What Does Research Tell Us About Corporal Punishment and Prohibition?

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Several decades of research have shown that corporal punishment does not improve children’s behavior and predicts more mental health problems and behavior problems over time.

Today I will summarize 4 insights from recent research about corporal punishment.

Insight #1

Corporal Punishment is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)
Insight #1: Corporal Punishment is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have been linked with worse health outcomes across the lifespan and have become a focus of concern in public health and medicine.

Several recent studies have demonstrated that corporal punishment predicts negative health outcomes into adulthood in the same ways as the 10 ACEs from the original study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Used Illegal Drugs</th>
<th>Drank High Amounts of Alcohol</th>
<th>Attempted Suicide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACEs that are significant predictors of mental health in adulthood</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent had mental illness</td>
<td>Parent abused substances</td>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent abused substances</td>
<td>Corporal punishment</td>
<td>Parent had mental illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACEs that are not significant predictors</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
<td>Physical neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
<td>Mother treated violently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother treated violently</td>
<td>Mother treated violently</td>
<td>Parent abused substances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent incarcerated</td>
<td>Parent had mental illness</td>
<td>Parents divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents divorced</td>
<td>Parent incarcerated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Insight #2

Corporal Punishment is Linked with Worse Outcomes for Children Across Countries and Cultures
Insight #2: Corporal Punishment is Linked with Worse Outcomes for Children Across Countries and Cultures

Much of the research on corporal punishment has been conducted in the U.S. or other high income countries, leading to questions about its relevance to Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs).

We now have research from countries around the world, including LMICs, showing that corporal punishment is linked with worse outcomes for children.
Corporal Punishment is Prevalent in LMICs

Proportion of 2- to 4-year-old children exposed to corporal punishment from UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)

Corporal punishment by parents is linked with worse social emotional behavior in all 60 low- and middle-income countries.

Data comes from UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

Sample size is 215,885 children.

In a longitudinal study in one specific middle income country – **Colombia** – my colleagues and I found that children exposed to corporal punishment early in life exhibited significantly lower cognitive development over time than did children who had not been corporally punished.

This was true after taking into account several factors about the children (including their initial cognitive scores), their families (including family wealth and parent involvement), and their communities (such as level of violence), and after using several econometric methods to increase our confidence that the associations were causal in nature.
Does corporal punishment in schools promote learning over time, over and above children’s initial skills?

No.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Math Skills</th>
<th>Verbal Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>↓ Worse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>↓ Worse</td>
<td>↓ Worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>↓ Worse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Corporal punishment in schools does not promote learning.

Insight #3

Shared Genes Do Not Explain Links Between Parents’ Use of Corporal Punishment and Children’s Aggressive Behavior
Could Shared Genes Explain the Relationship between Spanking and Child Aggression?

Parent’s use of corporal punishment

Child’s aggression

Parent’s genetic predisposition toward aggression

Child’s genetic predisposition toward aggression

My colleagues and I used as sample of twins in the U.S. to determine if the links between corporal punishment and aggression were stronger for identical twins (who share 100% of their genes) than for non-identical twins (who share 50% of their genes). That would suggest a genetic effect.

However, we found no evidence of a genetic effect—corporal punishment was associated with child aggression equally for identical and non-identical twins.

Insight #4

Corporal Punishment Affects Children’s Brain Functioning
A recent study using brain scan data found that children who have been corporally punished have more brain activation in response to threat than do children who have never been corporally punished.

Highlighted areas show brain regions in which corporally punished children were more reactive than children never corporally punished. These regions are involved in regulating emotions and processing social information about the intentions of others.

In Summary:

These latest results confirm what previous research has shown—there is no evidence that corporal punishment is effective or helps children and much evidence that it harms them.

Collectively, decades of research support prohibitions of corporal punishment as a means of protecting children and promoting their well-being.
THANK YOU!

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or for copies of these research papers:

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Sources


