

Effectiveness of physical punishment as a behaviour modification



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Physical punishment as a form of behaviour modification is a controversial issue amongst both society and professionals. Research studies and meta-analysis's can be found to both support and oppose the efficacy of spanking as an effective form of modifying maladaptive behaviour amongst children.

This essay identifies the different views on spanking, key conclusions about its effects and consequences and identifies the methodological limitations of current research. This essay will observe the topic of internalization and externalization concerning physical punishment, and the nature of avoidance learning.

In conclusion a proposal for future longitudinal studies is suggested and a note is made regarding an address of further research into the goals of parental discipline.

This essay aims to provide a succinct review of the current empirical research on the effects of physical punishment on children. For the purpose of this essay, spanking will remain the forefront focus. The essay explores whether spanking produces effective adaptive behaviours or if in fact, it counteracts adaptation and leads to other undesirable consequences in children.

This essay features different views of spanking, key conclusions about its effects, and methodological limitations of the research and the resulting ambiguities that stimulate current debate. The review also will draw on key findings about the effects of spanking, issues that limit advancement in understanding the effects of spanking, and ways to advance research.

Punishment by Definition

Punishment is a technique used in behaviour modification based on the principles of operant conditioning. Definitions of punishment in literature vary, however; from a behaviourist perspective punishment is the imposition of an aversive stimulus in response to an unwanted behaviour (Lerman & Vorndran, 2002).

Corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior. (Straus, 2001, p. 4)

The term "spanking" (Kazdin and Benjet 2003), refers to the striking of a child on the buttocks or extremities with an open hand, without inflicting physical injury and with the intent to modify behavior. Spanking is intended to be aversive, but not necessarily by inflicting physical pain.

The Theory of Operant Conditioning

Behaviour modification is based on the assumption that maladaptive behaviours are controlled by antecedent and consequent events (Simpson, 1998). Accordingly, it is vital to identify and manipulate relevant antecedent and consequent stimuli to rebuild new-targeted behaviours.

Burrhus Frederic Skinner is regarded as the founder of operant conditioning, a form of behaviour modification that is contingent upon the rewarding of desired behaviours and initiating unpleasant consequences for undesirable behaviours. Operant conditioning utilises reinforcement and punishment to shape and/or modify behaviours. (Mazur, 2002) Skinner's theory suggests

that reinforcement can lead to an increase in a behaviour and punishment a decrease in the behaviour (Mazur, 2002).

Analysis of Recent Studies

A survey from the Australian Childhood Foundation revealed that an overwhelming majority of Australian adults (80-90%) endorse the legitimacy and occasional necessity of mild physical punishments for misbehaving children. (INSERT REFERENCE)

However, growing quantity of empirical findings has found that corporal punishment, while potentially effective in stopping immediate behavioral transgressions, may have a range of unintended negative effects on children.

Two major perspectives exist for the effectiveness of spanking; the first is an unconditional anti-spanking position, which contests all forms of physical punishment as both ineffective and harmful. The second position, which has been called the conditional-spanking perspective (Benget & Kazdin 2003) has attempted to identify conditions under which spanking may be effectively beneficial or, at least, not detrimental to children.

A meta-analysis of 88 studies conducted by Gershoff (2002) examined the relationship between corporal punishment and compliance of the child. The result located 117 tests of the hypothesis that parental use of corporal punishment was not only ineffective but was associated with lower levels of moral internalization, mental health and anti-social behavior as well as higher levels of aggression in children.

In view of that, Gershoff did acknowledge corporal punishment produced one desirable behaviour, namely, increased immediate compliance (Gershoff 2002, P. 544). Gershoff further suggests that physically punished children comply simply to avoid consequences and thus fail to develop an internalized causality. This result in impaired conscience development, or the failure to internalise parents' values (Gershoff 2002).

An earlier study by Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit and Bates (1994) supports Gershoffs findings having also demonstrated that parental spanking was related to higher levels of child aggression. Strassberg et al. (1994), indicated that even mild forms of physical punishment, such as spanking, lead to higher levels of child aggression.

Other more recent studies have also concurred that using punishment as a behaviour modification technique may also increase the incidents of wanted behaviours (Lerman & Vorndran, 2002, Johnston, 2006). The use of punishment is also considered important when it is difficult or impossible to identify the reinforcers that are contributing to the ongoing problematic behaviour (Lerman & Vorndran, 2002).

However, the only published longitudinal study of aggression outcomes of customary spanking (Gunnoe, & Mariner 1997) concluded, " For most children, claims that spanking teaches aggression seem unfounded" (Gunnoe, & Mariner 1997p. 768). There findings suggested that customary spanking reduced subsequent aggression in 4 to 7 year-olds albeit in contrast increased subsequent aggression in 8 to 11 year-olds.

In response to Gershoff's meta-analysis, the reliance on correlations renders the review inconclusive as to the causal effect of spanking. The meta-analytic statistics used cannot tell whether spanking caused increased undesirable behavior or whether the child's misbehavior causes parents to use more frequent disciplinary enforcement of all kinds.

Baumrind et al. (2002) reviewed the studies that composed Gershoff's meta-analyses and concluded that many of the studies (65.4%) included "overly severe" forms of corporal punishment (e.g. hitting with an object.)

Baumrind's reanalysis indicated the outcomes were more negative in those studies than in studies of less severe punishment (Baumrind et al., 2002).

On the other side of the debate Larzelere and Kuhn, 2005, conducted a meta-analysis that concluded spanking in certain settings could be more beneficial than alternative methods in effecting optimal child behavior. (Lazerele & Kuhn 2005) Larzelere and Kuhn also noted that conditional spanking compared favorably with alternative discipline tactics. Moreover, as agreed by Saadeh (Saadeh et al.), when used primarily to back up milder disciplinary tactics with 2- to 6-year-olds for being noncompliant, as a back-up for time-out noncompliance or when used in a nonabusive controlled manner (e.g., two swats to the buttocks with an open hand), and when combined with reasoning. However, when physical punishment was overly severe or used as the predominant discipline tactic, it was more detrimental than alternative tactics. (Lazerele & Kuhn 2005)

Punishment Produces Aversive Learning

Since punishment is aversive, it is likely to prompt avoidance learning.

(Passer Smith, Psychology of Mind Body and Behavior P. 231) Learning how to avoid punishment does not necessarily stop the unacceptable behaviour, it can mean learning how to avoid detection of apprehension, with no reduction or even an increase in the offending behaviour.

The child learns not misbehave when the parent is around. The punished behavior may stop only in the presence of the adult. The child may continue the negative behavior when the adult is not around.

The Importance of Internalization in the Effectiveness of Punishment

Research suggests that children who are physically punished are actually less likely to internalize moral values such as empathy, and altruism than those who are not physically punished (Lopez, Bonenberger & Schneider 2001).

Physical punishment does not teach children why their behavior was wrong or what they should do instead. It further teaches children that they should behave in desired ways because if not they will be punished, not because there are important, positive reasons for behaving appropriately.

Current research also indicates that physical punishment does not promote long-term, internalized compliance. It is suggested that 85 percent of studies included in a meta-analysis found physical punishment to be associated with less moral internalization of norms for appropriate behavior and long-term compliance. (51. Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by parents and <https://assignbuster.com/effectiveness-of-physical-punishment-as-a-behaviour-modification/>

associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 539-579.)

Physical punishment elicits very high anxiety or arousal in the child and it interferes with the effective processing of the parental message about behavioral standards, and thus undermines internalization” (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997).

Spanking hinders development of empathy and compassion, because the child focuses on his/her own pain rather than on the effect of his/her behavior on others. Stress research (Selye; others) tells us that the natural human reaction to feeling threatened or being hurt is a flood of anger and/or fear that psychologists call the “ fight or flight” reaction. These emotions are likely, in turn, to block any cognitive appreciation by the child of the message

behind the discipline (Holden 2002). It ensures that a child cannot listen, think, or feel remorseful.

It is therefore not surprising that studies continue to link physical punishment consistently as a predictor of increased levels of aggression and antisocial behaviour in children (McCabe & Clark 1999, Simons, Lin & Gordon 1998, Ulman & Straus 2003).

Externalization as a Negative Consequence of Physical Punishment

Studies have shown that the more parents use physical punishment, the more aggressive their children become over time, even after accounting for children's initial levels of aggression.

Evidence of the causal role of physical punishment comes from a study that used randomized controlled trials to evaluate a parenting intervention designed to reduce child problem behaviors. With data from over 500 families, this evaluation revealed that significant reductions in children's externalizing behavior problems were a direct result of decreases in parents' reliance on physical punishment because of program participation. (Kandel, D. B., & Wu, P. (1995). Disentangling mother-child effects in the development of antisocial behavior. In J. McCord (Ed.), *Coercion and punishment in long-term perspectives* (pp. 106-123). New York: Cambridge University Press.)

In assessing increased anti-social behaviour linked to physical punishment, Strauss compiled data from interviews with a national sample of 807 mothers of children aged 6 to 9 years in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Supplement. Analysis of variance was used to test the hypothesis that when parents use corporal punishment to correct anti-social behavior, it actually increases subsequent anti-social behavior. (Straus et al., 1997)

In opposition, Larzelere and Smith (2000) replicated and extended Straus et al.'s (1997) study, using the same publicly available data. In general, they

found similar increases in antisocial behaviour two years later for those who alternative disciplinary tactics frequently.

Methodological Issues in Assessing Physical Punishment as an Effective Form of Behavior Modification

Researchers face a variety of challenges as they work with data about corporal punishment.

Fundamental theoretical and methodological issues affect the literature on spanking. As noted upon introduction, the varied definitions of spanking can dictate the conclusions reviewers reach.

As with most research on parenting and child behavior, conclusions about causality are rare since establishing a causal connection between any parental discipline technique and child behavior is difficult. In addition, most parents report using corporal punishment infrequently (e. g., 1-2 times per month for toddlers, Straus & Stewart, 1999), increasing the difficulty of establishing a causal connection. Another challenge researcher's face is the lack of direct, independent observation of the data. Most physical punishment occurs when children are under the age of five and, therefore, unable to self-report their experiences (Straus & Stewart, 1999). Therefore, most research relies on parent reports or on adolescent or adult children's recollections.

Conclusion

More longitudinal studies are needed to help establish time lines between spanking and desirable and undesirable outcomes, competing hypothesis's

that may explain the effects attributed to spanking need to be ruled out more persuasively.

There is no advocacy of physical punishment in this review. The conclusion having been formed is one that merely acknowledges that the current body of research does not articulate to the consequence of occasional spanking.

In one sense, it may be correct to say that current evidence does not establish a causal connection to either the harmful or the beneficial effects of very mild spanking.

The use of spanking raises questions regarding the goals of discipline, whether any punishment is needed to attain them, and, if in fact punishment is needed, whether spanking has any effect other than immediate, short term compliance.

In addressing the many methodological issues of recent findings, it is improbable to form any concrete opinion on the effectiveness or consequences of spanking, as a mild form of physical punishment.