

Harms Linked to Corporal Punishment of Children: A Public Health Issue

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What is corporal punishment?

“...‘corporal’ or ‘physical’ punishment [is] any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.”

--U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, para. 11.



Why is corporal punishment a public health issue?

Corporal punishment **is prevalent**.

physically injures children.

impairs development.

is universally harmful.

is costly to society.



Corporal punishment is prevalent around the world

63% of 2- to 4-year-old children around the world are corporally punished by their parents .

732 million children live in countries where school corporal punishment is permitted.
(*UNICEF, 2017*).



Corporal punishment physically injures children

- Corporal punishment is a form of violence against children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007).
- In countries that distinguish corporal punishment from physical abuse, the majority of physical abuse starts out as intentional corporal punishment (Durrant et al., 2006).
- Interviews with children confirm that corporal punishment is physically painful (Dobbs, 2007; Willow & Hyder, 1998).
- There is ample evidence from a range of countries that school corporal punishment results in sometimes severe injuries to children (Gershoff, 2017).



Corporal punishment physically injures children

The prevention of child maltreatment has been recognized as a public health issue because it leads to a range of physical and mental health problems (Zimmerman & Mercy, 2010).

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stated that eliminating corporal punishment is a key way to prevent physical abuse and injury to children.



Corporal punishment is an Adverse Childhood Experience comparable to maltreatment

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have become a focus of concern in public health and medicine.

The original ACEs study asked participants whether they had been corporally punished as a child, but the data had never been analyzed. I collaborated with colleagues at the CDC to analyze the data (Merrick, Ports, Ford, Afifi, Gershoff, & Grogan-Kaylor, 2017).



Reanalysis of Original ACES Study Data (Merrick et al., 2017)

	Drug Use	Moderate to Heavy Drinking	Suicide Attempt (lifetime)	Depressed Affect
ACE Exposure	OR _{adj}	OR _{adj}	OR _{adj}	OR _{adj}
Sexual abuse	1.48	1.35	2.31	1.18
Emotional abuse			2.27	
Physical abuse	1.29	1.19		1.33
Corporal punishment	1.42	1.29	1.39	
Physical neglect				
Emotional neglect			1.65	1.38
Mother treated violently				
Household mental illness	1.42		3.41	1.65
Incarcerated household member			1.50	
Household substance abuse	1.55	1.82		1.23
Parental separation/divorce				



Corporal punishment impairs development

There have been hundreds of studies of child outcomes associated with corporal punishment.

Physical punishment and child outcomes: a narrative review of prospective studies



Anja Heilmann, Anita Mehay, Richard G Watt, Yvonne Kelly, Joan E Durrant, Jillian van Turnhout, Elizabeth T Gershoff

Physical punishment is increasingly viewed as a form of violence that harms children. This narrative review summarises the findings of 69 prospective longitudinal studies to inform practitioners and policy makers about physical punishment's outcomes. Our review identified seven key themes. First, physical punishment consistently predicts increases in child behaviour problems over time. Second, physical punishment is not associated with positive outcomes over time. Third, physical punishment increases the risk of involvement with child protective services. Fourth, the only evidence of children eliciting physical punishment is for externalising behaviour. Fifth, physical punishment predicts worsening behaviour over time in quasi-experimental studies. Sixth, associations between physical punishment and detrimental child outcomes are robust across child and parent characteristics. Finally, there is some evidence of a dose-response relationship. The consistency of these findings indicates that physical punishment is harmful to children and that policy remedies are warranted.

Introduction

The WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission¹ on children has highlighted social, economic, commercial, and environmental threats to child health and has called for

The purpose of this narrative review is thus to summarise the past two decades of research on physical punishment in a format that is accessible to policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners. Although

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My colleagues and I conducted a systematic review, focusing on longitudinal studies that examined change in the outcome over time.



Corporal punishment impairs development

	Studies examining outcome (n)	Independent samples examining outcome (n)	Among the independent samples			
			Detrimental outcomes	Beneficial outcomes	No significant associations	Mixed findings*
Externalising behaviours						
Externalising behaviour	27	19	13	0	3	3 (Det/NS) ^{20,21} (Det/Ben) ²²
Aggressive behaviour	20	6	5	0	1	0
Antisocial behaviour or conduct problems	8	5	4	0	0	1 (Det) ^{23,24} (NS) ^{25,26}
Internalising behaviours	15	10	5	0	3	2 (Ben/NS) ²² (Det/Ben) ²⁷
Total behaviour problems (externalising and internalising)	6	5	4	0	0	1 (Det) ²⁸ (Det/NS/NS) ²⁹
Prosocial behaviour or social competence	5	5	0	0	5	0
Inattention or ADHD symptoms	2	2	1	0	1	0
Cognitive abilities	8	6	2	0	1	3 (Det/NS/NS) ^{30,31} (Det/Ben) ³²
Interpersonal relationships	3	3	1	0	1	1 (Det/NS/NS) ³³
Stress reactivity	1	1	1	0	0	0
Involvement with CPS†	3	2	2	0	0	0
Total	98	64	38	0	15	11

Det=detrimental. Ben=beneficial. NS=not significant. ADHD=attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. CPS=child protective services. *Differential findings across measures or subgroups within the same study or across studies within the same dataset. †Only one of the independent samples examining child abuse or neglect controlled for previous maltreatment.

Table: Overview of included studies, by child outcome

Of the 98 effect sizes we examined, NONE found an overall beneficial effect of corporal punishment on children.



Corporal punishment impairs development

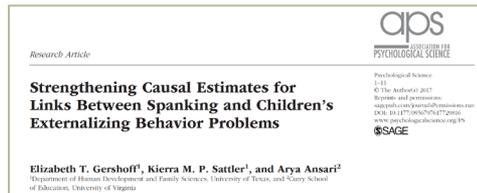
Our study, and the last sentence in the article, was featured on the cover of *The Lancet* the week our article appeared:



Is corporal punishment the cause of these negative outcomes?

Several recent papers have used econometric methods to approximate experimental conditions to study the impacts of corporal punishment on children.

I've published 3 papers using a method known as propensity score matching that statistically matches spanked and no-spank groups so that spanking is the only difference between them. All 3 have shown that children in the spanked group have more behavior problems, more mental health problems, and more cognitive problems.



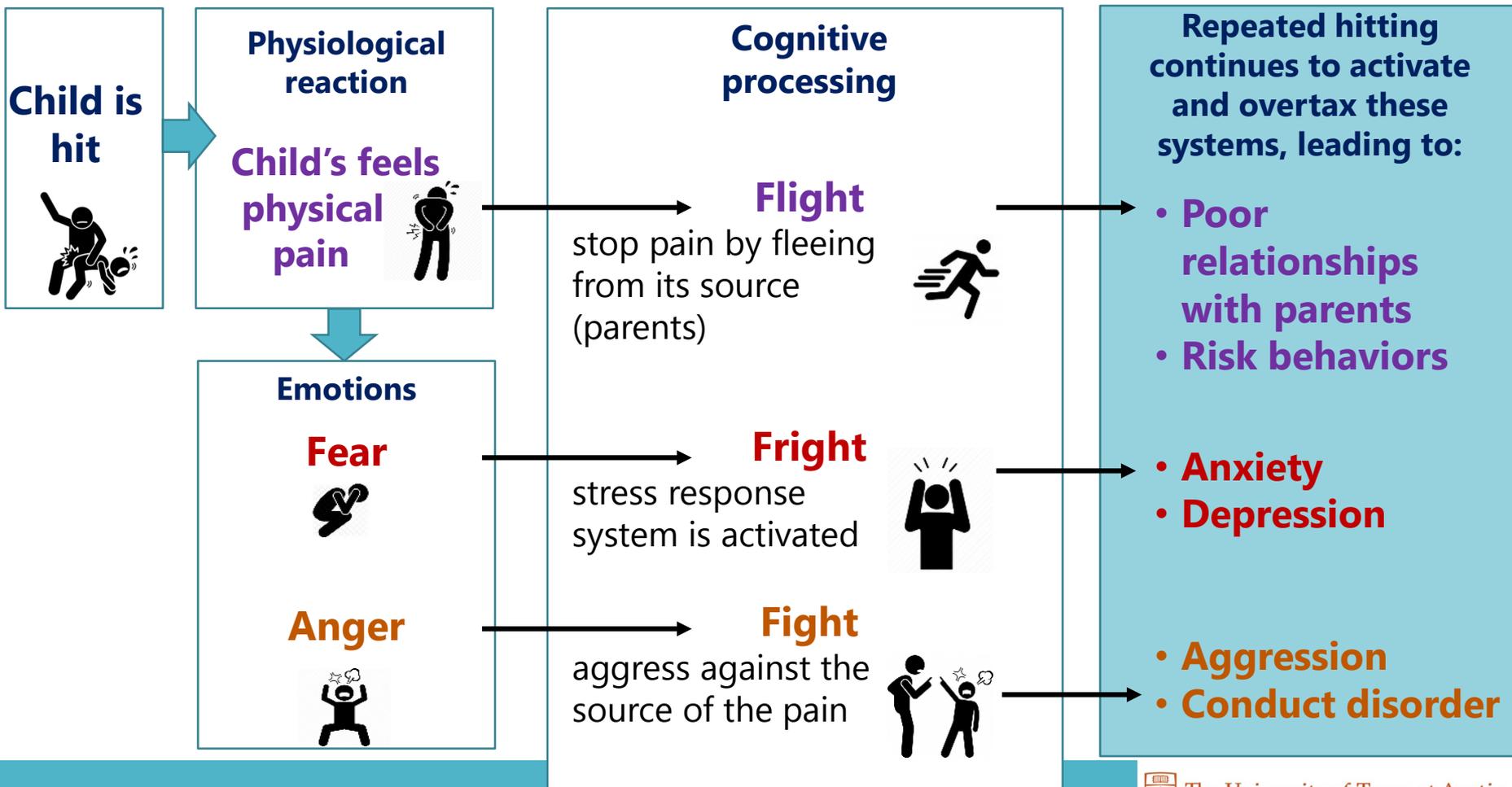
Corporal punishment is universally harmful.

The experience of pain and the physiological processes that follow it are universal across children.

Corporal punishment has been linked with entirely negative outcomes for children across countries and cultures.



Physiological basis for impacts of corporal punishment



Corporal punishment is universally harmful.

In a study of mothers and their children in China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand, my colleagues and I found that corporal punishment predicted higher aggression and more anxiety problems in all countries (Gershoff et al., 2010).

In multiple studies, corporal punishment is linked with negative outcomes for children regardless of country and regardless of how prevalent it is.



Summary

Corporal punishment is a public health issue because it is prevalent and harmful—universally harmful.

Because it is linked with costs related to mental health care and physical health care in adulthood, **corporal punishment is costly to society.**

Yet there is good news – corporal punishment and the harms linked with it are entirely preventable. Law reform and parenting education can prevent corporal punishment and its negative outcomes.



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