

APSAC Members' Responses to a Survey of Attitudes & Beliefs About Corporal Punishment

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During the summer of 2015, we conducted a survey of the full membership list of APSAC. Frank Vandervort, President of APSAC, sent an email to all APSAC members inviting them to participate in this survey about corporal punishment (CP), which took ten minutes or less to complete. We had an outstanding response rate! Over half (51%) of the APSAC membership completed this survey. Thanks to all of you who participated! This article reports on the key results of the survey.

Respondents

The APSAC members who completed this survey (n=569) were mainly counselors and mental health professionals (25.5%), physicians (19.5%), and “other professions” (18.6%), such as forensic interviewers, nurse practitioners, and advocates.

Attitudes and Beliefs About CP

When asked about their attitudes toward corporal punishment, such as spanking, the majority of respondents did not agree that “spanking is a normal part of parenting” and that “sometimes the only way to get a child to behave is with a spank.” Similarly, the vast majority of respondents agreed that overall “spanking is a bad disciplinary technique” and that it is “harmful for children.” When asked to gauge their colleagues’ attitudes on this topic, respondents rated them as having more moderate views, believing that their colleagues’ views were in the same direction but not as strongly held as their own. Participants were also asked to rate their opinions about both the likely positive and negative outcomes of

CP. Most believed that CP “seldom” or “never” resulted in positive outcomes, such as better self-control, better behavior in the long-term, a better relationship with the parent, or a decreased likelihood of delinquency in the future. And most believed that CP results in more negative outcomes, such as more aggressive behavior, poorer mental health, and poorer cognitive abilities “sometimes” or “most of the time,” and sometimes physical abuse or injury.

Relevant Training and Practice Needs

The majority of participants reported feeling “extremely” or “very” well-trained, well-supported, and confident in providing advice to parents about child discipline. And the majority felt “extremely” or “very” strongly that providing such advice is a high priority; yet, the majority also felt that parents only “somewhat” valued or followed their advice. Although the majority of respondents felt that responding to child abuse after the fact was emphasized in their professional training, most felt that primary prevention of child abuse (or preventing abuse before it occurs) was emphasized very little or not at all. The majority perceived the following as the main barriers to providing more advice to parents about how best to discipline their children: (1) concerns about cultural sensitivity, (2) lack of time, (3) lack of training, and (4) lack of resources. Yet, the majority of respondents were “extremely” to “very” motivated to learn more about how to better educate and intervene with parents and colleagues, and to promote change within their professions to challenge norms that promote the use of CP.

The results of this survey indicated a strong consensus

among APSAC members that CP is harmful for children and that alternative parenting strategies should be promoted. We found that the professionals in APSAC are well-informed of the emergent scientific consensus on this topic, extremely motivated to learn more and to promote change, and yet feeling constrained in advising parents due to concerns about culture, time, resources, and training.

The results of this survey provided a strong rationale for the APSAC Position Statement on Corporal Punishment of Children, which we formulated with our colleagues who are members of the APSAC Prevention Committee. This important statement, which calls for the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment and physical discipline of children in schools and at home, was accepted by the APSAC Board during the summer of 2016. The full text of the Position Statement on Corporal Punishment of Children is also published in this issue of the *Advisor*.

We hope this survey and the APSAC Position Statement on Corporal Punishment of Children will be of use to professionals as we move the field forward in promoting efforts to prevent child physical abuse.

About the Authors

Catherine A. Taylor, PhD, MPH, LCSW, is trained in clinical social work and public health and is Associate Professor in Tulane's Department of Global Community Health and Behavioral Sciences. Her work aims to inform the development of strategies to prevent and reduce violence in communities and within families. She has presented her work at conferences such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, American Public Health Association, International Family Violence and Child Victimization Research Conference, International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, and Society for Social Work and Research. She is a member of the Advisory Board for End Physical Punishment of Children, Center for Effective Discipline.

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