Corporal punishment of children: review of research on its impact and associations


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**Introduction**

Corporal punishment is a violation of children’s rights. International human rights law is clear that children have a right to legal protection from all corporal punishment in all settings of their lives.¹ There is no need to look for evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment in order to know that it must be prohibited in law and eliminated in practice – just as there is no need for research to show that violence against any other group of people is harmful before efforts are made to end it.

However, research on the issue can be useful for advocacy – and the message from research is very clear: corporal punishment carries multiple risk of harm and has no benefits. The large and consistent body of evidence on the issue has been augmented still further in recent years by the increasingly sophisticated techniques which researchers have employed to address the arguments advanced by a few opponents of prohibition (see “Responses to arguments defending corporal punishment” below).

This review includes more than 200 studies showing associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes; there is no evidence of any positive outcomes. The body of research presents an overwhelmingly convincing case that corporal punishment is harmful for children, adults and societies. Intended for use by advocates for children’s right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, this review illuminates how corporal punishment violates not just children’s right to freedom from all violence, but also their rights to health, development and education. It supports arguments that prohibition is a low-cost effective public health measure, for example in the prevention of domestic violence, mental illness and antisocial behaviour and to aid welfare, education and developmental outcomes for children (see “The public health case for prohibition” below).

For further resources for advocates, including detailed information on applicable human rights standards, guidance on law reform and a shorter summary version of this review of research see www.endcorporalpunishment.org or email info@endcorporalpunishment.org.  

*This review of research is a working document. Comments, questions and suggestions are welcome; please send any contributions to elinor@endcorporalpunishment.org.*

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**What is corporal punishment?**

“The Committee [on the Rights of the Child] defines “corporal” or “physical” punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting (“smacking”, “slapping”, “spanking”) children, with the hand or with an implement - a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children’s mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), *General Comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (arts. 19; 28, para. 2; and 37, inter alia)* (CRC/C/GC/8)
Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child.”

How prevalent is corporal punishment?

Enormous numbers of children experience corporal punishment in their homes, schools, care settings and the penal system in all world regions. UNICEF statistics collected between 2005 and 2013 in 62 countries highlighted that violent “discipline” is the most common form of violence against children. The report, which used data from surveys carried out in 2005-2013, found that on average about four in five children aged 2-14 had experienced violent “discipline” (physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) at home in the past month. On average, 17% of children experienced severe physical punishment (being hit on the head, face or ears or hit hard and repeatedly) at home in the past month.

Certain children are particularly likely to experience corporal punishment. A study published in 2013, which used UNICEF statistics from 17 countries, found that children with disabilities were more likely to experience physical punishment and less likely to experience only non-violent discipline than children without disabilities. Young children are especially vulnerable to corporal punishment. Corporal punishment may have a gender dimension, with girls and boys experiencing different types or frequencies of violent punishment. For summaries of research into the prevalence of, attitudes towards and children’s experience of corporal punishment, see [www.endcorporalpunishment.org](http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org).

Elizabeth Gershoff’s meta-analysis

In 2002, a major meta-analysis was published of studies on lawful corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviours and experiences, carried out by Elizabeth Gershoff. The meta-analysis, which involved 88 studies, examined the associations between physical punishment and the following eleven “behaviours and experiences”:

- immediate compliance (child stops the behaviour they were punished for)
- moral internalisation (child learns the intended lesson)
- poor quality of relationship between parent and child
- mental health problems in childhood

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2 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), op cit, para. 11
• aggression in childhood
• delinquent and antisocial behaviour in childhood
• child being a victim of “abuse”
• aggression and violence when adult
• criminal or anti-social behaviour when adult
• mental health problems when adult
• abusing child or spouse when adult

The meta-analysis found significant associations between corporal punishment and ten undesirable behaviours or experiences. The eleventh, “immediate compliance” had mixed results and its desirability is in any event ambiguous if children are unable to learn from the experience.

The studies showing these associations were published before 2001 and are referenced to this meta-analysis. All other studies summarised here were not included in the meta-analysis, many because they are more recent and some because they address associations not included in the meta-analysis.

The public health case for prohibition

The negative effects of corporal punishment on individual children and adults add up to negative effects on society as a whole. The evidence of these negative effects documented in this review supports arguments that prohibition is a low-cost effective public health measure, for example in the prevention of domestic violence, mental illness and antisocial behaviour and to aid welfare, education and developmental outcomes for children. Even if corporal punishment may be only a small risk factor for some negative outcomes, the cumulative effects of eliminating even a small risk factor can nevertheless be large.

Ending corporal punishment is essential in ending physical “child abuse” (see “Direct physical harm” below). The legality of corporal punishment undermines child protection: it reinforces the idea that a certain degree of violence against children is acceptable. In allowing “light” violence which carries a high risk of escalation to continue, it increases the number of children who are subjected to more severe violence. The evidence in this paper that much “abuse” is corporal punishment and “ordinary” corporal punishment is strongly linked to a risk of abuse provides clear evidence that eliminating corporal punishment is an essential part of working against all violence against children.

Studies are increasingly showing the links between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative effects at a societal level, including approval and use of other forms of violence. There are clear links between corporal punishment and partner violence – see “Corporal punishment and partner violence: the relationships” below.

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Ending corporal punishment is an essential element in creating societies which are overall less violent. Research suggests that the more a society uses violence for socially approved purposes, the more individuals in that society are likely to use violence for purposes which are not socially approved.\(^7\) A study of eight non-violent societies found that, although they differed in many respects, one thing they had in common was non-violent childrearing, suggesting that corporal punishment is a risk factor for societal violence.\(^8\) A study of anthropological records of 186 cultural groups from all world regions found that societies which made more frequent use of corporal punishment endorsed other forms of violence more. Societies in which corporal punishment was used more frequently also deliberately educated children to be aggressive to a greater extent and engaged more in warfare. The study controlled for demographic and socioeconomic factors. The researchers noted that “the findings are consistent with theories that adult violence becomes more prevalent in contexts in which corporal punishment is frequent, that the use of corporal punishment increases the probability that children will engage in violent behaviors during adulthood, and that violence in one social domain tends to influence behavior in other domains” and suggested that “if corporal punishment leads to higher levels of societal violence, then reducing parents’ use of corporal punishment should lead to reductions in societal violence manifested in other ways” (p. 257).\(^9\)

A US study of nearly 1,000 parents found that those who thought that “it is important for boys to have a few fist fights” were more likely to “spank” their children,\(^10\) and the study of students in 32 countries found that the higher the percentage of respondents who were physically punished a lot as children, the higher the percentage which agreed that “a man should not walk away from a physical fight with another man”.\(^11\) A nationally representative study of adults in the USA found that those who thought torture was sometimes justified were about a third more likely to believe that “spanking” children was necessary than those who thought torture was never justified.\(^12\) A study of students in 32 countries found that the higher the percentage of respondents who were physically punished a lot as children in the country, the higher the rate of murders in the country.\(^13\) Similarly, a study of US states found that the higher the percentage of the adult population who thought it was OK to “spank” a child in a state, the higher the murder rate.\(^14\) A study in 10 European states which examined the degree of teachers’ approval of physical punishment found that the greater the degree of approval of physical punishment, the higher the general homicide rate was and the higher the rate of homicide of infants was.\(^15\) A study found that people who approved of the death penalty and people who owned a gun were more likely than other people to approve of corporal punishment by parents.\(^16\)

\(^7\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\(^12\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\(^13\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\(^14\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\(^15\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\(^16\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
Corporal punishment in any setting can create a “culture of violence” where other forms of violence can thrive. An extreme example of this is shown by a study in all 50 states of the USA, which found that students in states where school corporal punishment was permitted were more than twice as likely to die in a school shooting than those in states where it was prohibited. The study also looked at the prevalence of corporal punishment in each state, and found that the more students were physically punished in schools, the higher the student mortality rate from school shootings. The study controlled for differences in poverty rates and the prevalence of conservative Christian religions associated with the use of corporal punishment. The researcher stated that the results suggest that “the endorsement of school corporal punishment reflects a set of values that are punitive in nature and create a context conducive to the violence that characterizes school shootings” (p. 182) and that school corporal punishment should therefore be prohibited.17

In a few states which have prohibited all corporal punishment, the positive effects of the decreased use of physical punishment are becoming visible.18 A 2000 study which examined the impact of the 1979 ban in Sweden found that reporting of assaults against children rose between 1981 and 1996, in line with expectations of a reduced tolerance of violence against children following the ban, and that there had been a decrease in the number of 15 to 17 year olds involved in various types of crime, including theft, narcotics crimes, assaults against young children and rape, between 1983 and 1996 and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people between 1971 and 1997.19 Studies in Finland have found that there has been a clear reduction in all forms of corporal punishment and other parental violence against children since prohibition in 198320 and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered.21

In recognition of the human rights imperative to prohibit all corporal punishment and the importance of prohibition for reducing all forms of violence against children and other violence in societies and improving physical and mental health and other developmental outcomes for children and adults, in 2013 nine international health organisations issued a statement calling for prohibition and elimination of all corporal punishment. The statement, available at www.endcorporalpunishment.org, is endorsed by the International Association for Adolescent Health, the International Council of Nurses, the International Council of Psychologists, the International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations, the International Pediatric Association, the International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health, the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, the International Union of Psychological Science and the World Federation of Public Health Associations.

18 For more information on research showing reductions in the use of physical punishment in countries which have prohibited it, see www.endcorporalpunishment.org
19 Durrant, J. (2000), A Generation Without Smacking: the impact of Sweden’s ban on physical punishment, Save the Children
Corporal punishment and partner violence: the relationships

Corporal punishment and partner violence are closely linked. The two kinds of violence often coexist and experiencing corporal punishment as a child increases the chance of both being a victim of and perpetrating intimate partner violence as an adult. Experience of violence in childhood is linked to experience of violence in adulthood: for too many girls and boys, childhood experience of corporal punishment is the beginning of a life of violent victimisation by authority figures and family members.

The links are at both an individual and a societal level. Corporal punishment increases individuals’ risk of involvement in partner violence in their own households, then and later. It is also part of the “pattern of violence” in society at large: corporal punishment makes other violence in society, including partner violence, more likely (see “The public health case for prohibition” above).

Research suggests that social settings in which corporal punishment is prevalent tend to be social settings in which partner violence is prevalent. A study which used anthropological data from more than 200 societies found that societies which used corporal punishment were more likely to be societies in which “wife-beating” was prevalent.22 A study which involved more than 14,000 participants in 32 countries found that the larger the percentage of participants who had been “spanked” as a child in a country, the larger the percentages who approved of a husband slapping their wife, approved of a wife slapping their husband, had assaulted a partner and had injured a partner. The same study found that the more respondents had been “spanked”, the greater the likelihood that they would later report having forced a partner to have sex without a condom.23

A US study involving nearly 2,000 families found that corporal punishment and intimate partner violence often coexist. Parents in households where intimate partner violence was perpetrated were twice as likely to inflict corporal punishment on their children.24 This relationship was confirmed by a report which analysed data from interviews with more than 180,000 women in 12 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. It found that, for all countries with data on the topic, the proportion of women who said that children in their current home were punished by being hit, beaten or slapped was higher among those who experienced partner violence than among those who did not experience partner violence. The same study found an association between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and experiencing partner violence as an adult: the proportion of women who reported experiencing partner violence was far higher among those who had been beaten as children than among those who had not been beaten as children – at least twice as high in most cases.25

A study published in 2014 examined the relationships between women’s attitudes towards husbands hitting their wives, their attitudes towards corporal punishment of children and whether corporal

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23 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
punishment was inflicted on children in their household. The study used data from 85,999 mothers and caregivers of 2-14 year olds in 25 low- and middle-income countries, drawn from UNICEF’s nationally representative and internationally comparable Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys carried out between 2005 and 2010. It found that women who believed that husbands were justified in hitting their wives were more likely to believe that corporal punishment is necessary to rear children and more likely to report that their child had experienced “violent discipline” (psychological aggression and/or physical punishment) in the home in the month prior to the survey than women who did not believe that husbands were justified in hitting their wives. The study controlled for children’s sex, caregivers’ age, and caregivers’ education.26

The 32 country study found that being “spanked” as a child was associated with a higher probability of verbally coercing or physically forcing a partner to have sex as an adult. The association was partly due to the association between being “spanked” as a child and having “antisocial personality traits”. The study controlled for factors including experiencing sexual abuse and neglect as a child.27 A study involving 760 male students found that having experienced harsh corporal punishment as a child was associated with perpetration of dating violence as an adult.28

A 2011 study in Sweden examined various risk factors for experiencing corporal punishment and found that violence between adults in the family was the greatest risk factor: children in families where there was violence between adults were ten times as likely to be physically punished as children in families where there was no violence between adults. The study, which involved 2,500 parents of children aged 0-12 and 3,207 15-16 year olds found that 92% of parents thought that it was wrong to beat or slap a child.29

Experience of corporal punishment as a child was associated with perpetrating violence towards a partner or child as an adult in all five studies on the topic included in Gershoff’s meta-analysis.30 A major study involving men in Brazil, Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico and Rwanda found that those who had experienced violence, including corporal punishment, during childhood, were more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence, hold inequitable gender attitudes, be involved in fights outside the home or robberies, pay for sex and experience low self-esteem and depression, and were less likely to participate in domestic duties, communicate openly with their partners, attend pre-natal visits with a pregnant partner and/or take paternity leave.31 Other research showing links between physical punishment and gender inequality includes a study which involved 2,805 17-79 year olds in Norway and which found that physical punishment by parents was associated with gender-unequal decision-making in the home: 27% of respondents who said their father made the decisions at home

27 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
30 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
reported physical punishment or witnessing violence at home, compared to 17% where the mother made the decisions and 10% of those whose parents made decisions on an equal basis.  

A study of 717 boys in Canada found that experience of harsh parental practices (being punished by being hit, slapped, scolded all the time or called names and feeling rejected by parents) contributed to the boys being perpetrators of “dating violence” at 16 and 17 years old.  

A study of 608 respondents in the USA who were interviewed at ages 12-19 and again ten years later found that those who had experienced “harsh physical discipline” including being “spanked” with a belt or strap, hit with a stick or closed fist and thrown against a wall were more likely to be violent towards a “romantic partner” as adults.

A study which used data from over 4,400 adults in the USA, who took part in a nationally representative survey of American heterosexual couples with and without children, found that the more often respondents had experienced physical punishment as teenagers, the more likely they were to physically assault their partners as adults, to approve of violence (slapping a partner’s face) in adult relationships and to have physically abused a child in the past year.  

Another study in the USA, involving 188 married couples without children, found that individuals who were physically punished during childhood were more controlling with their spouse, less able to take their spouse’s perspective and more likely to engage in physical and verbal aggression with their spouse. The authors suggest that this is because physical punishment both teaches children destructive problem-solving strategies – verbal and physical aggression – and hinders them learning essential problem-solving skills – taking others’ perspectives and understanding how their behaviour affects others.

A study in Ngangelizwe, South Africa, which involved interviews with 30 16-26 year olds, found that physical assault and rape or coercive sex in the young people’s dating relationships were common and accepted as “normal” by the young people, their parents, the police and teachers. The report suggested that these findings should be understood in the broader context of life in Ngangelizwe where beating was used in a whole variety of contexts as a strategy for punishment, including parents beating their children and teachers beating their students.

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32 Holter et al (2009), Gender Equality and Quality of Life: A Norwegian Perspective, Nordic Gender Institute
35 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
The effects of corporal punishment

Direct physical harm

Corporal punishment kills thousands of children every year, injures many more and is the direct cause of many children’s physical impairments. Research in countries in all regions attests to the severity of the physical violence which children experience in the name of “discipline”. For example, in research carried out in Cambodia, China (Hong Kong), Fiji, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines and Viet Nam, children reported that the most common type of punishment was being hit with hands and objects including whips, belts and chains, with words used to describe this including “beating”, “whacking”, “lashed” and “punched”. Other punishments included being electrocuted, having their heads submerged in water, having their joints twisted, being forced to the ground, being pinched, having their hair pulled, being scratched and having adults stomp on their stomachs. In a New Zealand study in which 80 children aged 7-14 were asked about their views on physical punishment, they described being hit on the face and head, hit with implements including belts and tennis rackets and being forced to ingest soap and mustard. The children who took part had no known or alleged history of child abuse or neglect.

Physical punishment is intended to hurt, and in studies from around the world which ask children their views of physical punishment, children consistently state that it is physically painful. In a UK study with children aged 5-7, children’s comments about “smacking” included “it feels like someone banged you with a hammer” (five year old girl) and “it hurts and it’s painful inside – it’s like breaking your bones” (seven year old girl).

Most “child abuse” is corporal punishment – adults using violence to control and punish children. Research has consistently found that the majority of incidents substantiated by authorities as abuse occur in a punitive context. A major Canadian study found that nearly three quarters (74%) of all cases of “substantiated physical abuse” were cases of physical punishment and 27% of “substantiated emotional maltreatment incidents” were initiated as a form of punishment. In the vast majority of cases of “substantiated physical abuse”, physical violence was the primary form of maltreatment. Of these cases, most involved forms of violence typically used as punishments: just over half (54%) involved children being slapped or “spanked”, 30% involved children being shaken, pushed, grabbed or thrown, 21% involved children being hit with objects and 8% involved children being punched, kicked or bitten. Similarly, a study of 830 substantiated physical abuse cases in the USA in the 1980s concluded that “almost invariably” parents defined their actions as “disciplinary

procedures that were required in response to the child’s behaviour”. A UK study found that the intent to discipline or punish was a common precursor in many child homicide cases.

The purported distinction between “ordinary” physical punishment and “abuse” is meaningless: no line can or should be drawn between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” violence against children. However, some researchers have distinguished between “punishment” and “abuse” in order to study the links between more and less socially accepted forms of violence against children. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all ten of the studies on the topic of child protection found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical “abuse”. A study in Canada found that children who were “spanked” by their parents were at seven times greater risk of being severely assaulted (such as being punched or kicked) than children who were not physically punished. A study which used data from 2,788 families in the USA with children born between 1998 and 2000 found that families in which children aged 1 were “spanked” were about 33% more likely to be involved with Child Protective Services before the child was aged 5 than families in which 1-year-olds were not spanked. The study controlled for mothers’ depression, household income and demographic factors.

Further studies include a 2002 US study which found that mothers who reported that they had spanked their child were 2.7 times more likely to report that they had beaten, burned, kicked, hit with an object or shaken their child and one of over 1,200 12 year olds in Sri Lanka, which found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical abuse. A study in the USA found that children who had been “spanked” by their parents in the past month were 2.3 times as likely to suffer an injury requiring medical attention as children who had not been spanked.

Several studies directly suggest the positive effects of eliminating corporal punishment in reducing physical “abuse”. A study carried out in 2011 and published in 2014, which involved a survey of a representative sample of 4,609 15-80 year olds in Finland, found that the proportion of people who were slapped and beaten with an object during childhood decreased after corporal punishment was prohibited in 1983 and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered. A US study involving 110 parents who had physically abused their children found that reducing the parents’ use of “spanking” reduced the risk

47 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
53 Österman, K. et al (2014), op cit
that they would physically abuse their children again.\textsuperscript{54} And a US study of 372 Hispanic fathers’ aggressive behaviour (including “spanking”, slapping and shaking) towards their 3-5 year old children found that Hispanic fathers who were born outside the USA were less likely to be aggressive towards their children than Hispanic fathers who were born in the USA and that this lower use of aggression by fathers is one reason that, despite socioeconomic risks, Hispanic children are not more likely to be involved with the child welfare system than children of other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{55}

All physical punishment, however “mild” and “light”, carries an inbuilt risk of escalation: its effectiveness in controlling children’s behavior decreases over time, encouraging the punisher to increase the intensity of the punishment.\textsuperscript{56} The risk of escalation of physical punishment is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry.\textsuperscript{57} In a 2007 study in Australia which involved interviews and focus groups with children aged 8-17, children said that physical punishment is often inflicted by adults who are angry and stressed and that adults often regret it and feel guilty afterwards.\textsuperscript{58}

Research shows that parents in difficult situations may be more likely to use physical punishment. A US study which used data from 2,309 fathers of three-year-olds found that fathers who reported finding parenting stressful, being depressed, using alcohol heavily and/or using drugs were more likely to physically punish their child.\textsuperscript{59} A US study involving the parents and teachers of 245 children, who were interviewed when the children were aged 3 and 5 \(\frac{1}{2}\) found that mothers and fathers who reported experiencing depressive symptoms were more likely to think that their child was not responsive and/or not affectionate towards them, and, in turn, parents who thought this were more likely to physically punish their child.\textsuperscript{60} Parents’ anger, stress and other negative emotions increase the risk of escalation, including through the potential to increase the level of force used beyond what was intended and because of the increased likelihood that parents’ intent is retaliatory as well as punitive.\textsuperscript{61}

That corporal punishment and “abuse” are not two separate phenomena is further evidenced by studies which show that their effects are similar, varying only in degree. For example, a study in Canada found that people who had been physically punished as a child (defined as having something thrown at them, being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped or spanked) but had not experienced more severe forms of assault were more likely to experience psychiatric disorders as adults than those who had not been physically punished as children, but less likely than those who had experienced

\textsuperscript{57} Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), \textit{Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth}, Ottawa: Coalition of Physical Punishment of Children and Youth
\textsuperscript{58} Straus, M. & Douglas, E. (2008), op cit
\textsuperscript{61} Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), op cit
more severe forms of assault as children (being kicked, bitten, hit with a fist or object, beaten up, choked, burned, or scalded).  

**Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour**

Research has consistently found that far from teaching children how to behave, corporal punishment in fact makes it less likely that they learn the lessons adults want them to learn. In addition to the links with aggression in children (see “Increased aggression in children” below), corporal punishment has been implicated in a variety of studies as a factor in behaviours such as bullying, lying, cheating, running away, truancy, school behaviour problems and involvement in crime as a child and young adult.  

In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance. This, ironically, may be its most harmful attribute, because 13 of 15 studies found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child’s long-term compliance to the desired behaviour. And in 12 of the 13 studies included in Gershoff’s meta-analysis, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in “delinquent and antisocial behaviour”.

Corporal punishment does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others. Instead of helping children to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, corporal punishment teaches children that it is desirable not to get caught: rather than behaving differently next time, they are therefore likely to repeat the undesired behaviour and use strategies to avoid being caught. Corporal punishment may also decrease long-term compliance through its effects on children’s cognitive development – for example, by making children less able to regulate their own behaviour and by damaging adult-child relationships (see “Damage to the parent-child relationship” below), introducing fear and undermining the powerful behavioural motivations of children’s respect for and desire to please their parents and other adults involved in their care and education.

Many longitudinal studies which have examined children’s experience of physical punishment and their behaviour over a period of several years, controlling for the child’s initial behaviour and other factors, refute the idea that the association between physical punishment and behaviour problems is due to children with more behaviour problems being punished more, providing strong evidence that physical punishment causes behaviour problems.

A study which used data from 1,600 children living in Scotland, UK, gathered between 2006 and 2009, found that children who had been “smacked” once or more times by their main caregiver by the time they were 22 months old were twice as likely to have emotional and behavioural problems.

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63 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
64 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
65 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
66 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
when they were four as children who had not been smacked. The study controlled for child age and sex, caregiver age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment and mental health status, sibling number, structural family transitions and socioeconomic status. A study of 117 mothers of toddlers in the USA which found that children of mothers who used “overreactive” discipline, including verbal and physical punishment and expressing anger, had more behaviour problems. The study examined children’s behaviour and mothers’ parenting at two different points between the ages of one and a half and six years. It found no evidence that children’s behaviour caused mothers’ overreactive discipline, but did suggest that overreactive discipline caused children’s behaviour problems.

Other longitudinal studies which have found links between corporal punishment and behaviour problems are listed below:

- A study involving more than 1,000 mothers in the USA who were interviewed and observed when their children were one, three and four years old found that children who experienced corporal punishment aged one were more likely to have both “internalising” and “externalising” behaviour problems aged three and four, after controlling for children’s initial behaviour/temperament and other factors.
- A US study of 779 children whose parents were interviewed when the children were born and at ages 1, 3 and 5 found that children who were “spanked” by their mothers two times a week or more at age 3 were more likely to behave aggressively and break rules aged 5.
- A US study published in 2013 which used data from about 1,900 children whose parents were surveyed when the children were aged three, five and nine, found that children who were “spanked” “regularly” or “occasionally” by their mothers when they were five were more likely to have behaviour problems when they were nine. The study controlled for children’s behaviour aged three and five and for other family characteristics.
- A US study of 4, 6 and 8 year olds with previous behaviour problems found that physical punishment was associated with a subsequent increase in behaviour problems.
- A Canadian study of a nationally representative sample of nearly 10,000 children aged 4-11 found that physical punishment was associated with a subsequent increase in hyperactivity, emotional disorders, aggression, indirect aggression and property offenses.

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• A US study of 807 children found that the more children were “spanked” aged 6-9, the more likely they were to cheat or tell lies, bully or be cruel to others, not feel sorry after misbehaving, deliberately break things, be disobedient at school and/or have trouble getting along with teachers two years later. The study controlled for initial levels of child antisocial behaviour and sex, family socioeconomic status and levels of emotional support and cognitive stimulation in the home.  

• A US study of 6-16 year old boys found that corporal punishment was associated with a subsequent increase in parents’ and teachers’ reports of children’s behaviour problems.  

• A US study found that experiencing physical punishment at home predicted 10-12 year old children’s disruptive school behaviour two years later.  

• A study of nearly 7,000 young people in the USA, whose mothers were interviewed six times during ten years, found that young people who experienced higher levels of corporal punishment manifested more antisocial behaviour problems than young people who did not experience corporal punishment, regardless of the level of their antisocial behaviour at the beginning of the study. No evidence was found for differences in the effect of corporal punishment across racial groups.

Also in the USA, a study in which parents from more than 500 families were trained to decrease their use of physical punishment found that the subsequent reduction in the difficult behaviour of their children (aged 3-8 years) was largely due to the reduction in their parents’ use of physical punishment. A 2011 study of 92 parents of young children involved in a parent education programme had similar results.

Numerous non-longitudinal studies have found associations between corporal punishment and behaviour problems. In a study of 238 3.5 year old children in the USA, children’s parents filled in questionnaires about the “discipline” practices, including physical punishment that they used and about their children’s behaviour and “moral regulation” (for example, how likely children were to try a prohibited but attractive activity when alone or to tell their parents when they did something wrong), preschool teachers filled in questionnaires about children’s behaviour and children took part in tests, including a “gift task” in which they were asked not to look while a gift for them was noisily wrapped and then not to touch the gift. The study found that boys who experienced physical punishment more frequently had more aggressive and destructive behaviour problems and less moral regulation. In another US study of 1,056 mothers of one to five year-old children, mothers...
reported on their use of verbal and physical punishment and rated the frequency of their children’s behaviour problems. The study found that children who experienced more frequent verbal and physical punishment had more behaviour problems. A US study involving 1,397 4- to 9-year-old children found that children who were “spanked” more frequently had more social and emotional problems, such as bullying and destructive behaviour, anxiousness, sadness and dependency.

A study involving 409 children (average age 10.5 years) at a private school in Tanzania found that the children’s experience of corporal punishment was associated with increased aggressive and hyperactive behaviour and decreased empathetic behaviour. A US study of 10-14 year olds found that physical punishment was associated with “delinquent” behaviour, including bullying, being cruel to other children and/or their parents, hitting children or adults, stealing, having discipline problems at school and/or drinking or using drugs. Physical punishment was associated directly with a higher likelihood of “delinquent” behaviour and was also associated with a weakened bond between children and parents, which in turn was associated with a greater likelihood of “delinquency”. A 2007-2008 study in Germany which involved 45,000 14-15 year olds found that children who had been severely beaten by their parents were five times more likely to use cannabis, four times more likely to skip school at least ten times a year, three times more likely to later hold extreme right-wing convictions and five time more likely to commit multiple violent criminal offences than those who were not physically punished.

A study involving 919 adolescents in Chile found that corporal punishment by mothers and fathers was associated with more delinquent and aggressive behaviour by the young people. In a US study of over 1,500 boys aged 6-18, half of whom were identified as displaying high levels of antisocial behaviour, participants engaging in more serious forms of delinquency (for example, stealing, carrying weapons, selling drugs and attacking someone to seriously hurt or kill them) reported experiencing higher levels of physical punishment.

A study involving 102 college students in the USA found that those who had experienced “minor” corporal punishment such as “spanking” or slapping as children had lower levels of empathy, while those whose parents had used explanation of the consequences of their actions as a discipline method had higher levels of empathy. Empathy was measured by a test where participants indicated their level of agreement with statements such as “I get really angry when I see someone being ill-treated”. The authors of the study suggest that corporal punishment may prevent people from

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85 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
developing an internalised set of values, meaning that they need to rely on external sanctions when making decisions about moral issues.  

**Increased aggression in children**

There is abundant evidence that corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression in children. All 27 studies on the topic included in Gershoff’s meta-analysis found an association, and this has been confirmed by all of the numerous studies on the topic carried out since. The reasons for the association may include that aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain, that children copy their parents’ behaviour and that children learn that violence is an appropriate method of getting what you want. Children in a New Zealand study described feeling aggressive after being smacked: “[you act] like you want payback and revenge” (nine year old boy); “you hurt your sister, like you take it out on somebody else” (13 year old boy). Children in the UK said that after they have been smacked, children “act naughty and start to hurt people” (five year old girl) and that “if they’re very little, they might think it’s right to smack and go off and smack somebody else” (seven year old girl).

Studies which use a prospective design have refuted the idea that findings of an association between corporal punishment and children’s aggressive behaviour are invalid because children who are more aggressive experience more corporal punishment – research consistently suggests that experiencing physical punishment directly causes children’s levels of aggression to increase. For example, a study in the USA of 2,461 children found that children who were “spanked” more than twice in the previous month aged 3 were more likely to be more aggressive aged 5. The study controlled for the children’s level of aggression at age 3, showing that the relationship was not due to more aggressive children experiencing more “spanking” – instead, it suggested that the spanking caused the increase in children’s aggressive behaviour. A study involving 3,279 mothers and children living in 20 US cities found that children who were “spanked” aged 1 were more aggressive at age 3 and children who were “spanked” aged 3 were more aggressive at age 5. Maternal warmth did not change the associations between “spanking” children and their later aggressive behaviour. The study controlled for demographic characteristics and other risk factors.

Recent research suggests that the relationship between corporal punishment and children’s aggressive may be reciprocal. A 2014 US study, which used data from 1,874 children collected when the children were aged 1, 3, 5 and 9, found that children who were “spanked” were more likely to

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90 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
91 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
behave aggressively and break rules 2-4 years later, and in turn, these children were then more likely to be spanked, creating a “vicious cycle”. The findings held for children of different races and genders. The study controlled for a wide range of demographic factors.  

Many of the numerous studies which have found links between corporal punishment and aggression have focussed on children’s aggression towards their peers. These include a study of 10-13 year old boys in Nigeria, which found that those who were identified as aggressive by their parents, peers and teachers experienced more physical punishment than those who were identified as “prosocial” (for example, because they were helpful and worked well with others): 77% of the aggressive boys had been beaten four times or more with an implement in the preceding two months compared to 9% of the prosocial boys.  

A study in Israel compared the behaviour of and levels of corporal punishment experienced by children of Israeli origin and children of former Soviet Union origin living in Israel. It found that the more frequent experience of corporal punishment of children of former Soviet Union origin explained their lower level of “prosocial” behaviour.  

A US study which involved 102 parents and children aged 3-7 found that children whose parents approved of and used corporal punishment were more likely to approve of “spanking” and to think that hitting was a good strategy for resolving conflicts with their peers and siblings. A study in the USA which examined how three to six year-old children behaved in playgrounds found that children whose parents who used less “power assertive discipline” (including punishing, threatening and belittling the children) were more popular with other children and showed fewer disruptive playground behaviours, such as arguing and aggression.  

Another US study of five to seven and nine to 10 year old children and their mothers found that children whose mothers used more “power assertive discipline” were less popular with their peers and were more likely to use “unfriendly methods”, such as hitting another child, to resolve conflicts with their peers. The effect continues into adolescence: a US study of 134 parents and children aged 10-15 found that children who were physically punished by their parents were more likely to approve of the use of violence in their peer relationships, to have been involved in a fight in the past year, to bully their peers and to have experienced violence from their peers in the last school term. A 2007-2008 study in Germany which involved 45,000 ninth grade students found that children who had been severely beaten by their parents were five times more likely to commit multiple violent criminal offences than those who were not physically punished.  

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study of 717 boys in Canada found that experience of harsh parental practices (being punished by being hit, slapped, scolded all the time or called names and feeling rejected by parents) contributed to the boys being perpetrators of “dating violence” at 16 and 17 years old.  

Children who experience corporal punishment from their parents are more likely to be aggressive towards their parents, as confirmed by a US study of 1,023 couples with a child aged between three and 17. It found that 40% of the mothers who used corporal punishment three or more times in the past year had been hit by their child in that year and 30% who had used corporal punishment once or twice had been hit, compared to only 13% who did not use it at all.  

A US study which involved a nationally representative sample of 15-16 year old boys found that those who were physically punished by their parents were more likely to assault their parents a year later.

**Adult perpetration of violent, antisocial and criminal behaviour**

See also “Corporal punishment and partner violence: the relationships” above.

The effects of corporal punishment can last long into adulthood and affect the next generation of children. Young children taking part in a study in the UK were concerned about the effects of parents smacking children, children then smacking their own children, and the “habit” continuing into future generations. A seven year old girl said, “...it’s mean and it hurts the child and they’ll just learn to smack people and they’ll go on and it won’t help at all”. In a study in New Zealand, a 14 year old boy said: “It [smacking] doesn’t work. But the thing is that when your Mum and Dad were younger they would have probably been brought up the same way, like getting hit and stuff” and an 11 year old girl said “It teaches them, when they get children, to smack their kids”.

Children’s belief that corporal punishment perpetuates itself is confirmed by other studies – including a US study of nearly 350 mothers and fathers of two and three year old children, in which parents were asked about their experience of physical punishment as children, how they resolved conflicts in their marriages and how much they approved of physically punishing their children. The study found that mothers who had experienced physical punishment from their mother and fathers who had experienced physical punishment from their father were more likely to approve of physically punishing their own children. Fathers who perceived the “discipline” they had experienced as children to be “harsh” were also more likely to approve of physically punishing their children.

Another US study which involved 102 parents and children aged 3-7 found that parents who had

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experienced corporal punishment as children were more likely to approve of using corporal punishment on their own children.\textsuperscript{111}

Corporal punishment is associated with perpetration of violent and criminal behaviour by adults to those outside as well as in the family. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all four studies on aggression in adulthood found a significant association with childhood experience of corporal punishment and four of the five studies on corporal punishment and criminal and antisocial behaviour in adulthood found an association.\textsuperscript{112} A study of over 4,000 adults in the USA found an association between having experienced corporal punishment as an adolescent and having physically assaulted someone outside the family in the past year.\textsuperscript{113}

**Mental harm**

Corporal punishment is not only physically but also emotionally painful, as children describe. A ten year old boy taking part in a New Zealand study said, “The thing that makes you cry is that if you don’t see them and they go ‘whack’. That’s what makes you cry, even if it’s a light one you can just get scared cause you never know when it’s going to come”.\textsuperscript{114} A ten year old in a 2007 Australian study described how children feel after being hit by saying, “I feel very heartbroken...They’ve hurt my feeling for one. They’ve kind of let me down, ‘cause I really trust...’cause they’re taking care of me, and then as soon as you get hit, you think...they’re...breaking your trust...and...your heart just goes down and...you get very sad...you go off and cry...get it all out of your system.” In a study in Scotland, UK, children used these words to describe how they felt after being hit: “Hurt, sore, scared, upset, unloved, terrified, worried, lonely, sad, angry, alone, abandoned, afraid, cross, frightened, sick, stunned, threatened, annoyed, bad, physically abused, hateful, emotionally hurt, unhappy, terrible, ashamed, disliked, confused, embarrassed, resentful, neglected, overpowered, humiliated, grumpy, disappointed, painful, miserable, überhaupt, unloved, depressed, worried, shocked.”\textsuperscript{115} The links between corporal punishment and poor mental health in childhood and adulthood are clear. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all 12 studies on mental health in childhood concluded that corporal punishment is significantly associated with a decrease in children’s mental health – including behaviour, anxiety and disruptive disorders and depression and hopelessness in adolescents. All eight on mental health in adulthood found an association between corporal punishment and poorer mental health, including low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.\textsuperscript{116}

The reasons for the effects may include disruption in parent-child attachment and disruption of the brain’s mechanism for regulating stress.\textsuperscript{117} A study involving 44 low socioeconomic status mothers and toddlers in the USA examined children’s levels of cortisol (a hormone released in response to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
\item[113] Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\item[114] Dobbs, T. (2007), op cit
\item[115] Cutting, E. (2001), “It doesn’t sort anything!” A report on the views of children and young people about the use of physical punishment, Edinburgh: Save the Children
\item[116] Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
\item[117] Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), op cit
\end{footnotes}
stress) before and after a stressful experience (repeated separation from their mother, combined with the presence of a stranger). The study found that the more often children were “spanked” or “smacked” the higher their levels of cortisol after the stressful experience, suggesting that more frequent experience of corporal punishment made children react with more stress to a potentially frightening event. The authors suggest that the children were vulnerable to unexpected, challenging, or novel life events and could have difficulty dealing with stress in the future.118

A US study involving 3,870 families found that children who were "spanked" when they were aged under one year old were more likely to be aggressive aged three and to be depressed or anxious aged five.119 An 18 year longitudinal study of 1,025 New Zealand -born children found that the more physical punishment they experienced during childhood, the more likely they were at age 18 to have had a psychiatric disorder, attempted suicide, been dependent on alcohol or cannabis, been a victim of assault aged 16-18 and committed criminal offences. Young people who had been exposed to frequent, severe punishment during their childhood had rates of these outcomes that were 1.5 to 3.9 times higher than those rates for young people who reported that their parents had never used physical punishment.120 Another New Zealand study, of 42 children aged 8-12 and their families, examined the kinds of punishment parents used: “mild” (slapping a child on the hand or poking them), “moderate” (spanking a child or pulling them up by the arm) and “borderline abusive” (hitting a child with an object such as a belt or wooden spoon). Children who experienced more severe punishments were more likely to report feeling anxious and depressed.121 Similar associations were found in a US study involving 16 year olds which found that experiencing harsh physical punishment was linked to greater adolescent depression.122

A study of 12-year olds in Sri Lanka found that the level of corporal punishment the young people experienced at home was significantly associated with their level of psychological maladjustment, including low self-esteem, hostility and aggression and emotional instability.123

A study of 480 children aged 6-17 living in an urban poor area in Brazil found that those who had experienced severe physical punishment (defined as being hit with an object, kicked, choked, smothered, burnt, scalded, branded, beaten or threatened with a weapon) in the past year by their mother or mother’s husband or partner were more than twice as likely as those who had not experienced these forms of punishment to suffer from two kinds of mental health problem together:

problems which are inwardly directed such as anxiety or depression and problems which are outwardly directed such as aggressive behaviour.\textsuperscript{124}

A study of 2,000 10-16 year olds in the \textit{USA} found that the more often the young people had been “spanked”, slapped or hit by parents or guardians in the past year, the more likely they were to have experienced psychological distress (including feeling sad, feeling alone and feeling bad about themselves). The association was significant at all levels of frequency of corporal punishment, including for young people who had experienced physical punishment once or twice in the past year. Those who experienced “frequent” corporal punishment (at least once a month) were also more likely to have been depressed in the past month. The study controlled for young people’s experience of violence identified as abuse and for their age, gender and parent’s income. The study also examined the effect of parental support (measured by young people answering questions such as “Do you and your parents have fun together?”, “Do they trust you?” and “If you were in trouble would you talk to them?”) and found that the association between experiencing frequent corporal punishment and psychological distress was greater when parents were more supportive: the difference in levels of psychological distress between frequently punished young people and those who were never physically punished was much greater among those with supportive parents. “The findings... suggest... that using physical punishment is not beneficial to the well-being of children or adolescents even in the context of a supportive parent-child relationship. In fact, this “loving” context may affect the meaning that children attach to the punishment, such that they are more likely to attribute it to their own failures and deficiencies, or experience the discipline as arbitrary and unexpected. Indeed, believing that “they spank me often because they love me” may be more distressing than believing that “they spank me often because we don’t get along”” (p. 164).\textsuperscript{125} This is confirmed by a study which involved 89 children aged 9-12 in the \textit{USA} and which found that children of parents who “spanked” them but who otherwise communicated with them in a positive and supportive way were more likely to be depressed than children who were “spanked” and whose parents did not communicate with them in a supportive way.\textsuperscript{126}

A nationally representative study in the \textit{USA} found that people who had experienced physical punishment as children, but not more severe forms of violence, were more likely to experience mental health problems including major depression, mania, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug abuse and personality disorders.\textsuperscript{127} A study in \textit{Canada} which used data collected in 2012 from a nationally representative sample of more than 23,000 adults found that experiencing corporal punishment (being slapped on the face, head or ears or hit or spanked with something hard 3 or more times) before the age of 16 was associated with mental disorders (including depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, alcohol abuse/dependence, drug abuse/dependence, phobias and eating disorders) and thinking about or attempting suicide. The study controlled for a wide range of


demographic variables. Similarly, a study of data from a survey of nearly 5,000 residents of Ontario, Canada aged 15-64 found that those who had been “spanked” or slapped more during childhood were more likely to have a psychiatric disorder, including anxiety disorder, major depression, alcohol or drug abuse and antisocial behaviour during their lifetime. For example, 5.8% of those who were never spanked or slapped during childhood had abused or been dependent on alcohol compared to 10.2% of those who were “rarely” slapped or spanked and 13.2% of those who were “sometimes” or “often” slapped or spanked. A study carried out in 2011 and published in 2014, which involved a survey of a representative sample of 4,609 15-80 year olds in Finland, found that experience of corporal punishment was associated with reporting indications of alcohol abuse, depression, mental health problems, and schizotypal personality and with having attempted suicide in the past year.

Physical punishment can cause alterations in the regions of the brain associated with vulnerability to the abuse of drugs and alcohol. A study of 1,628 18-70 year olds in China found that those who reported experiencing physical punishment sometimes or often during their childhoods were about three times as likely to develop alcohol-related problems (for example, alcohol dependence, social and legal problems due to alcohol drinking and hazard-laden drinking such as drunk driving) than those who rarely or never experienced physical punishment during childhood.

Other US studies which have found links between corporal punishment and poor mental health include one involving students aged 18-29 which found that those who had experienced parental corporal punishment more frequently at age 13, especially corporal punishment by an angry parent, were more likely to have experienced symptoms of depression in the past two weeks and one which found that the more corporal punishment adult respondents had experienced as teenagers, the more likely they were to have experienced symptoms of depression and thought about suicide in the past year.

**Indirect physical harm**

Experiencing corporal punishment may also have a negative impact on physical health in children and adults. A study of 3,355 13- to 19-year-old students in Hong Kong, China found that those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months were more likely to feel that their health was poor and to experience physical illnesses (for example asthma), injuries and accidents, as well as anxiety and stress. Those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three

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130 Österman, K. et al (2014), op cit
131 Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), op cit
months were more than twice as likely to have stayed in hospital in the past three months as those who had not (6.2% compared to 2.7%). Seventeen per cent of those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months “thought of themselves as a worthless person” compared to 10% of those who had not been corporally punished in the past three months. Students who had experienced corporal punishment were more likely to take up habits which put their health at risk, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and fighting with others. A US study of 16 and 17 year olds found that experiencing corporal punishment was associated with risky sexual behaviour (including not using contraceptives and having had or caused a pregnancy). The study found that the association was due to corporal punishment being associated with a weak child-to-parent bond, which in turn was associated with increased sexual risk-taking.

A study which involved more than 34,000 adults in the USA found that those who were “sometimes” or “often” hit, slapped, pushed, grabbed or shoved by an adult in their home during childhood were more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease and arthritis and to be obese as adults. The study controlled for demographic and socioeconomic factors, other adverse experiences during childhood and mental health problems.

A study in Taiwan which involved nearly 4,000 13-15 year olds, found that respondents who were sometimes beaten by parents or other adult family members were more likely to suffer from migraine than those who were not beaten: 30.3% of those who were beaten suffered from migraine compared to 21.3% of those who were not beaten. The more often respondents were beaten, the more likely they were to be diagnosed with migraine. Among respondents diagnosed with migraine, those who were beaten experienced headaches more frequently, had a greater proportion of severe headaches and reported experiencing more symptoms of depression in the past month than those who were not beaten.

A 2012 study involving 700 people aged 40-60 in Saudi Arabia found that those who had been beaten once every six months or more by their parents during childhood were more likely to develop cancer and asthma as adults; those who had been beaten once or more per month were also more likely to develop cardiac disease. Being insulted by parents during childhood was associated with a greater risk of all three diseases. The study controlled for demographic factors including level of parental education. The researchers suggest that the links are due to the stress caused by the beatings and insults, which in turn leads to an increased risk of disease.

**Damage to education**

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Several studies suggest that corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s cognitive development. This may be due to the effect of early experiences of fear and stress on the developing brain. Results from neuroimaging studies suggest that experiencing harsh physical punishment may reduce the volume of the brain’s grey matter in areas associated with performance on a scale used to measure intelligence in adolescence and adulthood.

A study from the USA, in which over 1,500 children did tests of their cognitive ability (including tests of their reading and maths, memory of locations and motor and social development) when they were aged 2-9 and four years later, found that the more times children were “spanked” by their mothers in the week prior to the study, the less their cognitive ability had increased four years later. The study controlled for factors including the amount of cognitive stimulation and emotional support given by mothers. Studies of the association between corporal punishment and poorer cognitive development in young children from the USA include a study of over 2,500 children which found that those who were “spanked” aged 1 were more likely to score worse on a test of their mental development aged 3 and a study of 779 children whose parents were interviewed when the children were born and at ages 1, 3 and 5 which found that children who were “spanked” by their mothers two times a week or more at age 3 were more likely to have a smaller vocabulary aged 5.

A US study published in 2013 which used data from about 1,900 children whose parents were surveyed when the children were aged three, five and nine, found that children who had been “regularly spanked” by their fathers when they were five were more likely to score poorly on a vocabulary test when they were nine. The study controlled for children’s behaviour aged three and five and for other family characteristics. A study of a nationally representative sample of children at elementary school in the USA found an association between being “spanked” in kindergarten and lower achievement in maths aged 10-11. A study of 715 3-year-olds in the USA which found that girls who experienced “harsh discipline” and “low maternal warmth” had lower IQ scores than girls who did not.

A study in Yemen of nearly 1,200 children aged 7-10 and their families found that children who experienced “harsh corporal punishment” (being hit with an implement, tied up, bitten or pinched) performed worse at school than other children and were more likely to have behavioural and emotional difficulties. A study of more than 1,000 13-17 year olds in South Africa found that the

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141 Tomoda A. et al (2009), “Reduced prefrontal cortical gray matter volume in young adults exposed to harsh corporal punishment”, Neuroimage, 47, 66-71
142 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
146 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
more frequent and severe physical punishment (including being pinched, slapped and hit with a stick) children experienced from their parents, the lower their scores on national school examinations. The same holds true for psychological punishment: a study in Canada of 144 children aged 9-11 found that the more verbal aggression (including being rejected, demeaned, ridiculed, cursed, terrorised, criticised and insulted) children experienced from their parents, the lower their school marks in French (their native language), and the lower their self-esteem. Those who experienced frequent verbal aggression from their parents saw themselves as less competent in their school work, were less comfortable with their own behaviour and felt less worthy.

In a study of 337 children of African American mothers in the USA, the children were tested as infants and at age seven. The study found that children whose mothers used reasoning to resolve conflicts were more confident with words at age seven and that the more children were “spanked”, the more difficulties with attention and hyperactivity they had at age seven (for example, being easily distracted or having difficulty awaiting their turn).

Corporal punishment by parents can impact negatively on children’s education through its links with not attending school. A 2007-2008 study in Germany which involved 45,000 ninth grade students found that children who had been severely beaten by their parents were four times more likely to skip school at least ten times a year than those who were not physically punished.

The negative impact of corporal punishment on children’s cognitive development and education may last into adulthood. Studies of nationally representative samples of 5,268 adults in the USA who took part in a survey in 1985 and 1,415 adults who took part in a survey in 1975 found that the more corporal punishment men had experienced from their parents as teenagers, the less likely they were to graduate from college. A study of 1,337 men in the USA who were surveyed in 1975 found that the more corporal punishment they had experienced as teenagers from their parents, the lower the probability of them being in the top fifth of the occupational and income distribution for the country.

All three studies controlled for parents’ level of education and other factors.

The negative impact of school corporal punishment on children’s education

School corporal punishment violates children’s right to education, including by creating a violent and intimidating environment in which children are less able to learn. School corporal punishment is often a reason given by children for not attending or for dropping out of school. The UN Secretary General’s 2006 major global study on violence against girls and boys found that physical punishment

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in schools contributes to absenteeism, drop-out and lack of motivation for academic achievement.\textsuperscript{154} In a 2011 study in Pakistan, which involved interviews with nearly 1,700 parents, teachers and students (50% girls), 93% of respondents identified corporal punishment as a major cause of school drop-out.\textsuperscript{155} In a study involving questionnaires with 878 children, 265 teachers and 426 parents in the Gambia, four children in ten had at some time decided not to go to school for fear of being beaten or punished by a teacher and 47% of children knew of another child who left school because of corporal punishment or fear of a teacher.\textsuperscript{156} A study carried out in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan involved nearly 400 disadvantaged 8-16 year olds, including children from poor rural homes, children with disabilities, survivors of trafficking, homeless children, working children, children in conflict with the law and children engaged in or affected by armed conflict. Challenging the myth that children end up in vulnerable situations only because of poverty, the study found that physical and psychological punishment was one of the main reasons for some children to leave home and drop out of school, which eventually led to them doing sex work, being jailed and/or living on the streets.\textsuperscript{157}

School corporal punishment has negative effects on the quality of education in schools as a whole. An analysis of US college admission test results found that students in states where school corporal punishment was prohibited had better results on average than students in states where school corporal punishment was lawful. Overall, the average results improved in 86% of US states between 1994 and 2010. In three-quarters of the states which have prohibited school corporal punishment, the results were above the national average in 2010 and in nearly two-thirds of them, the rate of improvement of the results was above the national average. In three quarters of states in which school corporal punishment was lawful, the results were below the national average in 2010 and in half of them, the rate of improvement was below the national average.\textsuperscript{158}

Research shows that school corporal punishment can have similar effects to parental corporal punishment on children’s cognitive abilities. A study which examined the effects of school corporal punishment found that children who experienced and witnessed corporal punishment regularly scored worse on various cognitive tests than their peers. The study involved 63 children aged 3-6, who attended two private schools in a country in West Africa. In one of the schools (“the punitive school”), corporal punishment, including beating children with a stick, slapping their heads and pinching them, was administered routinely; in the other (“the-non punitive school”) children were disciplined with time-outs and verbal reprimands. Children’s verbal ability, ability to delay gratification and ability to sort cards according to various criteria were tested. In kindergarten, children’s abilities were similar in the two schools, but in grade 1, children in the non-punitive school performed better on all the tasks than children in the punitive school.\textsuperscript{159}

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{155} Hussein, A. et al (2011), “Causes of Students’ Dropout at Primary Level in Pakistan: An Empirical Study”, \textit{International Journal of Humanities and Social Science} 1(12), 143-151
\item\textsuperscript{156} Tang, J. (2005), \textit{Beating the Misconceptions, Not the Children}, The Gambia: The Child Protection Alliance
\item\textsuperscript{157} Choudhury, I. & Jabeen, S.F. (2008), \textit{Perception of Children on Parenting Practices}, Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia
\item\textsuperscript{158} Center for Effective Discipline (2010), \textit{Paddling Versus ACT Scores - A Retrospective Analysis}, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline
\item\textsuperscript{159} Talwar, V. et al (2011), op cit
\end{itemize}
Damage to the parent-child relationship

Corporal punishment inflicted on a child by her or his parents can cause damage to the parent-child relationship. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all 13 studies on the topic found an association between corporal punishment and a decrease in the quality of the parent-child relationship. One of the studies included found that two year olds who experienced physical punishment from their mothers were more likely to distance themselves from their mothers than two year olds who were not physically punished.\(^{160}\)

Studies suggest that the damage to the relationship is due to the association of the feelings of fear, anxiety and anger created by corporal punishment with the parent, leading to fear and avoidance of the parent. In studies of their experience of corporal punishment, children confirm this: they report feeling hurt, angry and frightened of their parents after experiencing physical punishment. Children in New Zealand said that “It feels like they [parents] don’t love you anymore” (nine-year-old girl) and “You feel real upset because they are hurting you and you love them so much and then all of a sudden they hit you and hurt you and you feel like as though they don’t care about you because they are hurting you” (13-year-old girl). They described trying to avoid their parents: “You go to your room and never talk to them. And if… your parents come and talk to you, you push them away” (13 year old girl).\(^{161}\) When asked why adults don’t “smack” each other, young children in the UK said it was because they love each other and are friends or respect each other.\(^{162}\) A study which involved 349 9-16 year olds in St Kitts found that the more frequently and severely children were physically punished by their parents, the more likely they were to feel rejected by their parents. The association existed regardless of whether the children accepted the cultural belief that corporal punishment is appropriate.\(^{163}\)

Later studies corroborate these findings: a study of 169 mothers and babies aged 14 months in the USA found that babies who were spanked more frequently were less securely attached to their mothers. Attachment was measured by mothers sorting cards on which were descriptions of children’s behaviour, for example “child readily shares with mother or lets her hold things if she wants to” and “Child sometimes signals mother that he wants to be put down, and then fusses or wants to be picked right back up”; these were arranged into nine piles ranging from “very much unlike my child” to “very much like my child”.\(^{164}\) Similar effects are evident in adolescence. A study in Egypt, which involved 400 9-14 year olds and their mothers, found that children who were physically punished by their mother were more likely to say that they had a poor relationship with their

\(^{160}\) Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
\(^{161}\) Dobbs, T. (2007),
\(^{162}\) Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), op cit
parents, siblings, peers and teachers than those who were not physically punished by their mothers.165

A US study of 10-14 year olds found that physical punishment was associated with a weakened bond between children and parents, which in turn was associated with a greater likelihood of “delinquent” behaviour (see also “Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour” above).166 A study of 3,355 13- to 19-year-old students in Hong Kong, China found that those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months were more likely to have poor familial relations and coping skills: twenty-eight per cent of them felt that they “did not know how to handle their emotional problems” compared to 20% of those who were not corporally punished, and 25.5% said they had “a bad relationship with family members”, compared to 14% of those who were not corporally punished.167 The effects may be long-lasting: a study of 274 students aged 18-26 in the USA found that those who experienced high levels of physical punishment during childhood were more likely to have poor relationships with their parents, high family conflict, symptoms of depression and poor social relationships at the time of the study.168

Responses to arguments defending corporal punishment

Despite the near-consensus on the harmful effects of corporal punishment from those working on the topic across a wide range of academic disciplines, a small number of supporters of physical punishment continue to maintain that it is not harmful. This section contains brief responses to some of the arguments which have been advanced against the enormous body of evidence showing corporal punishment’s negative effects.

“All individuals have experienced corporal punishment without experiencing the negative effects described in this paper.”

The fact that there is extensive evidence that corporal punishment has negative effects does not imply that every individual who experiences corporal punishment will necessarily experience those effects. Rather, the evidence shows that there is a greater risk that these individuals will experience these negative consequences. Across the whole of society, this risk adds up to a significant effect (see “The public health case for prohibition” above).

“The harmful outcomes associated with physical punishment may actually be due to other factors.”

166 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
It has been suggested that the associations between corporal punishment and behaviour problems or aggression in children are due to aggressive children being physically punished more, rather than to physical punishment affecting their behaviour (i.e. that the results of these studies are distorted by a “child effect”). Similarly, it has been suggested that the associations are due to confounding variables – for example, that parents with a higher income are less likely to use physical punishment and more likely to have children with better developmental outcomes. To address these issues, over the past twenty years, researchers have employed increasingly sophisticated research designs and statistical techniques to investigate the nature of the relationship between corporal punishment and a variety of child outcomes. Much of the research summarised in this review has examined the potential effects of confounding variables by controlling for a wide range of factors. And many of the studies have a longitudinal design which, by gathering data at two or more times, allows for them to check for potential “child effects”. As summarised in this paper, the results have consistently found that physical punishment increases the risk of a wide range of negative outcomes, while no study has found that physical punishment enhances children’s development. The evidence that corporal punishment causes negative outcomes is overwhelming.

“Studies showing negative outcomes are about “abuse” rather than “ordinary” physical punishment”.

The purported distinction between “ordinary” physical punishment and “abuse” is meaningless: no line can or should be drawn between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” violence against children (see “Direct physical harm” above). However, in order to study the effects of socially accepted “physical punishment” separately from the effects of socially unaccepted “physical abuse”, many researchers have drawn a distinction and found overwhelming evidence that even “light” or “infrequent” corporal punishment is damaging to children.

“Research has not distinguished between the effects of physical punishment and other punishments.”

It has been suggested that research on the harmful effects of physical punishment has not addressed other “disciplinary techniques” which parents use and therefore has not separated the negative effects of corporal punishment and these other techniques. However, a study involving children in six countries which examined 11 discipline techniques used by parents (including teaching children about good and bad behaviour, taking away privileges and promising treats or privileges) found that only corporal punishment and expressing disappointment with the child were associated with both increased aggression and increased anxiety. Yelling at or scolding a child was associated with increased aggression and sending children to their room and shaming them were associated with

169 Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), op cit
170 Durrant, J. E. (2008), op cit
171 For example, Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
increased anxiety. There are many positive, non-violent discipline techniques which do not inflict damage on children and are effective in teaching them how to behave.

Similarly, it has been suggested that the fact that some studies have found that non-physical punishments have negative effects implies that a “child effect” is at play in research on physical punishment, because children who behave in ways that adults find problematic are more likely to be punished, both physically and non-physically. Arguments relating to a “child effect” are discussed above. And the fact that non-physical as well as physical punishments have negative effects on children does not reduce the evidence of the negative effects of physical punishment and is an argument for rather than against the human rights imperative to prohibit and eliminate it. Children have a right to protection from corporal punishment and all other cruel or degrading punishment. Prohibition of corporal punishment promotes respectful relationships with children and respect for them as human beings and rights-holders.

“The effects of physical punishment vary across cultures or according to context.”

The suggestion that the effects of physical punishment vary across cultures has sometimes been used to promote claims that that ending corporal punishment is a European/North American idea and not a universal right. However, there is little evidence of cultural variation in negative effects, and the few studies advanced in its support deal only with purported differences in the effects on children’s antisocial or aggressive behaviour: no evidence has been found of differences in the effects on children’s mental or physical health or other outcomes. As is clear from this review, research in most world regions has found evidence of the harmful effects of corporal punishment.

In a systematic comparison of 17 studies which included 60 comparisons of the effects of physical punishment in different cultural contexts, including by parents’ and children’s perceptions about the normality of corporal punishment, there was no evidence of differences in the effects of corporal punishment due to cultural context, including because of its perceived normativity. A study which compared the effects of corporal punishment on societies rather than on individuals found consistent effects on cultural groups from all world regions: in societies which made more frequent use of corporal punishment, there was greater endorsement of other forms of violence at a societal level.

A few researchers have suggested that physical punishment is not harmful where it occurs in a loving context. However, research suggests that a loving or supportive context can increase rather than decrease the negative effects of corporal punishment.

The perception that corporal punishment is more a non-European than a European cultural “tradition” or that non-white parents in Europe, North America and Australasia are more likely to use corporal punishment than white parents is not grounded in fact. In fact, the

174 Lansford, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2008), op cit
176 Durrant, J. E. (2008), op cit
institutionalization of corporal punishment in many societies around the world was driven by European colonialism and slavery. Moreover, all countries have high levels of corporal punishment before they outlaw it: for example over 90% of Swedish parents used it before the laws was changed in 1957 and 1966 to remove this right (it was explicitly banned in 1979). Thus no tradition or state can claim physical punishment is special to them. Only hunter/gatherer societies, arguably the most “traditional” societies in existence, use little or no corporal punishment.

Prohibiting and eliminating corporal punishment is a human rights imperative; from a human rights perspective, the suggestion that children from non-European cultures should be afforded less protection than their European counterparts is of course entirely unacceptable. No culture owns corporal punishment but all have a responsibility to disown it.

“It has not been shown that all corporal punishment is harmful.”

The suggestion that research has not shown that corporal punishment of all levels of severity is harmful for all ages of children has been used to justify the idea that certain types of corporal punishment are acceptable – for example, corporal punishment of children of particular ages or corporal punishment inflicted by adults who are not angry, in response to particular behaviours by children. There is no need to “prove” that any corporal punishment is harmful before prohibiting it. In any case, there is no evidence that corporal punishment is less harmful for certain groups of children than for others. Research has found that corporal punishment has harmful effects whether it is inflicted impulsively (in anger and with little or no forethought or control) or non-impulsively and that it is harmful for children of all ages. In addition, research shows that parents typically do not use corporal punishment in ways that its advocates recommend (as a last resort, not in anger, selectively and infrequently).

Conclusion

The evidence that corporal punishment is harmful to children, adults and societies is overwhelming – the more than 200 studies included in this review show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes, while no studies have found evidence of any benefits. Corporal punishment causes direct physical harm to children and impacts negatively in the short- and long-term on their mental and physical health and education. Far from teaching children how to behave, it impairs moral internalisation, increases antisocial behaviour and damages family relationships. It increases aggression in children and increases the likelihood of perpetrating and experiencing violence as an adult. It is closely linked to other forms of violence in societies, and ending it is essential in combatting other violence, including partner violence. Respect for children’s

177 Modig, C. (2009), Never Violence – Thirty Years on from Sweden’s Abolition of Corporal Punishment, Save the Children Sweden & Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs
178 Diamond, J. (2012), op cit
179 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
rights to protection, health, development and education requires that all corporal punishment of children be prohibited in law and eliminated in practice.

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