

# Evidence Supports APSAC's Position Statement Calling to End Corporal Punishment in All U.S. Homes and Schools

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This issue of the *Advisor* highlights the issue of corporal punishment (hereafter, CP), a timely issue for the APSAC membership to consider for several reasons. First, in the summer of 2015, over half of the APSAC membership responded to a survey that Cathy Taylor and I conducted to examine attitudes and beliefs about CP (see *Advisor* article in this issue that summarizes the results of the membership survey). Then, we worked closely with other members of the APSAC Prevention Committee to develop the *ASPAC Position Statement on Corporal Punishment of Children*, which calls for “the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment and physical discipline of children in all environments including in schools and at home.” The ASPAC President and Board approved this statement in July 2016. While a number of organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics have statements advising parents and caregivers against the use of CP, relatively few have issued calls to end the practice altogether. In this regard, ASPAC has again shown itself to be a leader in prioritizing the safety and welfare of children. Most recently, in November 2016, APSAC signed an open letter calling for an end to CP in schools (see *Advisor* article in this issue on CP in schools by Rania Hannan).

Thus, in this special issue of the *Advisor*, the Editors sought to highlight the issue of CP in the United States. The research related to CP has not been effectively translated to child welfare professionals, even though child welfare professionals play a critical role in working with caregivers who may benefit the most from parent education on the alternatives to physical punishment. Furthermore, recognizing that professionals are

not unanimous in their opposition to CP, the Editors wanted to provide the APSAC membership with information and resources that address different dimensions of CP. In this introduction to the special issue, I provide an up-to-date, evidence-based overview of research on CP in the U.S. In short, I argue that the strength of the research base strongly supports APSAC's position statement calling for an end to CP in homes and schools. As such, other professional organizations concerned with the welfare of children should follow APSAC's lead and issue policy statements against the use of any CP or physical punishment of children, whether at home, in schools, or elsewhere.

## CP in the United States

As discussed herein, CP is defined as spanking, smacking, physical discipline, physical punishment, or any use of physical force, “with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behavior” (Donnelly & Straus, 2005, p. 3). (I use the terms *hitting*, *CP*, *physical punishment*, and *spanking* interchangeably.) The majority of U.S. parents use CP toward their children. Large community-based studies show that spanking begins early and often occurs frequently. In one study conducted in North Carolina, about 5% of mothers reported that they had spanked their 3-month old baby (Zolotor, Robinson, Runyan, Barr, & Murphy, 2011), and when looking at children aged 2 years old (<24 months), 70% of mothers said that they had spanked their child at least once (Zolotor et al, 2011). In a community-based study of urban families, 30% of 1-year-old children had been spanked at least once in the past month (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014). Zolotor and colleagues (2011) reported that of the

mothers of 2-year-olds who spanked, 10% said they spanked their child 20 times or more in the past year. In another study, 44% of 3-year-olds were spanked 2 times or more in the past month by one or both parents; only 32% were spanked by neither parent in the past month (Lee, Taylor, Altschul, & Rice, 2013). By the time children are 9 or 10 years old, up to 94% of them have been spanked at least once in their lifetime (Straus & Stewart, 1999; Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

Unfortunately, CP has a host of detrimental effects on child wellbeing. One reason why CP is important to child welfare professionals is because it is linked to greater risk that the child will experience abuse. Although CP in which there are no marks or bruises left on the child is legal in the United States and even in public schools in 19 states, research suggests that children who are physically punished are at greater risk of serious injury and physical abuse (Gershoff, 2008). One study showed that CP raised the odds of physical child abuse by 3 times and by 9 times when an object is used (Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan, 2008). In another study, mothers who spanked their child at age 1 were more likely to experience subsequent Child Protective Services involvement (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014).

On the continuum of child wellbeing, the possibility that hitting will escalate to child abuse is clearly a negative outcome for the child. There is considerable evidence to show that CP is harmful to children on other key domains of wellbeing. Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor published an important meta-analysis that showed that spanking children was associated with numerous negative outcomes across childhood, adolescence, and even into adulthood. For example, CP is associated with increased child aggression and antisocial behavior (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005a, 2005b; Gromoske & Maguire-Jack, 2012; Lansford et al., 2011; Lee, Taylor, Alt-

schul, & Rice, 2013; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010).

### The Conditional CP Arguments

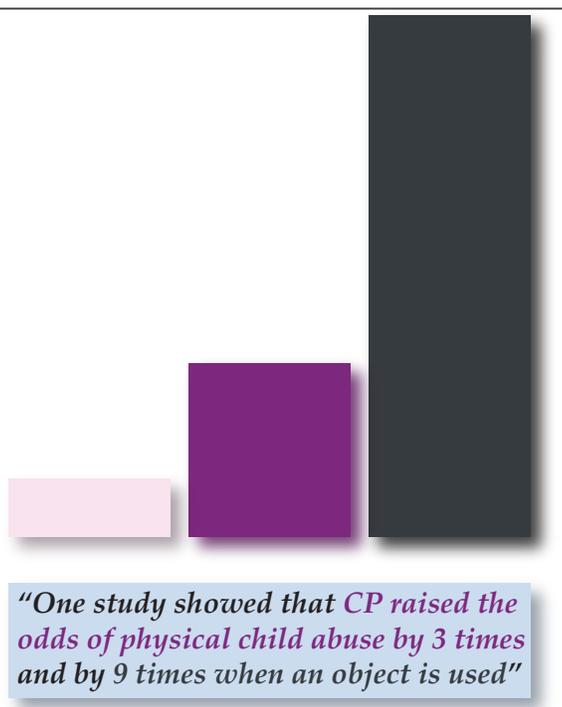
As noted earlier, this research base has not been effectively communicated to child welfare professionals, or to the public in general, perhaps in part because many professionals, parents, and researchers continue to believe that the effects of CP are “conditional” on other aspects of the child environment. In this line of thinking, the effects of spanking are “not necessarily negative or positive, but may be either or both depending on many

other conditions” that characterize the parent-child relationship (Benjet & Kazdin, 2003). Some of the more common conditional CP arguments are that CP is not harmful when it is done in cultural contexts where use of such behavior is normative, when it is done in the context of a warm and loving maternal-child relationship, or when parents use CP in a reasoned or calm manner as opposed to spanking out of parental anger or frustration. Next, I summarize the current literature addressing these arguments. In sum, the research strongly suggests that CP—regardless of the conditions in which it occurs—is harmful to children,

and furthermore, no research to date shows positive effects of CP on child behavior.

### Spanking & Cultural Normativeness

Probably the most persistent, and arguably one of the most pernicious, arguments in support of the use of CP is the “cultural normativeness” argument. In this line of thinking, when a parenting behavior such as spanking is perceived to be culturally normative, it is thus less likely to have negative consequences for children. One early study in particular showed that spanking was linked to externalizing behavior problems for White but not African American children (Deater-Deckard, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996), which lent credence to



the argument that cultural context may buffer children from experiencing negative effects of physical punishment.

Here it is important to differentiate between two types of research: studies that examine *cultural variations in use of CP* (with culture most often defined by race, ethnicity, or country of origin), and studies that examine cultural normativeness as a *buffer or moderator* of the link between CP and child outcomes. Both U.S.-based studies and international studies have demonstrated that parental CP occurs more frequently in certain cultural contexts and among certain race and ethnic groups (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Lansford et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Lansford & Dodge, 2008; Lansford, Wager, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 2012; C. Rodriguez, 2008; C. M. Rodriguez & Henderson, 2010). Many have argued that spanking may be more common among African American parents due to cultural factors that emphasize the importance of respecting one's elders and maintaining obedience to protect children from discrimination and physical harm (Dodge, McLoyd, & Lansford, 2005; Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004).

However, research examining whether culture, race, or ethnicity *buffers* the negative consequences of CP on children shows that it does not. Spanking, even when it is culturally normative, still has negative consequences for children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a; Gershoff et al., 2010; Gershoff et al., 2012; Lansford et al., 2005). For example, in one study, Black parents reported that they used spanking more often; however, even though the behavior could be described as being more culturally normative for Black parents, spanking still predicted increases in children's externalizing behaviors for Black and White children in this study (Gershoff et al., 2012). Simply experiencing the behavior in a context in which it was normalized did not mitigate its negative consequences for children. In a meta-analysis published in *Family Relations*, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016a) examined this issue and concluded that "[c]ontrary to the cultural normativeness perspective, these results demonstrate that spanking is similarly associated with detrimental outcomes for White and Black children in the United States" (p. 498). Similar results are reported in international studies as well (Gershoff et al., 2010).

## Spanking & the Context of Maternal Warmth

Many have argued that CP is not harmful, or is less harmful, when the parent-child relationship is otherwise characterized by high levels of warmth and parental responsiveness (Deater-Deckard, Ivy, & Petrill, 2006; McKee et al., 2007; McLoyd & Smith, 2002). However, recent studies using rigorous longitudinal analytic procedures conducted with large, diverse samples of families suggest that the negative effects of spanking persist, even when accounting for high levels of maternal warmth (Stacks, Oshio, Gerard, & Roe, 2009). This finding was supported in another study that showed that maternal spanking was associated with increased child aggression, and high level of maternal warmth did not buffer against this outcome (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013). An international study of parenting in eight countries provided additional evidence in support of the finding that CP was associated with child anxiety and aggression, and that maternal warmth did not, for the most part, moderate those associations; indeed, the authors state, "[O]ur findings suggest that corporal punishment may be *especially harmful* in the context of high warmth" (Lansford et al., 2014, p. 681).

## CP Conducted Within Certain Guidelines

Additionally, an argument commonly posed in support of CP is that it is not harmful to children if done in a reasoned and calm manner. This position holds that providing parents with spanking guidelines (e.g., use with preadolescent children and children over age 2, with an open hand to the buttocks, leaving no mark, as a back-up for less aversive techniques, and not as a primary or the only technique, in conjunction with reasoning, and within a loving family environment) will do more to curb child abuse than outlawing or discouraging spanking (Larzelere, 2000). Unfortunately, research has not supported these claims. As noted earlier, CP is shown to be harmful even in contexts that are high in maternal warmth. Furthermore, one study failed to show that spanking done in a calm and controlled manner was any less harmful than impulsive spanking (Lorber, O'Leary, & Slep, 2011).

Finally, in another study, my colleagues and I wanted to examine whether spanking led to *positive* child behavior. Many parents who use CP feel that it is an effective way to promote children's positive behavior, yet almost no studies had examined whether parental spanking contributed to the development of child social competence. We found that spanking was not associated with children's social competence. Instead, as shown in many prior studies, spanking predicted increases in child aggression. However, maternal warmth and responsiveness to the child *did* predict children's greater social competence. Our study indicated that responding to the child with warmth is a more effective way to promote children's social competence than spanking (Altschul, Lee, & Gershoff, 2016).

### Next Steps

Whereas the use of spanking has been banned in 51 countries (<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org>), such actions are unlikely in the United States. The General Social Survey indicates that the majority of adults in the U.S. support the use of physical punishment against young children (Straus, 2011). As recently as 2010, 69% of U.S. adults agreed with the statement "[I]t is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking" (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014). While the past 24 years have shown a slight decline in how many men (from 84% to 75%) and women (from 82% to 64%) endorse this statement (Child Trends, 2015), shifting attitudes have been primarily in relation to beliefs about CP toward older children. There has been relatively little change in the past 24 years in attitudes supporting use of corporal punishment with young children ( $\leq 5$  years) (Dube, Fairweather, Pearson, Felitti, Anda, & Croft, 2009).

Thus, it is left to organizations such as APSAC, ISPCAN, and others concerned with the welfare of children to take the lead in shifting social norms related to the use of CP. I am grateful that APSAC has done just that, and has released a statement strongly opposing the use of CP in homes and schools. Based on our survey of APSAC members (Taylor and Lee, reported in this issue), while the majority of professionals feel prepared to talk to parents about CP, this tack is not universal. In our survey, respondents pointed to the lack of time, training, and resources, as well as concerns about cul-

tural sensitivity, as barriers that hindered their efforts to provide advice to parents against the use of physical punishment. Thus, to best promote the welfare of children, child welfare agencies should include in their staff training more information about the detrimental effects of CP, so that child welfare professionals are better trained and prepared to address this issue. Such training should include clear, evidence-based information related to the detrimental effects of CP as well as information in helping parents to implement effective alternative disciplinary techniques with their children.

There are multiple benefits of policies from professional organizations against the use of spanking. Such policies call attention to the fact that spanking is an act of violence against children. Statements such as these provide an opportunity to educate professionals who work with children—and who are the most likely to effect change with parents—about the negative consequences of using CP. Organizational policies against the use of CP will begin to shift norms and attitudes that condone the use of violence against children. This is particularly important in the field of child welfare, where professionals work hand in hand with parents who are most likely to benefit from information about the harms of CP and alternative approaches to physical punishment of children. Many—perhaps most—parents think that spanking is a harmless and effective way to discipline children. This brief review of the literature shows that the weight of the evidence suggests that CP is *neither harmless nor is it effective*. Child welfare professionals are in a strong position to educate their colleagues and the parents they work with about effective alternatives to the practice of hitting children for discipline.

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