



## THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SOUTH CAROLINA

PO Box 8453, Columbia, SC, 29202, (803) 251-2726, [www.lwvsc.org](http://www.lwvsc.org)

### **AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT**

*By Robin-Kimbrough-Melton, JD, LWVSC Director, Criminal/Juvenile Justice*

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In summary, it cannot be concluded that *all* children who are spanked will turn out to be aggressive, delinquent or have mental health problems. But there is also no reason to believe that corporal punishment by itself teaches children right from wrong or that it deters them from misbehaving over the long-term. The following is an overview of the research literature.

#### **Parental Discipline**

- Elizabeth Gershoff, PhD, (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of all studies from 1938 to 2001 that examined the association between parental corporal punishment and child behaviors and experience. She found that spanking by parents was related to 10 negative behaviors. The negative behaviors include aggression, anti-social behavior, and mental health problems.

In response to her critique of corporal punishment, three other psychologists defended mild to moderate spanking of children ages 2-6 as a viable disciplinary measure but advised parents with abusive tendencies to avoid spanking altogether.

However, as Gershoff (2002) notes, empirical findings on the short-term effectiveness of physical punishment in achieving child compliance are mixed. A meta-analysis (which is a method of research synthesis that statistically combines existing data to discern the average strength of the findings) of five studies examining children's immediate compliance with physical punishment found a positive effect on average. However, the findings were highly inconsistent in that one of the studies found no effect and another found that children were *less* likely to comply when physically punished. In one of these studies, the authors concluded that "there was no support for the necessity of the physical punishment" to change children's behavior. (Day & Roberts, 1983; Roberts & Powers, 1990).

- Research also does not support the notion that physical punishment promotes long-term, internalized compliance. 85 percent of the studies included in Gershoff's (2002) meta-analysis found physical punishment to be associated with *less* moral internalization of norms for appropriate behavior and long-term compliance. Similarly, the more children receive physical punishment, the more defiant they are (Gershoff, 2002) and the less likely they are to empathize with others (Lopez, Bonenberger, & Schneider, 2001).

- Gershoff (2002) also found that physical punishment leads children to engage in more, not less, aggressive and antisocial behaviors over time. Physical punishment has been associated with more physical aggression, verbal aggression, physical fighting and bullying behaviors, antisocial behavior and behavior problems generally (Gershoff, 2008).

Proponents of corporal punishment have argued that it is not the punishment that causes children to be defiant, but rather that children are defiant so they elicit more punishment. Gershoff's studies show that defiant children do elicit more physical punishment. Unfortunately, the more children are physically punished, the more aggressive and defiant they become.

- A task force of the American Psychological Association conducted a 5-year review of the scientific literature on corporal punishment and concluded that "parents and caregivers should reduce and potentially eliminate their use of any physical punishment as a disciplinary measure" (as reported in Scientific American, January 2010)
- A 2006 study compared the attitudes and intentions of children between the ages of 10 and 15 to use violence to resolve conflicts and their parent's expectations and use of corporal punishment. The study found that children whose parents used physical discipline were more likely to use violence (fighting, bullying, and victimization of others) to resolve conflict (Ohene, Ireland, McNeely, and Borowsky, 2006).
- Not only does physical punishment not achieve parents' intended goals, it places children at risk for other adverse outcomes or "side effects." Studies have shown that children who are physically punished are more likely to suffer mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, alcohol and drug problems and general psychological maladjustment. These children also are more likely to have poorer relationships with their parents, and they are more likely to report hitting a dating partner or spouse than children who have not been physically punished (Gershoff, 2008; Parke, 1977; Azrin & Holz, 1966).
- A study published in 2009 found that children who were spanked at age 1 had more aggressive behaviors at age 2 and performed worse on cognitive measures at age 3 although the effects were small (Berlin, et. al, 2009).
- Research has shown that children who are spanked by their parents are 7 times more likely to be severely assaulted (punched or kicked) by their parents than are children who are not physically punished (Clement, Bouchard, Jette & Laferriere, 2000).

### **Corporal Punishment in Schools**

- In 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that spanking or paddling by schools is lawful where it has not been outlawed (Ingraham v. Wright).
- 20 States, including South Carolina, have laws that still permit corporal punishment in the schools
- Overall the use of corporal punishment has been diminishing in schools in favor of alternative forms of discipline.

- More than 40 national organizations in the U.S. are on record in opposition to corporal punishment in the schools. These include the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Humane Association, American Medical Association, American Public Health Association, and numerous school-related organizations.

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