The developmental and health consequences of corporal punishment around the globe

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I will summarize three key findings from contemporary scientific research on corporal punishment and child development:

1. Corporal punishment is prevalent around the globe.
2. Corporal punishment can undermine brain development.
3. Corporal punishment can impair cognitive and social-emotional development.
Finding 1:

Corporal punishment is prevalent around the globe
Corporal punishment is prevalent around the world


About 2 out of 3 children suffered corporal punishment before COVID-19

Corporal punishment has increased amid the pandemic
COVID-19 pandemic

- Poverty, unemployment
- Violence against women
- Disruption in social services
- Closure of education and care centers
- Behavior change
- Parental stress

Laws against violence (including corporal punishment)
Gender inequality
Social and legal normalization of violence
Effective social programs
Gender inequity
Social, economic, and gender equity
Violence against women
Parental stress
Disruption in social services
Poverty, unemployment
Self-regulation skills
Safe contexts
High-quality health and education services
Knowledge on childrearing and child development
Shared parenting load
Nurturing care
Child

COVID-19 pandemic

Community and society
Family and household
Child

Finding 2: Corporal punishment can undermine brain development
Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

Corporal punishment triggers harmful physiological and psychological responses

Children experience **sadness, fear, pain, anger, shame, guilt** when corporally punished - evidence from Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, New Zealand, The Philippines, South Africa, the U.S., and other settings.

Moreover, children exposed to corporal punishment **feel threatened** when punished and tend to **exhibit high hormonal reactivity to stress**, likely due to the physiological stress caused by the punishment.

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A biologically-based mechanism indicates that the consequences of corporal punishment will likely be universal, and scale in relation to its severity/frequency.

- Psychological and physiological responses
- Severity and frequency
  - Corporal punishment
  - Activate neural systems which support dealing with danger
  - Physiological Stress
    - Reduced differentiation between fear and safety cues
    - Increased reactivity to negative experiences
    - Overload biological systems

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

Corporal punishment is linked to changes in brain structure

Prefrontal cortex volume was reduced by 15% - 19% for adults who were exposed to ‘harsh’ corporal punishment (hit with objects).

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

Socially normative ‘spanking’ linked to atypical brain function

Children who experienced more severe physical abuse or sexual abuse were excluded from the study.

Children who were spanked exhibited **atypical neural activation** in response to threatening stimuli in areas of the prefrontal cortex relative to children who were not spanked.

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

What are these findings telling us?

Multiple studies reporting that more severe abuse impacts dACC

Reinforces the idea that distinguishing 'normative corporal punishment' from abuse is meaningless - both are forms of violence that constitute violations to children's right to protection and could lead to negative developmental consequences.

Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex (dACC)

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

What are these findings telling us?

The MFG is often engaged during effortful attempts to regulate emotional responses.

This could indicate that the brain of children who were spanked have a tendency to interpret neutral situations as threatening.

Middle Frontal Gyrus (MFG)

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

What are these findings telling us?

The dPFC and frontal pole are involved in several social-cognitive processes, including social information processing.

This suggests that spanked children devote greater attentional resources to processing fear/threatening stimuli, perhaps at expense of other cognitive and social-emotional processes.

Increased risk for mental health problems.

Corporal punishment can undermine brain development

What are these findings telling us?

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) develops from infancy to late adolescence.

It plays a central role on high-order cognition (e.g., executive function) and social-emotional skills, like self-regulation.

Behaviors and disorders related to self-regulation, such as substance use and risky/antisocial behavior are costly to individuals and societies.
Finding 3: Corporal punishment can impair cognitive and social-emotional development
Corporal punishment can impair cognitive and social-emotional development

Spanking undermines cognitive and social-emotional development

Recent studies followed young children in time and used advanced statistical techniques to identify the causal effect of spanking on children’s outcomes.

A study of a national sample of Bhutanese young children found that spanking impairs social-emotional development, specifically emotion regulation and conflict solving skills.

Another study from Colombia found that infants who were spanked at ages 9-26 months had slower cognitive growth at ages 27-46 months.

Corporal punishment can impair cognitive and social-emotional development

Spanking relates to negative child outcomes across cultures and countries

One study examined the links between spanking and social-emotional development in 62 socially, economically, and culturally diverse countries

Corporal punishment can impair cognitive and social-emotional development

Spanking relates to negative child outcomes across cultures and countries

Out of 62 countries, spanking predicted negative social-emotional outcomes in 59 (null findings in 3)

In 49 countries, children exposed to corporal punishment were about 24% less likely to be developmentally on track according to an indicator for the Sustainable Development Goals

Corporal punishment is not “beneficial” in any culture or country

Conclusions

1. Not a single study has found that corporal punishment might be beneficial to children’s health or development in any culture or country.

2. In contrast, studies from many diverse countries around the world show consistent links between corporal punishment and negative child developmental and health outcomes.

3. The consistency of findings across countries and underlying biologically-based mechanisms (brain development) suggests that corporal punishment might be universally harmful to children’s health and development.

4. Corporal punishment was prevalent and has increased amid the pandemic. Parenting programs, supports for parents, massive education campaigns, and legislation prohibiting all forms of corporal punishment are needed.
Gracias | Obrigado | Thank you

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