strassberg, et al., 1994). The abundance of literature against CP notwithstanding, the physical discipline of children is routine and broadly accepted as a method

of maintaining school discipline in some American schools, particularly in the South (Nolen, 2010). Alternatively, a growing number of states and school districts are banning CP (Larzelere & Baumrind, 2010).

Educational Attainment Level, Gender, Number of Children, Poverty Level, Race, Region of United States, and Residence Setting (i.e., rural, urban)

Theoretical Framework

A hypothesis of shifting spanking views over time was investigated (Figure 1). Individual spanking beliefs may depend on generation and historical times. Characterizations of spanking as an old-fashioned, generational practice guided observations by generational cohorts. Individual beliefs on spanking may also be influenced by other factors. Relationships between spanking and Educational Attainment Level, Gender, Number of Children, Poverty Level, Race, Region of United States, and Residence Setting were identified in previous literature.

National, state, and district level CP policies reflect American collective conscious on spanking (Figure 1). American spanking beliefs have voice in discussions on the physical discipline of students at school. An overarching study hypothesis was American views on spanking have shifted. A practical assumption being, as American spanking beliefs shift, so to should CP policies change. Observations of CP bans in other developed countries and a trend towards large school districts banning CP guided comparisons over time.

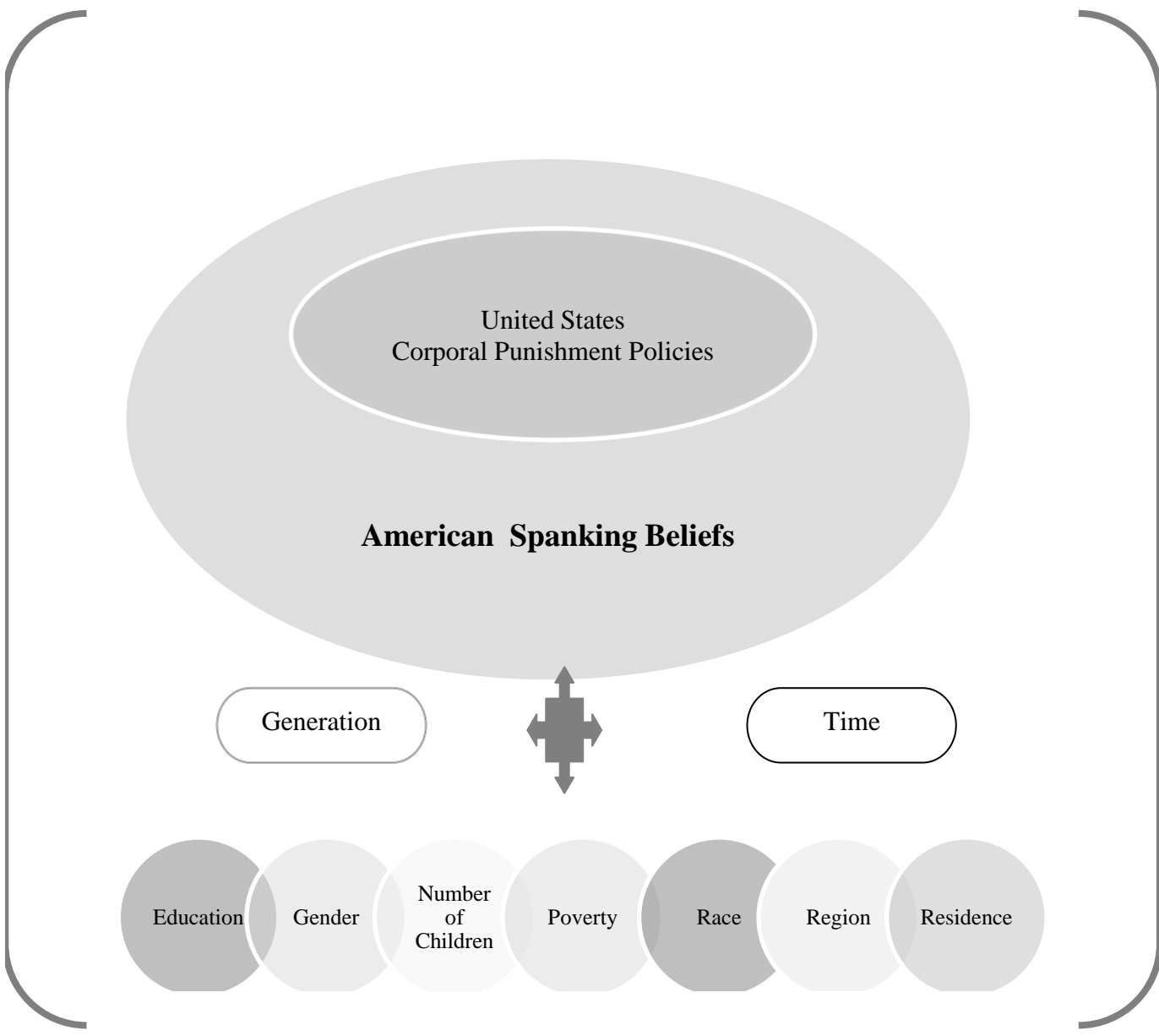


Figure 1. Theoretical Design

Corporal punishment policies reflect the broader structure of American beliefs on spanking.

Methodology

Analysis procedures differed by research question and included frequency cross-tabulations, comparing means, and logistic regressions. Descriptive statistics for study variables and a Log Odds Ratio Matrix for variables are available in a supplemental file. To answer Research Question One and Research Question Two, in part, percentages, frequencies, Pearson Chi-Squares, significance levels, and population were reported in cross-tabulation tables for American spanking belief (Table 1) and spanking belief over time by generational cohort (Table 2). A stratified cluster sample design was employed with a Taylor series approximation method. Samples were complex and a Rao-Scott adjustment was applied, with F statistics factored. Specifically, significance levels were from F statistics. An experimental survey weight (FORMWT) was applied to analyses. Statistics exclude missing-data and out-of-range values. To further answer Research Question One and Research Question Two, spanking belief means were charted over time (Figure 2) and by generational cohorts (Figure 2). Pearson Chi-Squares, significance levels, population, and range were reported in figure notations. A 95% confidence level was applied throughout, and a threshold of .05 determined statistical significance.

Logistic regressions investigated associations between agreement with spanking and independent predictors (Research Question Three). All variables were dichotomized. Spanking, the dependent variable, was dichotomized for favoring spanking (Agree and Strongly Agree). Predictors were dichotomized by observing category or categories with largest proportion agreeing with spanking or categories connected by previous literature with favoring spanking. To better understand and quantify effects of targeted predictors, associations between agreement with spanking and predictors were observed independently and in a model. To compare the strength of predictors, a logistic regression model was built by adding predictors in the order of

strongest to weakest independent predictor. Regression coefficients /B/ were reported and measure one unit change effect in the independent variable on the dependent variable logit. Coefficients, Standard Errors, single parameter t-tests, and p values were reported in Table 3. The exponential of logistic regression coefficients (Exp [B]) estimated odds ratios for observing outcomes (Table 3).

Table 1. American Belief in Spanking by First and Last Survey Year: Percentages (Frequencies)

	1986	2010
Agree/strongly agree	84 (1,220)	69 (983)
Disagree/strongly disagree	16 (240)	31 (434)
Total	100 (1,460)	100 (8,693)
Chi-sq (p)= 83.22(p≤.001)		
N= 20,456*		

Note: *N includes one group of all other survey years, which is not displayed. 1986 was the first year the spanking prompt was included in the survey and 2010 is the most recent survey year. See footnote 2.

Source: General Social Survey 1972-2010 Cumulative Datafile, CSM, UC Berkeley

Data Source

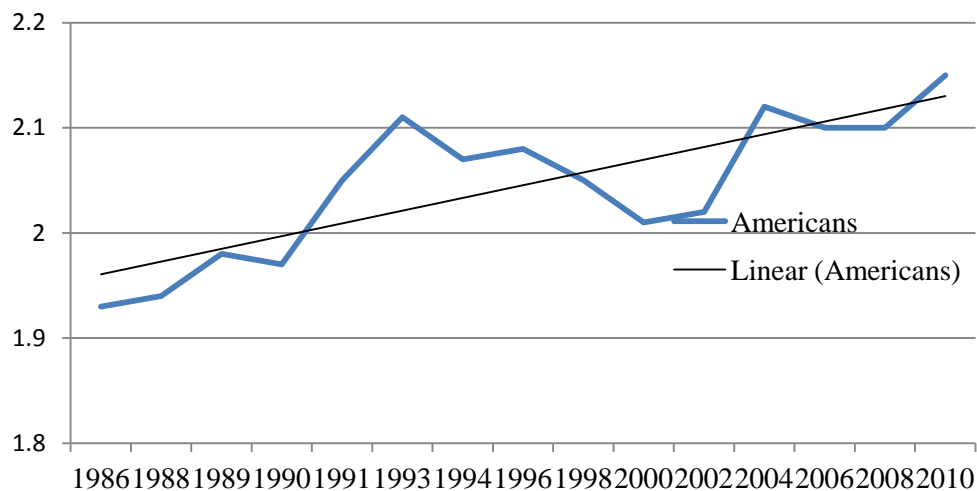
Research questions were examined with the 1972-2010 General Social Survey (GSS) Datafile from the National Opinion Research Center (Smith, et al., 1972-2010). The survey was accessed through the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program at the University of California, Berkley. The GSS tracks attitudinal and other measures on non-institutionalized, English speaking Americans over the age of 18 (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR], 2007). Spanish speaking Americans were included in the GSS target

population since 2006 (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2011). Thousands of variables are included in the GSS replicating core and special interest topic modules. The same spanking prompt was part of the replicating GSS core since 1986. Full probability sampling was utilized (ICPSR, 2007). Surveys 2004 and after sub-sampled non-respondents, and surveys 2006-2010 utilized sampling based on the United States Census (ICPSR, 2007). Response rates varied slightly for each survey year, with a total response rate of approximately 71% (ICPSR, 2007). Total GSS sample size for years of the current study was 36,501.

Results

Research Question One

Most Americans agreed or strongly agreed with spanking in 1986 and 2010 (Table 3). However, the proportion of Americans disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with spanking increased 14 percentage point (82%) overall between 1986 (17%) and 2010 (31%). The trend towards disagreeing with spanking is observed on Figure 2 as a rising spanking mean trend line between 1986 and 2010.



Notes: N= 20,456; Chi-sq = 243.81 (p<.001); SD range: .73 (1986)-.90 (2000). See footnote 2.

Source: General Social Survey 1972-2010 Cumulative Datafile, CSM, UC Berkeley

Figure 2. Mean of Belief in Spanking by Survey Year: Strongly Agree (1)-Strongly Disagree (4)

Table 2. American Spanking Belief by Age and Decade: Percentages (Frequencies)

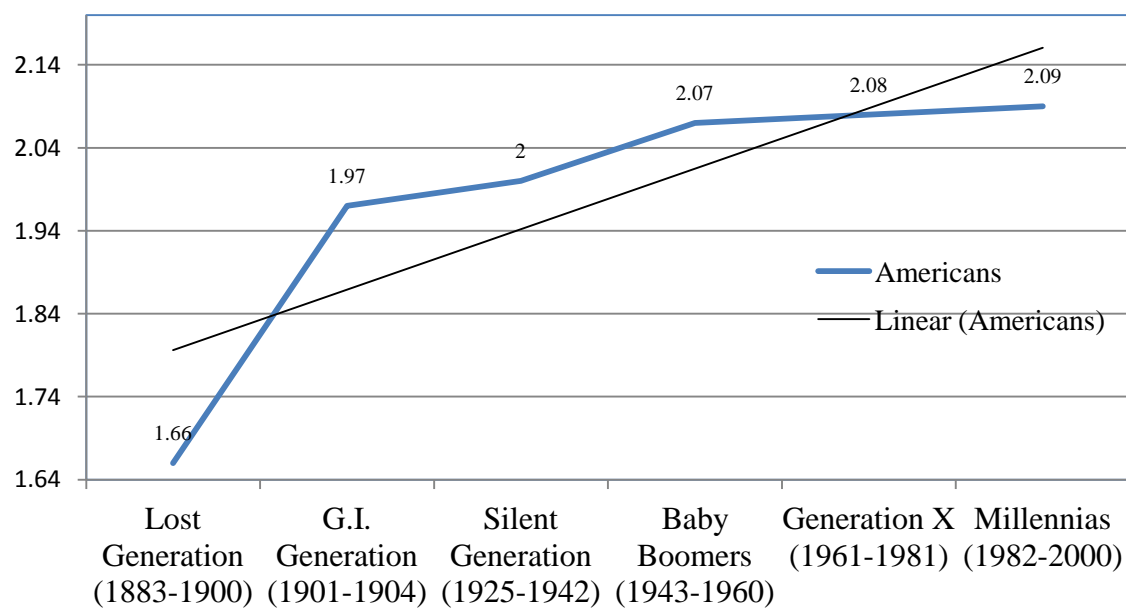
	Lost /G.I. Generations (1883-1924)	Silent Generation (1925-1942)	Baby Boomers (1943-1960)	Generation X/Millennias (1961-1992)
1980's				
Agree/strongly agree	81 (592)	82 (603)	81 (1,113)	-
Disagree/strongly disagree	19 (142)	18 (133)	19 (261)	-
Total	100 (734)	100 (736)	100 (1,374)	(577)
1990's				
Agree/strongly agree	77(831)	77 (1,330)	73(2,410)	-
Disagree/strongly disagree	23(245)	23 (389)	27(893)	-
Total	100(1,076)	100(1,719)	100(3,303)	(2,577)
2000's				
Agree/strongly agree	74(242)	72 (927)	71 (1,895)	-
Disagree/strongly disagree	26(86)	28 (362)	29 (779)	-
Total	100(328)	100 (1,289)	100 (2,674)	(4,010)
n	2,138	3,744	7,351	7,164
Chi-sq (p)	6.74(p=.05)	27.74(p≤.001)	49.82(p≤.001)	ns
SD	.42	.42	.44	-

Note: 1986 was the first year the spanking prompt was included in the survey and 1992 was the most recent birth year. See footnote 2.

Source: General Social Survey 1972-2010 Cumulative Datafile, CSM, UC Berkeley

Research Question Two

A shift towards disagreement with spanking in each consecutive generation is observed as a rising spanking mean trend line on Figure 3. For significant cohorts, a pattern of greater proportions disagreeing with spanking in each generation in each consecutive decade was observed (Table 2). Proportions disagreeing with spanking for Lost and G.I. Generations rose seven percentage points or 37% overall between the 1980's (19%) and 2000's (26%). A 10 percent point or 55% overall increase in the proportion of Silent Generation was evident between the 1980's (18%) and 2000's (28%). The proportion of Baby Boomers disagreeing with spanking was slightly higher (one-four percentage points) than that of Silent Generation in each decade. The increase in proportions disagreeing with spanking was similar, however, for Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (10 percentage points or 53% overall)



Notes: N= 20,397; Chi-sq = 65.31 (p<.001); SD range: .55 (Lost Generation)-.87 (Baby Boomers, Millennials). See footnote 2.

Source: General Social Survey 1972-2010 Cumulative Datafile, CSM, UC Berkeley

Figure 3. Belief in Spanking Mean by Generations: Strongly Agree (1)-Strongly Disagree

(4)

Research Question Three

Predictors were added to the model from strongest to weakest independent predictor in the following order: Region of United States (1), Race (2), Residence Type (i.e., rural, urban) (3), Educational Attainment (4), Gender (5), Number of Children (6), Poverty Level (7), and Generational Cohorts (8). Low Poverty Level was expected to be a significant predictor, but was insignificant when added and removed. Four or More Children ($b=.173$) and Lost /G.I. Generational Cohorts ($b=.139$) were expected to be more strongly correlated, based on previous literature. The top five predictors for agreement with spanking revealed by analysis used in the current study were South Central Region of United States ($b=.835$), African American Race ($b=.795$), Rural Residence Type ($b=.565$), Male Gender ($b=.446$), and High School Diploma or Less Level of Educational Attainment ($b=.422$). (Table 3)

Conclusion and Discussion

Study findings support a notion of shifting belief on spanking. A glance towards European nations may suggest to Americans that in today's contemporary world where some school environments are overburdened by the types and intensity of social ills alien to other generations and times, spanking may have outgrown its effectiveness. More importantly, educational institutions may have evolved beyond the paddle.

Future research may identify factors behind the shift in spanking views. Do relationships exist between school environments in academic turnaround, increased CP incidences, and greater disagreement with spanking? Do parents and educators have growing concerns over detrimental effects? Is ineffectiveness of CP a growing opinion among parents and educators? School discipline and CP should be specifically explored in future research. Even with awareness of correlational research limitations, justifying CP with maintaining discipline may be difficult if schools with higher incidences of CP have greater discipline and dropout problems. Effective discipline in those school

districts banning CP, however, makes this point moot. Qualitative research giving voice to students subjected to frequent paddling may prove insightful.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Model for Agreement with Spanking

Logit Coefficients Test That Each Coefficient = 0

	B	SE(B)	Exp(B)	T-statistic	P
East South Central region of United States	.835	.087	2.305	9.609	.000
African American race	.795	.058	2.213	13.658	.000
Rural residence type	.565	.060	1.760	9.380	.000
High school diploma or less level of education	.422	.035	1.525	12.006	.000
Male gender	.446	.034	1.561	13.142	.000
Four or more children	.173	.049	1.189	3.536	.000
Lost /G.I. generational cohorts	.139	.057	1.149	2.459	.014
Constant	.387	.032	1.472	11.958	.000

Log Likelihood = -11,078.814 Pseudo R-sq = .037

Global Tests for Groups of Variables

P = Probability that all B's equal 0

Group	Wald Chi-sq	Numerator	Denominator	Adjusted Wald F	P
All independent variables	739.485	7	20302	105.609	.000

Note: Effects of all coefficients > 2.0 See footnote 2. Source: General Social Survey 1972-2010 Cumulative Datafile, CSM, UC Berkeley

The dilemma of differentiating cruel and unusual punishment from acceptable punishment has been noted (Palmer, 2010), and individual student characteristics may be determining factors. Without better understandings of effectiveness, populations where CP may be most harmful and least effective may be subjected to higher incidences of CP (i.e., students with disabilities, disadvantaged or at risk students).

A theoretical underpinning of CP in schools appears to need clarity—is freedom from CP a right, and if so, at what age is it gained? Perhaps CP is a right exclusive to the educational system? Corporal punishment in American penal institutions has been held unconstitutional (violating Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments) (Palmer, 2010). Why do rights of older students, albeit all students, in American k-12 schools appear more diminished than the rights of prisoners? Considering the shifting collective conscience on spanking, school boards may have been granted too much discretion. Wide district to district variance for discipline consequences is out of step with a national movement towards common academic standards.

Significance of the Study

Findings amplify a call to inform policymakers with research on an issue with capacity for affecting thousands of American students. Stakeholders are more aware of undercurrents affecting school environments with greater understandings of shifting American spanking belief.

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