

Research on Corporal Punishment (CP): It's time to move forward

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CP/Spanking by parents remains prevalent in the U.S.¹

70% of mothers of **two year olds** report spanking their children (Zolotor, Robinson, Runyan, & Murphy, 2011).

By the time they reached 5th grade, 80% of children reported that they have been spanked by their parents (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Vittrup & Holden, 2010).

In Contrast to the US, 37 Countries Have Banned Corporal Punishment by Parents¹

[Honduras](#) (2013)

[Albania](#) (2010)

[Tunisia](#) (2010)

[Luxembourg](#) (2008)

[Togo](#) (2007)

[Uruguay](#) (2007)

[Netherlands](#) (2007)

[Romania](#) (2004)

[Turkmenistan](#) (2002)

[Bulgaria](#) (2000)

[Denmark](#) (1997)

[Norway](#) (1987)

[Malta](#) (2014)

[TFYR Macedonia](#) (2013)

[Congo, Republic of](#) (2010)

[Poland](#) (2010)

[Republic of Moldova](#) (2008)

[Spain](#) (2007)

[Portugal](#) (2007)

[Greece](#) (2006)

[Ukraine](#) (2004)

[Germany](#) (2000)

[Croatia](#) (1999)

[Cyprus](#) (1994)

[Finland](#) (1983)

[South Sudan](#) (2011)

[Kenya](#) (2010)

[Liechtenstein](#) (2008)

[Costa Rica](#) (2008)

[Venezuela](#) (2007)

[New Zealand](#) (2007)

[Hungary](#) (2005)

[Iceland](#) (2003)

[Israel](#) (2000)

[Latvia](#) (1998)

[Austria](#) (1989)

[Sweden](#) (1979)

Focus on CP/Spanking

Adults are protected from all physical force or violence by another without qualifications—i.e., “no fine lines.” **This is not the case for children.**

- As Straus (1994:4-5) reviews, *corporal punishment*, i.e., *legal violence*, 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 a child.” Examples include spanking, slapping, hitting with open hand, etc.
- This is theoretically distinguished from *physical abuse* i.e. “*illegal violence*” defined as a physical attack on a child resulting in injury. Examples include hitting with closed fist/punch, kicking, etc. and focus on severity of injury.

CP: NO “fine lines”

Distinguishing between how much physical violence against children is “abuse” vs. “ok” or “acceptable physical punishment” is *arbitrary and dangerous* as battered women know too well.

Over 50 years of research across disciplines has shown that use of corporal punishment is directly and strongly related to physical abuse of children.¹

Indeed parents who murder their children often use the “fine line” as a defense: The step-father who murdered Nixzmary Brown, “admitted that he routinely beat Nixzmary with a belt, hit her with his hands using “all my force,” threw her on the floor.” His defense argued “*You don’t know you’ve crossed the line until you get accused of crossing the line.*”²

CP: NO “fine lines”

- Much physical abuse starts out as an attempt to control the child with corporal punishment and when that does not bring desired results, often these parents increase the severity of attacks escalating to physical abuse.
- Bringing us back to a conclusion by Gil (1970:141) **over 40 years ago** (and reiterated by researchers repeatedly) that “Since culturally determined permissive attitudes toward the use of physical force in child-rearing seem to constitute the common core of all physical abuse of children in American society, systematic educational efforts ... and developing clear-cut cultural prohibitions and legal sanctions against the use of physical force as a means for rearing children, are likely to produce over time the strongest possible reduction of the incidence and prevalence of physical abuse of children.”

Adverse consequences of ‘just’ spanking

In addition to the above, literally hundreds of studies have documented the numerous adverse consequences of spanking, with many based on the most sophisticated methods available including national random samples, longitudinal designs with controls.¹ While there is always a study that may yield different results due to certain factors, *the weight of scientific evidence indicates that the more frequently a child is spanked, the more likely the child suffers negative consequences including among others:*

- Increased *physical aggressiveness* with others throughout life including violent attacks on siblings and other children outside of the home²;
- Increased *anti-social behavior* including externalizing such as fighting in school and other indicators of “delinquency”;
- Lower scores on IQ measures although grade-point average is not related;

Adverse consequences of 'just' spanking: Continued

- Increased likelihood of acts of physical violence in adulthood against dating partners, spouses and their own children;
- Increased likelihood of engaging in risky sex behaviors;
- Less empathy and greater alienation;
- Increased *mental health problems* including depression, anxiety, higher levels of psychiatric symptoms (BSI). As Straus (1994:x) states “ . . . *children who have been hit by their parents suffer serious psychological harm, just as wives suffer serious psychological injury as a result of being hit by their husbands.*”

Overall, the consequences of spanking are the same as for physical abuse, just less severe. **Clearly there is NO fine line in avoiding the risks of multiple adverse consequences of CP.**

Do Adverse Consequences of CP differ by culture: NO¹

No—spanking predicts increases in child aggression among all race and ethnic groups in the US, even among the group that spans the most.

No—spanking is associated with more child aggression and anxiety, even when the parent or child believes spanking to be normative in their culture.

For example, Gershoff et al 2012: 838: “While race / ethnic differences were observed in the frequency of spanking, no differences were found in the associations of spanking and externalizing over time: Early spanking predicted increases in children’s externalizing while early child externalizing elicited more spanking over time across all race / ethnic groups.”

Why is spanking related to so many adverse effects

To begin with, these are the same kinds of consequences that result from most childhood trauma (physical, sexual, emotional) only differing in severity.

Also, just like adults, children experience hitting as humiliating and degrading.

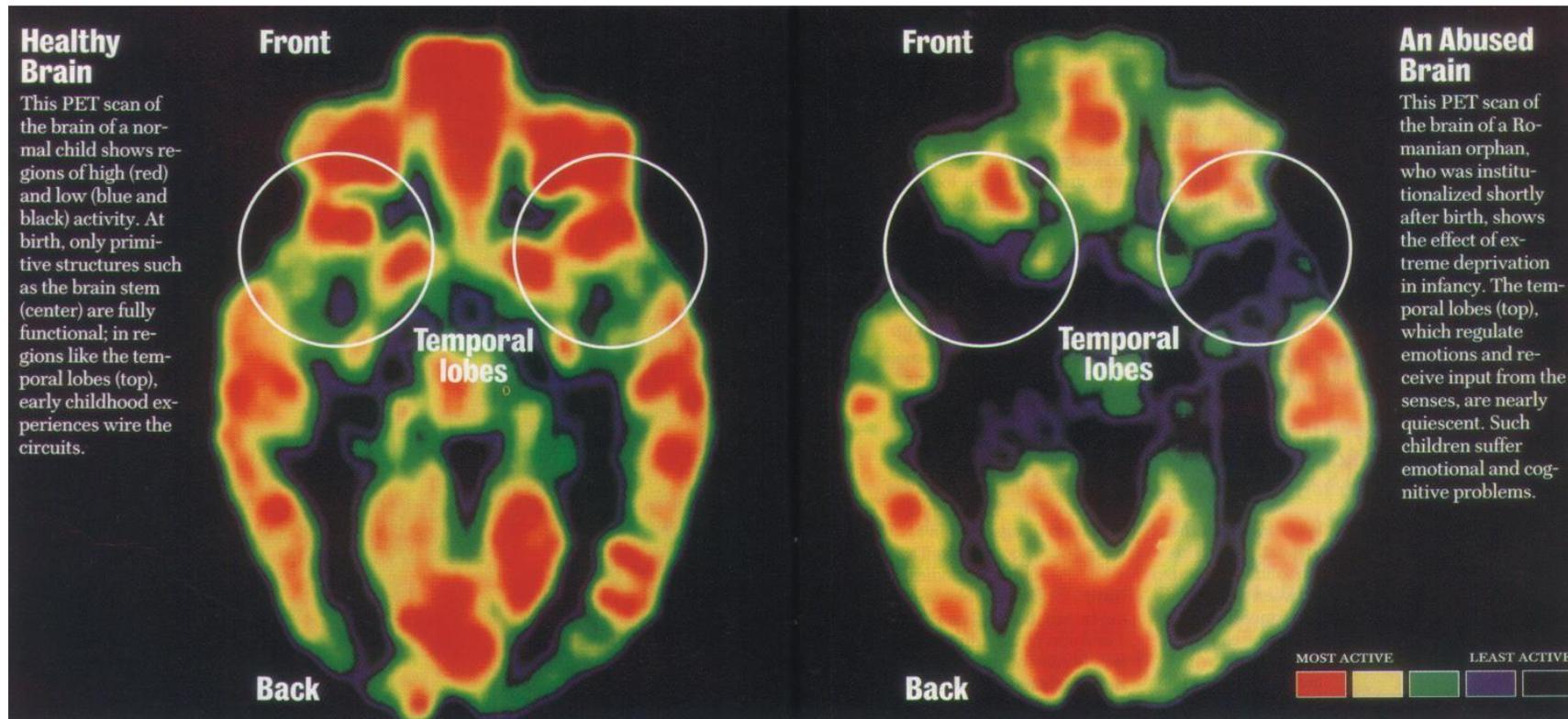
Research by Perry and others have shown that **physical violence affects the brain and central nervous system**, resulting in increased flight/fight, aggressiveness and more :

<http://www.childtrauma.org>

Moreover, the frequency, severity and number of types of child maltreatment clearly have a cumulative or “dose-response” relationship to the likelihood or severity of adverse consequences or disturbances. ¹

MRI showing actual effects of child abuse on the child's brain

Source: R. Anda M.D.



Why is spanking related to so many adverse effects: Continued

In addition to the effects on the developing brain and CNS:

As Straus and others note, much hitting occurs while children are infants/toddlers - **a time when the deepest layers of personality are being formed.**

As Alice Miller (1981; 1990) says, since the child cannot react with anger toward the parent because the child loves the parent, depends on the parent and knows it would only make the parent more violent, this unexpressed anger is suppressed and transformed into rage/hatred against self (e.g., depression) or against a substitute person (e.g., aggression against a sibling, other child or later a spouse).

CP and adverse effects: why do parents keep spanking?

Given the many adverse effects of spanking, why do parents keep hitting?

Part of the problem is that *our society tends not to be evidence-based*, parents or professionals.

For example, “**expert reviews of child abuse and neglect field services suggest... that most field services provided to abused children and their families are not based on any clear evidence that the services actually work.**” (Chaffin & Friedrich 2004: 1098)

Also, even when confronted by data on the long-term harm of CP, *many adults are resistant because of the changes in their brain/CNS, personality formation, defense mechanisms and modeling that resulted from their own abuse* which made it easier to survive as a child but very difficult to change as adults, thus perpetuating the cycle of child violence across generations.

Most critically, *children are not granted human rights* under the law to equal protection from violence; parents have no incentive to change, similar to any dominant group.

CP: a human rights approach

Researchers in the field are clear that the data are in! **We do *not* need any more research to show that CP is harmful to children, the adults they become and society they live in**, anymore than we need more data that smoking is related to lung cancer or that hitting wives is harmful to women.

Also while helpful, **we do not need to provide non-violent alternatives to parents to raise their children *before* we insist that *it is never ok to hit a child***, anymore than we needed to provide non-violent alternatives to batterers before we insisted that it was never ok to hit his wife.

Words such as family 'privacy' 'preservation' 'sanctity' ignore the very real power differences and risks of violence of wives compared to husbands and children compared to parents in the "*family*." **We must be alert to challenge any concept that promotes violence against children** as we have and continue to do for women.

CP: a human rights approach

Finally, even if the data were not as compelling as they are, we as a society, each individual, must *stand against all violence against children* because **it is the right thing to do**, just as standing against violence against women, when husbands could 'discipline' their wives, and standing against violence against all minority groups, has been and is the right thing to do.

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." — Nelson Mandela

Select References

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Straus, Murray A. (2008, February 28). "Corporal punishment of children and sexual behavior problems: results from four studies." Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Summit Conference on Violence and Abuse in Interpersonal Relationship, Bethesda, Maryland.

Suggested References/Websites

Websites with information and free publications to download:

Dr. Murray Straus, Family Research Laboratory, UNH: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/cp.htm>
or <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/CP-Empirical.htm>

The Center for Effective Discipline: <http://www.stophitting.com/>

The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children:
<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/>

Brain/CNS Changes from Child Abuse & Neglect”: Dr Perry: <http://www.childtrauma.org>