



End Violence
Against Children



End Corporal
Punishment

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

Full working paper, September 2021

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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 250 studies published over five decades 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 secretariat@end-violence.org

This review of research is a working document. Comments, questions and suggestions are welcome; please send any contributions to bess.herbert@end-violence.org

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.”²

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.³

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.⁴ 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.

Major meta-analyses of associations with corporal punishment: 2002 and 2016

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.⁵ The meta-analysis, which involved 88 studies, found associations between physical punishment and the following ten negative “behaviours and experiences”:

- poor moral internalisation (child is less likely to learn the intended lesson)
- poor quality of relationship between parent and child
- mental health problems in childhood
- aggression in childhood

² Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), op cit, para. 11

³ UNICEF (2014), *Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children*, NY: UNICEF

⁴ Hendricks, C. et al (2014), “Associations Between Child Disabilities and Caregiver Discipline and Violence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries”, *Child Development*, published online 29 July 2013

⁵ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), “Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4), 539-579; see also Gershoff, E. T. (2008), [Report on physical punishment in the United States: what research tells us about its effects on children](#), Columbus, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline

- 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

In 2016, Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor published a second major meta-analysis, which used 75 studies published over 50 years, involving a total of 160,927 children.⁶ It found associations between corporal punishment and 13 negative outcomes, confirming associations with all eight of the ten undesirable outcomes from the earlier meta-analysis which were covered and finding associations between corporal punishment and another five undesirable outcomes not included in the earlier meta-analysis:

- externalizing behaviour problems in childhood
- internalizing behaviour problems in childhood
- impaired cognitive activity in childhood
- low self-esteem in childhood
- holding positive attitudes about “spanking” as an adult

The 2016 meta-analysis strengthens the overwhelming research evidence that corporal punishment causes negative outcomes, both by adding still more evidence of the associations between corporal punishment and negative outcomes and by confirming the strength of the existing evidence. For more information on how the meta-analysis confirms the strength of the existing evidence, see [“Responses to arguments defending corporal punishment”](#) below.

In this paper, all studies included in the two meta-analyses are referenced to them. All other studies summarised here were not included in the meta-analyses, because they address associations not included in the meta-analysis, are more recent or did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the meta-analyses. The two meta-analyses are referred to as “the 2002 meta-analysis” and “the 2016 meta-analysis” throughout.

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 health problems and antisocial behaviour and to aid welfare, education and developmental outcomes for children. The 2016 meta-analysis points out

⁶ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), “Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analyses”, *Journal of Family Psychology*, advance online publication 7 April 2016

about its findings that “although the magnitude of the observed associations may be small, when extrapolated to the population in which 80% of children are being spanked, such small effects can translate into large societal impacts.”⁷ 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 be large.⁸

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.

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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).¹¹

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,¹² and the study of students in 32 countries found that the higher the percentage of respondents who were physically punished a lot as

⁷ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit, p. 13

⁸ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), *The Primordial Violence: Spanking Children, Psychological Development, Violence, and Crime*, NY: Routledge

⁹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁰ Montagu, A. (1978), *Learning non-aggression: The experience of non-literate societies*, NY: Oxford University Press, cited in Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹¹ Lansford, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2008), “Cultural Norms for Adult Corporal Punishment of Children and Societal Rates of Endorsement and Use of Violence”, *Parenting: Science and Practice* 8, 257–270

¹² Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

1996 and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people between 1971 and 1997.²² 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 1983²³ and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered.²⁴ In **Germany**, which achieved full prohibition in 2000, research has shown significant decreases in violent punishment, which has been linked to decreases in violence by young people in school and elsewhere and to reductions in the proportion of women experiencing physical injury due to domestic violence.²⁵ 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.

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

²² Durrant, J. (2000), *A Generation Without Smacking: the impact of Sweden's ban on physical punishment*, Save the Children

²³ Ellonen, N. et al (2008), *Lasten ja nuorten väkivaltakokemukset. Tutkimus peruskoulun 6. - 9. luokan oppilaiden kokemasta väkivallasta*, Poliisiammattikorkeakoulun Raportteja 71/2008

²⁴ Österman, K. et al (2014) "Twenty-Eight Years After the Complete Ban on the Physical Punishment of Children in Finland: Trends and Psychosocial Concomitants", *Aggressive Behaviour*, 9999, 1-14

²⁵ Pfeiffer, C. (2012), "Weniger Hiebe, mehr Liebe. Der Wandel familiärer Erziehung in Deutschland", *Centaur*, 11 (2), 14-17, cited in Pfeiffer, C. (2013), *Parallel Justice – Why Do We Need Stronger Support for the Victim in Society?*, Address at the closing plenary session of the 18th German Congress on Crime Prevention, April 23, 2013

societies in which “wife-beating” was prevalent.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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 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.³⁰

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”.

²⁶ Levinson, D. (1989), *Family violence in cross-cultural perspective*, Newbury Park: Sage, cited in Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

²⁷ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

²⁸ Taylor, C. A. et al (2012), “Use of Spanking for 3-Year-Old Children and Associated Intimate Partner Aggression or Violence”, *Pediatrics*, 126(3), 415-424

²⁹ Bott, S. et al (2012), [Violence Against Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comparative analysis of population-based data from 12 countries](#), Washington DC: Pan American Health Organisation & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

³⁰ Lansford, J. E. et al (2014), “Attitudes Justifying Domestic Violence Predict Endorsement of Corporal Punishment and Physical and Psychological Aggression towards Children: A Study in 25 Low- and Middle-Income Countries”, *The Journal of Pediatrics*, published online 9 January 2014

The study controlled for factors including experiencing sexual abuse and neglect as a child.³¹ 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.³²

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.³³

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 the 2002 meta-analysis.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

³¹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

³² Simons, L. G. et al (2008), “A test of explanations for the effect of harsh parenting on the perpetration of dating violence and sexual coercion among college males”, *Violence and Victims*, 23 (1), 66-82

³³ Janson, S. et al (2012), *Corporal punishment and other humiliating behaviour towards children in Sweden – a national study 2011*, Children’s Welfare Foundation & University of Karlstad

³⁴ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

³⁵ Contreras, M. et al (2012), [*Bridges to Adulthood: Understanding the Lifelong Influence of Men's Childhood Experiences of Violence, Analyzing Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey*](#), Washington DC: International Center for Research on Women & Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Promundo

³⁶ Holter et al (2009), [*Gender Equality and Quality of Life: A Norwegian Perspective*](#), Nordic Gender Institute

³⁷ Lavoie, F. et al (2002), “History of family dysfunction and perpetration of dating violence by adolescent boys: a longitudinal study”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 30, 375–383

³⁸ Swinford, S. P. et al (2000), “Harsh physical discipline in childhood and violence in later romantic involvements: The mediating role of problem behaviors”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 508–519

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

³⁹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

⁴⁰ Cast, A. D. et al (2006), "Childhood physical punishment and problem solving in marriage", *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21, 244-261

⁴¹ Woods, K. & Jewkes, R. (1998), [*Love is a dangerous thing: micro-dynamics of violence in sexual relationships of young people in Umtata*](#), CERSA Women's Health Medical Research Council

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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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).⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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

⁴² Krug E. G. et al. (eds) (2002), [World Report on Violence and Health](#), Geneva: World Health Organization

⁴³ Beazley, H. et al (2006), [What Children Say: results of comparative research on the physical and emotional punishment of children in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, 2005](#), Bangkok: Save the Children Sweden

⁴⁴ Dobbs, T. (2007), "What Do Children Tell Us About Physical Punishment As A Risk Factor For Child Abuse?", *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 30, 145-162

⁴⁵ Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), [It Hurts You Inside: young children talk about smacking](#), Save the Children & National Children's Bureau

⁴⁶ Gil D. G. (1979), "Unraveling child abuse", in D. G. Gil (Ed.), *Child abuse and violence*, New York: AMS Press

⁴⁷ Trocmé, N. et al (2010), *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Executive Summary & Chapters 1-5*, Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada; see also Jud, A. & Trocmé, N. (2013), [Physical Abuse and Physical Punishment in Canada](#), Child Canadian Welfare Research Portal Information Sheet # 122

procedures that were required in response to the child's behaviour".⁴⁸ A **UK** study found that the intent to discipline or punish was a common precursor in many child homicide cases.⁴⁹

The purported distinction between "ordinary" physical punishment and "abuse" is meaningless⁵⁰: 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 the 2002 meta-analysis, all ten of the studies on the topic of child protection found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical "abuse"⁵¹; the 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies and confirmed the finding.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

A study of over 1,200 12 year olds in **Sri Lanka**, which found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical abuse.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ A **US** study involving 110 parents who had physically abused their children found that reducing the parents' use of "spanking" reduced the risk that they would physically abuse their children again.⁵⁸ And a **US** study of 372 Hispanic fathers' aggressive behaviour (including "spanking", slapping and shaking) towards their 3-5 year old children

⁴⁸ Kadushin, A. & Martin, J. A. (1981), *Child abuse: An interactional event*, New York: Columbia University Press

⁴⁹ Cavanagh, K. & Dobash, P. (2007), "The murder of children by fathers in the context of child abuse", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31, 731-46

⁵⁰ Durrant, J. E. (2008), "Physical Punishment, Culture and Rights: Current Issues for Professionals", *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 29, 55-66

⁵¹ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁵² Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

⁵³ Clément, M. E. et al (2000), [*La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec*](#), Québec: Institut de la Statistique du Québec

⁵⁴ Lee, S. J. et al (2014), "Parental spanking of 1-year-old children and subsequent child protective services involvement", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, published online 3 March 2014

⁵⁵ de Zoysa, P. et al (2008), "Outcomes of Parental Corporal Punishment: Psychological Maladjustment and Physical Abuse", in T. Richardson & M. Williams (Eds.), *Child Abuse and Violence*, Nova Science Publishers Inc

⁵⁶ Crandall, M. et al (2006), "Injury in the first year of life: Risk factors and solutions for high-risk families", *Journal of Surgical Research*, 133, 7-10

⁵⁷ Österman, K. et al (2014), op cit

⁵⁸ Chaffin, M. et al (2004), "Parent-child interaction therapy with physically abusive parents: efficacy for reducing future abuse reports", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72(3), 500-510

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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ The risk of escalation of physical punishment is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry.⁶¹ 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.⁶²

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.⁶³ A **US** study involving the parents and teachers of 245 children, who were interviewed when the children were aged 3 and 5 ½ 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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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. The 2016 meta-analysis studied how the associations between corporal punishment and child outcomes compared with the associations between “abuse” and child outcomes. It found that both “spanking” and “abuse” were associated with negative outcomes, with the effect size for “spanking” averaging 65% of the effect size for “abuse”. Similarly, a study in **Canada** suggested that the effects of corporal punishment are similar to those of “abuse”, differing only in degree. It 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

⁵⁹ Lee, S. J. (2011), “Hispanic Fathers and Risk for Maltreatment in Father-Involved Families of Young Children”, *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 2(2), 125-142

⁶⁰ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit; Straus, M. & Douglas, E. (2008), “Research on spanking by parents: Implications for public policy”, *The Family Psychologist: Bulletin of the Division of Family Psychology*, 24(43), 18-20

⁶¹ Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), [Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth](#), Ottawa: Coalition of Physical Punishment of Children and Youth

⁶² Straus, M. & Douglas, E. (2008), op cit

⁶³ Lee, S. J. et al (2011), Paternal Psychosocial Characteristics and Corporal Punishment of Their 3-Year-Old Children”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 26(1), 71-87

⁶⁴ Callender, K. A. et al (2012), “The Effects of Parental Depressive Symptoms, Appraisals, and Physical Punishment on Later Child Externalizing Behavior”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 40, 471–483

⁶⁵ Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), op cit

children, but less likely than those who had experienced more severe forms of assault as children (being kicked, bitten, hit with a fist or object, beaten up, choked, burned, or scalded).⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷

In the 2002 meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance. The results are mixed, however: as the 2016 meta-analysis, which examined 5 studies on the topic, using different mathematical techniques to the earlier meta-analysis, found no statistically significant link between corporal punishment and children's immediate defiance.⁶⁸ The 2016 meta-analysis states that, "From these five studies, it appears that children are as likely to defy their parents when they spank as comply with them, but future research will be needed to substantiate this conclusion".⁶⁹

In the 2002 meta-analysis, 13 of 15 studies found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child's long-term compliance to the desired behaviour,⁷⁰ and in 12 of 13 studies, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in "delinquent and antisocial behaviour".⁷¹ The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies on low moral internalization and nine on antisocial behaviour and confirmed the associations between corporal punishment and these outcomes. It also examined 14 studies on children's externalizing behaviour problems and eight on children's internalizing behaviour problems and found associations between corporal punishment and both types of behaviour problem.⁷²

Corporal punishment does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others.⁷³ 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 behaviour⁷⁴ and by damaging adult-child relationships (see

⁶⁶ Afifi, T. O. et al (2005), "Physical punishment, childhood abuse and psychiatric disorders", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30(10), 1093–1103

⁶⁷ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁶⁸ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁶⁹ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit, p. 12

⁷⁰ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁷¹ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁷² Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

⁷³ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

⁷⁴ Talwar, V. et al (2011), "Effects of a Punitive Environment on Children's Executive Functioning: A Natural Experiment", *Social Development*, 20(4), 805–824

[“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.

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 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

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

- 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 5.⁷⁷
- 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.⁷⁸
- 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.⁷⁹
- 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.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Scott, S. et al (2013), “Early parental physical punishment and emotional and behavioural outcomes in preschool children”, *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 40(3), 337-45

⁷⁶ O’Leary, S.G. et al (1999), “A longitudinal study of mothers’ overreactive discipline and toddlers’ externalizing behavior”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 27(5), 331-341

⁷⁷ MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2011), “Corporal Punishment and Child Behavioural and Cognitive Outcomes through 5 Years of Age: Evidence from a Contemporary Urban Birth Cohort Study”, *Infant and Child Development*, published online 25 Oct 2011

⁷⁸ MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2013), “Spanking and Child Development Across the First Decade of Life”, *Pediatrics*, published online 21 October 2013

⁷⁹ Lau, A. S. et al (2006), “Factors affecting the link between physical discipline and child externalizing problems in Black and White families”, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34(1), 89-103

⁸⁰ Millar, P. (2009), *The best interests of children: An evidence-based approach*, Toronto: University of Canada Press, cited in Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

- 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.⁸¹
- 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.⁸²
- A **US** study found that experiencing physical punishment at home predicted 10-12 year old children’s disruptive school behaviour two years later.⁸³
- 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.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ A 2011 study of 92 parents of young children involved in a parent education programme had similar results.⁸⁶

Corporal punishment has negative effects on children’s behaviour regardless of how warm and caring their parents are towards them: a 2014 study which involved 139 children of Indo-Caribbean mothers in **Guyana** found that mothers’ warmth towards their children did not moderate the relationship between corporal punishment of children and children’s prosocial behaviour and anger at pre-school.⁸⁷

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

⁸¹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

⁸² Pardini, D. A. et al (2008), “Bidirectional Associations between Parenting Practices and Conduct Problems in Boys from Childhood to Adolescence: The Moderating Effect of Age and African-American Ethnicity”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 36(5), 647–662

⁸³ Eamon, M. K., & Altshuler, S. J. (2004), “Can we predict disruptive school behavior?”, *Children & Schools*, 26, 23-37

⁸⁴ Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2005), “Corporal Punishment and the Growth Trajectory of Children’s Antisocial Behavior”, *Child Maltreatment*, 10, 283-292

⁸⁵ Beauchaine T. P. et al (2005), “Mediators, moderators, and predictors of 1-year outcomes among children treated for early-onset conduct problems: a latent growth curve analysis”, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73, 371-88

⁸⁶ Knox, M. S. et al (2011), “ACT Against Violence Parents Raising Safe Kids Program: Effects on Maltreatment-Related Parenting Behaviors and Beliefs”, *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(1), 55-74, cited in Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

⁸⁷ Roopnarine, J. L. et al (2014), “Do Guyanese mothers’ levels of warmth moderate the association between harshness and justness of physical punishment and preschoolers’ prosocial behaviours and anger?”, *International Journal of Psychology*, 49(4), 271-279

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.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ 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".⁹² 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 times more likely to commit multiple violent criminal offences than those who were not physically punished.⁹³

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.⁹⁴ 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,

⁸⁸ Kerr, D. C. R. et al (2004), "Parental Discipline and Externalizing Behavior Problems in Early Childhood: The Role of Moral Regulation and Child Gender", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 32(4), 369-383

⁸⁹ Brenner, V. & Fox, R.A. (1998), "Parental discipline and behavior problems in young children", *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 159(2), 251-256

⁹⁰ Eamon, M. K. (2001), "Antecedents and socioemotional consequences of physical punishment on children in two-parent families", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25(6), 787-802

⁹¹ Hecker, T. et al (2013), "Corporal punishment and children's externalizing problems: A cross-sectional study of Tanzanian primary school aged children", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, available online 17 December 2013

⁹² Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

⁹³ Stadler, L.; Bieneck, S. & Pfeiffer, C. (2012), *Repräsentativbefragung Sexueller Missbrauch 2011*, (KFN-Forschungsbericht Nr. 118), Hannover: KFN, cited in Pfeiffer, C. (2013), *Parallel Justice – Why Do We Need Stronger Support for the Victim in Society?*, address at the closing plenary session of the 18th German Congress on Crime Prevention, April 23, 2013

⁹⁴ Ma et al (2012), "Corporal punishment and youth externalizing behaviour in Santiago, Chile", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36, 481-490

carrying weapons, selling drugs and attacking someone to seriously hurt or kill them) reported experiencing higher levels of physical punishment.⁹⁵

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 developing an internalised set of values, meaning that they need to rely on external sanctions when making decisions about moral issues.⁹⁶

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 2002 meta-analysis found an association.⁹⁷ This was confirmed by the 2016 meta-analysis, which examined seven studies on the topic,⁹⁸ and by all the other numerous studies on the topic.⁹⁹ 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).¹⁰⁰ 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).¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² 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

⁹⁵ Loeber, R. et al (2000), “Stability of Family Interaction from Ages 6 to 18”, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 28(4), 353-369

⁹⁶ Lopez, N. et al (2001), “Parental disciplinary history, current levels of empathy, and moral reasoning in young adults”, *North American Journal of Psychology*, 3, 193-204

⁹⁷ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

⁹⁸ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

⁹⁹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁰⁰ Dobbs, T. (2005), *Insights: children & young people speak out about family discipline*, Save the Children New Zealand

¹⁰¹ Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), op cit

¹⁰² Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), “[Physical punishment of children: lessons from 20 years of research](#)”, Canadian Medical Association Journal, 6 February 2012

in children's aggressive behaviour.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

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 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.¹⁰⁵

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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ A study in the **USA** which examined how 106 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹ 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

¹⁰³ Taylor, C. A. et al (2010), "[Mothers' Spanking of 3-Year-Old Children and Subsequent Risk of Children's Aggressive Behavior](#)", *Pediatrics*, 125(5), 1057-1065

¹⁰⁴ Lee, S. J. et al (2013), "Does Warmth Moderate Longitudinal Associations Between Maternal Spanking and Child Aggression in Early Childhood?" *Developmental Psychology*, published online 21 January 2013

¹⁰⁵ MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2014), "Spanking and Children's Externalizing Behavior Across the First Decade of Life: Evidence for Transactional Processes", *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, published online 25 March 2014

¹⁰⁶ Ani, C.C. & Grantham-McGregor, S. (1998), "Family and personal characteristics of aggressive Nigerian boys: Differences from and similarities with Western findings", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23(5), 311-317

¹⁰⁷ Simons, D. A. & Wurtele, S. K. (2010), "Relationships between parents' use of corporal punishment and their children's endorsement of spanking and hitting other children", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34, 639-646

¹⁰⁸ Hart, C.H. et al (1992), "Maternal and paternal disciplinary styles: Relations with preschoolers' playground behavioral orientations and peer status", *Child Development*, 63(4), 879-892

¹⁰⁹ Hart, C.H. et al (1990), "Children's expectations of the outcomes of social strategies: Relations with sociometric status and maternal disciplinary styles", *Child Development*, 61(1), 127-137

bully their peers and to have experienced violence from their peers in the last school term.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹²

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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴

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”.¹¹⁵ 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”.¹¹⁶

Children’s belief that corporal punishment perpetuates itself is confirmed by research. The 2016 meta-analysis examined 5 studies on the topic and found an association between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and holding positive attitudes about spanking as an adult.¹¹⁷ Other

¹¹⁰ Ohene, S. et al (2006), “Parental Expectations, Physical Punishment, and Violence Among Adolescents Who Score Positive on a Psychosocial Screening Test in Primary Care”, *Pediatrics*, 117(2), 441-447

¹¹¹ Stadler, L.; Bieneck, S. & Pfeiffer, C. (2012), *Repräsentativbefragung Sexueller Missbrauch 2011*, (KFN-Forschungsbericht Nr. 118), Hannover: KFN, cited in Pfeiffer, C. (2013), *Parallel Justice – Why Do We Need Stronger Support for the Victim in Society?*, address at the closing plenary session of the 18th German Congress on Crime Prevention, 23 April 2013

¹¹² Lavoie, F. et al (2002), “History of family dysfunction and perpetration of dating violence by adolescent boys: a longitudinal study”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 30, 375-383

¹¹³ Ulman, A. & Straus, M. A. (2003), “[Violence by children against mothers in relation to violence between parents and corporal punishment by parents](#)”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 34, 41-60

¹¹⁴ Brezina, T. (1999), “Teenage Violence Toward Parents as an Adaptation to Family Strain Evidence from a National Survey of Male Adolescents”, *Youth & Society*, 30(4), 416-444

¹¹⁵ Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), op cit

¹¹⁶ Dobbs, T. (2007), op cit

¹¹⁷ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

studies which have found associations include 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.¹¹⁸ Another **US** study which involved 102 parents and children aged 3-7 found that parents who had experienced corporal punishment as children were more likely to approve of using corporal punishment on their own children.¹¹⁹ Corporal punishment is associated with perpetration of violent and criminal behaviour by adults to those outside as well as in the family. In the 2002 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.¹²⁰ The 2016 meta-analysis examined three studies on antisocial behaviour and confirmed the association (it did not examine aggression in adulthood).¹²¹ 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.¹²²

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”*.¹²³ 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, intimidated, uncared-for, unwelcome, heartbroken, bullied,*

¹¹⁸ Lunkenheimer, E. S. et al (2006), “The Intergenerational Transmission of Physical Punishment: Differing Mechanisms in Mothers’ and Fathers’ Endorsement?”, *Journal of Family Violence*, 21, 509-519

¹¹⁹ Simons, D. A. & Wurtele, S. K. (2010), “Relationships between parents’ use of corporal punishment and their children’s endorsement of spanking and hitting other children”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34, 639-646

¹²⁰ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

¹²¹ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

¹²² Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹²³ Dobbs, T. (2007), op cit

*depressed, worried, shocked.*¹²⁴ The links between corporal punishment and poor mental health in childhood and adulthood are clear. In the 2002 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.¹²⁵ The 2016 meta-analysis examined ten studies on childhood mental health problems and confirmed the association. It additionally examined three studies on self-esteem and found an association between corporal punishment and children having low self-esteem.¹²⁶

In the 2002 meta-analysis, all eight studies 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.¹²⁷ The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies on adult mental health problems and confirmed the association.¹²⁸ Numerous other studies have found associations between corporal punishment and poor mental health. 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.¹²⁹ 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.¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹ 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.¹³² 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

¹²⁴ 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

¹²⁵ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

¹²⁶ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

¹²⁷ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

¹²⁸ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

¹²⁹ Gromoske, A. N. & Maguire-Jack, K. (2012), "Transactional and Cascading Relations Between Early Spanking and Children's Social-Emotional Development", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 74, 1054–1068

¹³⁰ Fergusson, D.M. & Lynskey, M.T. (1997), "Physical punishment/maltreatment during childhood and adjustment in young adulthood", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 21, 617-30

¹³¹ Rodriguez, C. M. (2003), "Parental Discipline and Abuse Potential Affects on Child Depression, Anxiety, and Attributions", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 809-817

¹³² Bender, H. L. et al (2007), "Use of harsh physical discipline and developmental outcomes in adolescence", *Development and Psychopathology*, 19, 227-242

with their level of psychological maladjustment, including low self-esteem, hostility and aggression and emotional instability.¹³³

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.¹³⁴

A study of 2,000 10-16 year olds in the **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).*¹³⁵ This is confirmed by a study which involved 89 children aged 9-12 in the **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.¹³⁶

A nationally representative study in the **USA** found that people who had experienced physical punishment as children, but not more severe forms of violence, were more likely to experience

¹³³ de Zoysa, P. et al (2008), "Corporal Punishment in the Sri Lankan Context: Psychological Outcomes for Our Children", in Devore, D. M. (2006), *New Developments in Parent-Child Relations*, Nova Science Publishers Inc

¹³⁴ Bordin, I. A. et al (2009), "Severe physical punishment: risk of mental health problems for poor urban children in Brazil", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 87(5), 336-244

¹³⁵ Turner, H. A. & Finkelhor, D (1996), "Corporal Punishment as a Stressor among Youth", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58(1), 155-166

¹³⁶ Wimsatt, A. R. et al (2012), "Positive communication moderates the relationship between corporal punishment and child depressive symptoms," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 3 September 2012

mental health problems including major depression, mania, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug abuse and personality disorders.¹³⁷ A study in **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.¹³⁸ 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.¹³⁹ 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.¹⁴⁰

Physical punishment can cause alterations in the regions of the brain associated with vulnerability to the abuse of drugs and alcohol.¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴²

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 weeks¹⁴³ 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.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Afifi, T. O. et al (2012), “Physical Punishment and Mental Disorders: Results From a Nationally Representative US Sample”, *Pediatrics*, 2 July 2012

¹³⁸ Afifi, T. O. (2014), “Child abuse and mental disorders in Canada”, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, published online 22 April 2014

¹³⁹ MacMillan, H. L. et al (1999), “Slapping and spanking in childhood and its association with lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders in a general population sample”, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 161(7), 805-809

¹⁴⁰ Österman, K. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁴¹ Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), op cit

¹⁴² Cheng, H. G. et al (2011), “Childhood physical punishment and the onset of drinking problems: Evidence from metropolitan China”, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 118, 31-39

¹⁴³ Turner, H. A., & Muller, P. A. (2004), “Long-term effects of child corporal punishment on depressive symptoms in young adults: Potential moderators and mediators”, *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 761-782

¹⁴⁴ Straus, M. A. (1999), “Corporal punishment of children and adult depression and suicidal ideation”, in Joan McCord (ed), *Coercion and Punishment in Long Term Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press

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 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.¹⁴⁵ 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.¹⁴⁶

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.¹⁴⁷

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.¹⁴⁸

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

¹⁴⁵ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), “ Prevalence and correlates of physical abuse in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents: A population-based approach”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 549-557

¹⁴⁶ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁴⁷ Afifi, T. et al (2013), “Harsh Physical Punishment in Childhood and Adult Physical Health”, *Pediatrics*, published online 15 July 2013

¹⁴⁸ Fuh, J. et al (2010), “Relationship Between Childhood Physical Maltreatment and Migraine in Adolescents”, *Headache*, 50, 761-768

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.¹⁴⁹

Damage to education

Corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children's cognitive development. The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies related to cognitive development and found an association between experience of corporal punishment and impaired cognitive ability.¹⁵⁰

Many other studies have found similar associations. 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.¹⁵¹ Studies of the association between corporal punishment and poorer cognitive development in young children from the **USA** include 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 5.¹⁵² 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.¹⁵³ 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 10-11.¹⁵⁴ 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.¹⁵⁵

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

¹⁴⁹ Hyland et al (2012), "[Beating and insulting children as a risk for adult cancer, cardiac disease and asthma](#)", *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 29 September 2012

¹⁵⁰ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

¹⁵¹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁵² MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2011), "Corporal Punishment and Child Behavioural and Cognitive Outcomes through 5 Years of Age: Evidence from a Contemporary Urban Birth Cohort Study", *Infant and Child Development*, published online 25 October 2011

¹⁵³ MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2013), "Spanking and Child Development Across the First Decade of Life", *Pediatrics*, published online 21 October 2013

¹⁵⁴ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁵⁵ Smith, J.R., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1997), "Correlates and consequences of harsh discipline for young children", *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 151(8), 777-786

emotional difficulties.¹⁵⁶ A study of more than 1,000 13-17 year olds in **South Africa** found that the 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.¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸

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).¹⁵⁹

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.¹⁶⁰

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.¹⁶¹ 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 effects of corporal punishment on cognitive development may be due to the effect of early experiences of fear and stress on the developing brain.¹⁶² Results from neuroimaging studies suggest that experiencing harsh physical punishment may reduce the volume of the brain’s grey matter in

¹⁵⁶ Alyahri, A & Goodman, R. (2008), “Harsh corporal punishment of Yemeni children: occurrence, type and associations”, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 32(8), 766-773

¹⁵⁷ Cherian, V. I. (1994), “Self-reports of corporal punishment by Xhosa children from broken and intact families and their academic achievement”, *Psychological Reports*, 74(3), 867-874

¹⁵⁸ Solomon, C.R. & Serres, F. (1999), “Effects of parental verbal aggression on children’s self-esteem and school marks”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(4), 339-351

¹⁵⁹ Jester, J. M. et al (1999), *Do Maternal Reasoning and Physical Punishment Contribute to Development of Verbal Competence and Behavior Problems?*, presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 1999

¹⁶⁰ Stadler, L.; Bieneck, S. & Pfeiffer, C. (2012), *Repräsentativbefragung Sexueller Missbrauch 2011*, (KFN-Forschungsbericht Nr. 118), Hannover: KFN, cited in Pfeiffer, C. (2013), *Parallel Justice – Why Do We Need Stronger Support for the Victim in Society?*, address at the closing plenary session of the 18th German Congress on Crime Prevention, April 23, 2013

¹⁶¹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁶² Fox, N. A. & Shonkoff, J. P. (2011), “[How persistent fear and anxiety can affect young children’s learning, behaviour and health](#)”, *Early Childhood Matters*, 116, The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation

areas associated with performance on a scale used to measure intelligence in adolescence and adulthood.¹⁶³

The negative impact of 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. The UN Secretary General's 2006 major global study on violence against girls and boys found that physical punishment in schools contributes to absenteeism, drop-out and lack of motivation for academic achievement.¹⁶⁴

A 2016 review which drew on more than 20 studies on the effects of school corporal punishment found that it injures children, damages their learning and is linked with mental health and behaviour problems.¹⁶⁵ The review highlighted research documenting the physical and mental pain caused to children by school corporal punishment and cases of children who were killed by school corporal punishment in numerous countries. Studies included one in **Egypt**, in which 26% of boys and 18% of girls reported that they had been injured by school corporal punishment, including 7% of boys and 6% of girls who reported a fracture as a result of school corporal punishment.¹⁶⁶ The review also reported that a 2003 paper estimated that 10,000 – 20,000 students required medical attention as a result of school corporal punishment every year in the **USA**.¹⁶⁷

The 2016 review emphasised the negative effect of school corporal punishment on children's education, highlighting that there is no evidence that school corporal punishment enhances children's learning.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, there is significant evidence that school corporal punishment undermines and damages children's education, including through discouraging them from attending school and through making school a place they dislike and fear. The review documents research from countries including **Barbados, Egypt, India, Sudan, Pakistan and Zimbabwe** which has found that children say that corporal punishment makes them want to avoid school and/or drop out altogether.¹⁶⁹ Other studies with similar findings include 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.¹⁷⁰ 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

¹⁶³ Tomoda A. et al (2009), "Reduced prefrontal cortical gray matter volume in young adults exposed to harsh corporal punishment", *Neuroimage*, 47, 66-71

¹⁶⁴ Pinheiro, P. S. (2006), *World Report on Violence against Children*, Geneva: United Nations

¹⁶⁵ Gershoff, E. T. (2016), *School Corporal Punishment in Global Perspective: Prevalence, Outcomes, and Efforts at Intervention*, Report submitted to the Know Violence in Childhood Initiative, Violence in Schools Learning Group

¹⁶⁶ Youssef, R. M. et al (1998), "Children experiencing violence II: Prevalence and determinants of corporal punishment in schools", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 975-985

¹⁶⁷ Society for Adolescent Medicine (2003), "Corporal punishment in schools: Position paper of the Society for Adolescent Medicine", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 32, 385-393

¹⁶⁸ Gershoff, E. T. (2016), op cit

¹⁶⁹ Gershoff, E. T. (2016), op cit

¹⁷⁰ Hussein, A. et al (2011), "Causes of Students' Dropout at Primary Level in Pakistan: An Empirical Study", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(12), 143-151

47% of children knew of another child who left school because of corporal punishment or fear of a teacher.¹⁷¹ 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.¹⁷²

Other studies on the effects of school corporal punishment on children's learning covered in the 2016 review include a major 2015 study which used data from the Young Lives project which involves around 12,000 children in **Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam** (about 3,000 children in each country). The study found that experiencing school corporal punishment at age eight was associated with poorer maths scores at ages eight and 12. Corporal punishment was the first cause for not liking being at school in India, the third cause in Ethiopia and the sixth in Viet Nam and Peru.¹⁷³ 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.¹⁷⁴

The 2016 review highlighted that school corporal punishment, like parental corporal punishment (see [Mental harm](#) and [Poor moral internalization and increased antisocial behaviour](#)), is linked with mental health and behavioural problems.¹⁷⁵ The major 2015 Young Lives study found that experiencing more frequent school corporal punishment at age eight was associated with lower self-esteem four years later in Ethiopia and Vietnam and less self-efficacy (for example, feeling less able to cope with difficult situations or solve problems) four years later in Ethiopia and Peru.¹⁷⁶ Other studies in the 2016 review included one from **Hungary**, which studied 68 "life events" and found that experiencing physical punishment by teachers was the strongest predictor of depression in children¹⁷⁷ and a study from **Pakistan** which found that school corporal punishment was linked with

¹⁷¹ Tang, J. (2005), *Beating the Misconceptions, Not the Children*, The Gambia: The Child Protection Alliance

¹⁷² Choudhury, I. & Jabeen, S.F. (2008), *Perception of Children on Parenting Practices*, Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia

¹⁷³ Ogando Portela, M. J. & Pells, K. (2015), *Corporal Punishment in Schools Longitudinal Evidence from Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam – Innocenti Discussion Paper 2015-02*, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research

¹⁷⁴ Talwar, V. et al (2011), op cit

¹⁷⁵ Gershoff, E. T. (2016), op cit

¹⁷⁶ Ogando Portela, M. J. & Pells, K. (2015), op cit

¹⁷⁷ Csorba, J. et al (2001), "Family- and school-related stresses in depressed Hungarian children", *European Psychiatry*, 16, 18–26

hostility, pessimism, and depression.¹⁷⁸ A study in **Tanzania** found that school corporal punishment was linked with decreased empathic behaviour¹⁷⁹ and one in **Egypt** found that children who experienced corporal punishment reported that they were more disobedient, stubborn, verbally aggressive, and likely to lie than children not corporally punished.¹⁸⁰

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.¹⁸¹

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 the 2002 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.¹⁸² The 2016 meta-analysis examined five studies on the topic and confirmed the association between corporal punishment and negative parent-child relationships.¹⁸³

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).¹⁸⁴ When asked why adults don't "smack" each other, young children in the **UK** said it was

¹⁷⁸ Naz, A. et al (2011), "The impacts of corporal punishment on students' academic performance/career and personality development up-to secondary level education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan", *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2, 130-140

¹⁷⁹ Heckler, T. et al (2014), "Corporal punishment and children's externalizing problems: A cross-sectional study of Tanzanian primary school aged children", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 38, 884-892

¹⁸⁰ Youssef, R. M. et al (1998), "Children experiencing violence II: Prevalence and determinants of corporal punishment in schools", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 975-985

¹⁸¹ Center for Effective Discipline (2010), *Paddling Versus ACT Scores - A Retrospective Analysis*, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline

¹⁸² Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

¹⁸³ Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

¹⁸⁴ Dobbs, T. (2007), op cit

because they love each other and are friends or respect each other.¹⁸⁵ 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.¹⁸⁶

Later studies corroborate these findings: 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 parents, siblings, peers and teachers than those who were not physically punished by their mothers.¹⁸⁷

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).¹⁸⁸ 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.¹⁸⁹ 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.¹⁹⁰

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.

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

¹⁸⁵ Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), op cit

¹⁸⁶ Rohner, R. P. et al (1991), “Effects of Corporal Punishment, Perceived Caretaker Warmth, and Cultural Beliefs on the Psychological Adjustment of Children in St. Kitts, West Indies”, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53(3), 681-693, cited in Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁸⁷ Abolfotouh, M. A. et al (2009), “Corporal punishment: Mother’s disciplinary behavior and child’s psychological profile in Alexandria, Egypt”, *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, 5, 5-17

¹⁸⁸ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁸⁹ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), op cit

¹⁹⁰ Leary, C. E. et al (2008), “Parental Use of Physical Punishment as Related to Family Environment, Psychological Well-being, and Personality in Undergraduates”, *Journal of Family Violence*, 23, 1-7

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).

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

The purported distinction between “ordinary” physical punishment and “abuse” is meaningless¹⁹¹: 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.¹⁹²

Critics of the 2002 meta-analysis suggested that as it included studies which covered more severe forms of physical punishment, such as hitting children with objects, as well as “spanking”, it did not show that “spanking” is harmful, as the negative effects could have come from the more severe forms of physical punishment. The 2016 meta-analysis responded to this by using only studies which covered only “spanking” (or “smacking”, “slapping” etc.), excluding those which covered hitting with objects and other more severe forms of physical punishment. As detailed above (in the [Introduction](#) and throughout the paper), the 2016 meta-analysis found associations between “ordinary” corporal punishment (“spanking” etc.) and 13 negative outcomes.

“The evidence showing that physical punishment is associated with harmful outcomes is weak because it does not rule out the effects of confounding variables.”

It has been suggested that the associations between corporal punishment and negative outcomes 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. However, 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 still found associations between corporal punishment and negative outcomes.

“The evidence showing that physical punishment causes harmful outcomes is weak because it does not rule out the possibility of a ‘child effect’.”

It has been suggested that the associations between corporal punishment and behaviour problems or aggression in children are due to a “child effect” – for example, that aggressive children are

¹⁹¹ Durrant, J. E. (2008), op cit

¹⁹² For example, Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

physically punished more, rather than because physical punishment affects their behaviour. This criticism was directed at the 2002 meta-analysis, and the 2016 meta-analysis set out to address it.

Critics had suggested that as many of the studies which have found associations between corporal punishment and negative outcomes, including many included in the 2002 meta-analysis, are cross-sectional (they measure corporal punishment and the outcomes at one point in time rather than over time) there was a possibility of a “child effect”, and that this weakened the results of the 2002 meta-analysis.

To respond to this criticism, the 2016 meta-analysis compared the associations between corporal punishment and child outcomes in different kinds of studies – primarily cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Longitudinal studies measure corporal punishment and outcomes over time. They are a methodologically stronger approach to studying the effects of corporal punishment than cross-sectional studies, as they can control for factors such as children’s behaviour at the time the study begins. This means they can show how children’s behaviour changed after they were physically punished, reducing the possibility of a “child effect”.

The meta-analysis found that there was no difference between the findings of associations between corporal punishment and negative outcomes in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. The fact that the findings of methodologically stronger studies do not differ from the findings of methodologically weaker studies lends confidence to the findings of the methodologically weaker studies and to the 2002 meta-analysis which includes some of them. It shows that the criticism of the body of research showing the negative effects of corporal punishment as methodologically weak due to failure to account for “child effects” is unfounded.

“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 increased anxiety.¹⁹³ 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

¹⁹³ Gershoff, E. T. et al (2010), “Parent discipline practices in an international sample: Associations with child behaviors and moderation by perceived normativeness”, *Child Development*, 81(2), 480-495

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 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.¹⁹⁴ 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.¹⁹⁵

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 does not moderate the associations between corporal punishment and harmful outcomes,¹⁹⁶ and can even increase rather than decrease the negative effects of corporal punishment.¹⁹⁷

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.¹⁹⁸ In fact, the 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).¹⁹⁹ Thus no tradition or state

¹⁹⁴ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁹⁵ Lansford, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2008), op cit

¹⁹⁶ Roopnarine, J. L. et al (2014), op cit

¹⁹⁷ For example, Rohner, R. P. et al (1991), op cit, Turner, H. A. & Finkelhor, D (1996), op cit, Wimsatt, A. R. et al (2012), op cit, Lee, S. J. et al (2013), op cit

¹⁹⁸ Durrant, J. E. (2008), op cit

¹⁹⁹ 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

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.²⁰⁰

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.²⁰¹ 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).²⁰²

Conclusion

The evidence that corporal punishment is harmful to children, adults and societies is overwhelming – the more than 250 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.

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September 2021

²⁰⁰ Diamond, J. (2012), op cit

²⁰¹ Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit

²⁰² Holden, G. W. et al (2014), “Eavesdropping on the Family: A Pilot Investigation of Corporal Punishment in the Home”, *Journal of Family Psychology*, advance online publication 14 April 2014