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

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Introduction

Corporal punishment – violence inflicted on children by parents, teachers, carers and others in the name of “discipline” – is experienced by a large majority of children in many states worldwide.¹ Some children, including children with disabilities² and young children, are particularly likely to experience it.

Corporal punishment is a violation of children’s rights and international human rights law requires prohibition of all corporal punishment, including in the family home. There is no need to look for evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment in order to know that it must be prohibited and eliminated – just as there is no need for research to show that violence against other groups 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. A major 2002 meta-analysis of 88 studies found associations between lawful corporal punishment by parents and ten negative outcomes.³ Since then, the already large and consistent body of evidence on the topic has been augmented still further – including through the use of increasingly sophisticated techniques which researchers have employed to address the arguments advanced by a few opponents of prohibition⁴ and through studies which address associations not included in the meta-analysis. The body of evidence is now overwhelming – more than 200 studies show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes, while no studies have found evidence of any benefits.

Intended for use by advocates for children’s right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, this summary of research illuminates how corporal punishment violates not just children’s right to freedom from all violence, but also their rights to health, development and education, and has damaging effects on society as well as individuals. 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.

*The information in this summary is taken from the Global Initiative’s longer working paper which reviews research on the impacts of and associations with corporal punishment. For a copy of the working paper, detailed information on applicable human rights standards, guidance on law reform, reports on the legality of corporal punishment in every state worldwide and research into the prevalence of and attitudes towards corporal punishment see [www.endcorporalpunishment.org](http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org) or email info@endcorporalpunishment.org.*

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⁴ For more information, see the Global Initiative’s review of research on the impacts of and associations with corporal punishment, of which this document is a summary
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. Ending corporal punishment is essential in ending physical “child abuse”, and in creating societies which are overall less violent (see also “Direct physical harm” and “Corporal punishment and partner violence” below). 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, and that the approval and prevalence of corporal punishment in societies is linked to the use or endorsement of other forms of violence, including fighting, torture, the death penalty, war and murder.5

In a few states which have prohibited all corporal punishment, the positive effects of the decreased use of physical punishment are becoming visible.6 A 2000 study which examined the impact of the 1979 ban in Sweden found that there had been a decrease in the number of 15 to 17 year olds involved in theft, narcotics crimes, assaults against young children and rape and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people.7 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 19838 and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered.9

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 professionals’ organisations issued a statement calling for prohibition and elimination of all corporal punishment.10

Corporal punishment and partner violence: the relationships

Corporal punishment and partner violence are closely linked. Studies have found that social settings in which corporal punishment is prevalent tend to be social settings in which partner violence is prevalent.11 Corporal punishment and intimate partner violence often coexist: studies have found that parents in households where intimate partner violence was perpetrated are more likely to inflict

6 For more information on research showing reductions in the use of physical punishment in countries which have prohibited it, see www.endcorporalpunishment.org
7 Durrant, J. (2000), A Generation Without Smacking: the impact of Sweden’s ban on physical punishment, Save the Children
10 The statement is available at http://endcorporalpunishment.org/pages/pdfs/Health%20statement%20in%20support%20of%20prohibition.pdf
corporal punishment on their children\textsuperscript{12} and that approval of husbands hitting their wives is associated with a belief that corporal punishment is necessary to rear children.\textsuperscript{13} Associations have been found between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and perpetrating violence towards a partner as an adult,\textsuperscript{14} experiencing violence from a partner as an adult,\textsuperscript{15} holding inequitable gender attitudes\textsuperscript{16} and verbally coercing or physically forcing a partner to have sex as an adult.\textsuperscript{17}

The effects of corporal punishment

Direct physical harm

Corporal punishment kills thousands of children each year, injures many more and is the direct cause of many children’s physical impairments.\textsuperscript{18} Research in countries in all regions attests to the severity of the physical violence which children experience in the name of “discipline”. Corporal punishment includes children being hit with hands and objects; being kicked, shaken and forced to maintain uncomfortable positions; and a wide range of other painful and degrading treatment.\textsuperscript{19}

Most violence against children commonly referred to as “abuse” is corporal punishment. Research has consistently found that the majority of incidents substantiated by authorities as physical “abuse” are cases of physical punishment.\textsuperscript{20} The intent to discipline or punish has been shown to be a common precursor in many child homicide cases.\textsuperscript{21}

When research has distinguished between physical punishment and “abuse”, it has found associations. All ten of the studies on child protection in a major 2002 meta-analysis found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical “abuse”.\textsuperscript{22} Later studies have found

\textsuperscript{14} Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
\textsuperscript{17} Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
\textsuperscript{19} Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), \textit{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)
\textsuperscript{20} For example, Jud, A. & Trocmé, N. (2013), \textit{Physical Abuse and Physical Punishment in Canada}, Child Canadian Welfare Research Portal Information Sheet # 122
\textsuperscript{22} Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
similar associations and links between corporal punishment and involvement with child protection services. 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. The risk of escalation is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry: their anger can increase the level of force used beyond what was intended, and their intent may be retaliatory as well as punitive.

Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour

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. Although in the meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance, 13 of 15 studies found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child’s long-term compliance to the desired behaviour.

Corporal punishment has been found to be 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 12 of the 13 studies included in the meta-analysis, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in delinquent and antisocial behaviour. The link with behaviour problems has been confirmed by numerous later studies, including longitudinal studies involving both young and older children.

Corporal punishment can reduce empathy and moral regulation. It does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others; rather than helping children to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, it teaches them that it is desirable not to get caught. Corporal punishment may also decrease the likelihood of long-term compliance by damaging adult-child relationships, introducing fear and undermining the powerful

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27 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
behavioural motivations of children’s love and respect for their parents and other adults involved in their care and education.

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 the major meta-analysis found an association, and this has been confirmed by numerous other studies, including many longitudinal studies. Children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers, to approve of the use of violence in peer relationships, to bully and to experience violence from their peers, to use violent methods to resolve conflict and to be aggressive towards their parents.

The reasons may include that aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain, that children learn that violence is an appropriate method of getting what you want and that children copy their parents’ behaviour. Children describe feeling aggressive after being physically punished.

Adult perpetration of violent, antisocial and criminal behaviour

The violent behaviour of children who have experienced corporal punishment persists into adulthood: corporal punishment in childhood is associated with aggressive, antisocial and criminal behaviour in adulthood.

Corporal punishment perpetuates itself. Adults who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to inflict it on their own children and children who experience it are more likely to approve of its use.

Mental harm

Corporal punishment is emotionally as well as physically painful and its links to poor mental health in childhood are clear. In a major meta-analysis, all 12 studies found that corporal punishment is

\[\text{33 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit}\]


\[\text{40 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit}\]

significantly associated with a decrease in children’s mental health, including with behaviour disorders, anxiety disorders, depression and hopelessness. Later studies have found associations with suicide attempts, alcohol and drug dependency, low self-esteem, hostility and emotional instability.

The associations hold true in adulthood. All eight studies on mental health in adulthood in the meta-analysis found an association between corporal punishment and poor mental health, including low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies. Significant later studies include nationally representative studies in Canada, Finland and the USA which found associations with mental disorders including depression, anxiety disorder and alcohol and drug abuse.

Indirect physical harm

Corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s physical health. Associations have been found between corporal punishment and children feeling that their health was poor, experiencing physical illnesses such as asthma, suffering injuries and accidents, being hospitalised and developing habits which put their health at risk, such as smoking, fighting with others and alcohol consumption.

The effect can continue into adulthood. Studies have found associations with developing cancer, asthma, alcohol-related problems, migraine, cardiovascular disease, arthritis and obesity as an adult.

Damage to education

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42 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
44 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
Studies suggest that corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s cognitive development: associations have been found between corporal punishment and lower IQ scores, smaller vocabularies, poorer cognitive abilities, slower cognitive development and poorer school marks. Similar associations have been found for school corporal punishment.

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. It has negative effects on the quality of education in schools as a whole: research has found links between the legality of corporal punishment in schools and poorer test results.

The negative impact of corporal punishment on children’s cognitive development and education may last into adulthood. In some studies, adults who experienced corporal punishment as children were less likely to graduate from college and to have high status and highly paid jobs.

Damage to the parent-child relationship

Corporal punishment inflicted on a child by her or his parents can severely damage the parent-child relationship. In the 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 found that two-year-olds who were physically punished by their mothers were more likely to distance themselves from their mothers than two year olds who were not physically punished. Later studies have found that corporal punishment is associated with poor attachment by babies to their mothers and with poor family relationships in adolescence and young adulthood.

56 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
60 Center for Effective Discipline (2010), Paddling Versus ACT Scores - A Retrospective Analysis, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline
63 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
Corporal punishment can make children feel rejected by their parents, and teach them to fear and avoid their parents: children report feeling hurt, angry and frightened of their parents after being physically punished.

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 rights to protection, health, development and education requires that all corporal punishment of children be prohibited in law and eliminated in practice.

Briefing prepared by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children
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