ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Corporal Punishment

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Introduction

One of the key responsibilities of parents and teachers is to promote desired behaviours in children and to handle misbehaviours when they occur. Parents and teachers have many options for managing children's behaviours, ranging from proactive guidance aimed at preventing misbehaviour in the first place to reactive methods that punish misbehaviour after it occurs. Arguably, the most controversial way that some parents and teachers attempt to manage children's behaviour is through corporal punishment, which has been defined as adult use of physical force intended to cause pain, but not injury, to correct or control a child's inappropriate behaviour.[1] This article focuses primarily on parents' rather than teachers' use of corporal punishment because more children experience corporal punishment at home than in school and because the majority of research has focused on parents' use of corporal punishment. However, many of the issues described apply equally to corporal punishment in home and school settings.

Subject

Corporal punishment is widely used by caregivers around the world. In one study of parents' use of corporal punishment with 2- to 4-year-old children in 30,470 families from 24 low- and middle-income countries, 63% of primary caregivers reported that someone in their household had

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corporally punished their child in the last month.[2] Across these 24 countries, 29% of caregivers reported that they believe it is necessary to use corporal punishment to rear a child properly.[2] In a study of 1,417 families with 7- to 9-year-old children in 9 countries, over half of the children had been corporally punished in the last month.[3] Even with this older sample, 17% of parents across countries believed it was necessary to use corporal punishment to rear their child.[3]

Despite this widespread use of corporal punishment, there is a wide range in attitudes regarding and use of corporal punishment between and within countries. In terms of attitudes, between 27% and 38% of the variance in caregivers' beliefs about the necessity of using corporal punishment can be explained by the country in which parents live.[2] In terms of use, "flogging" or beating a child has been reported to be the most common response to child misbehaviour in Jamaica.[4] Likewise, 40% of Mongolian caregivers reported seeing someone in their home beat a child in the last month, and 44% of Gambian caregivers reported witnessing a child being hit with an object in the last month.[2] At the other extreme, in 1979, Sweden became the first country to outlaw parents' use of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is now legally banned in schools in over 100 countries and is banned in all settings (including at home and in schools) in 63 countries.[5] In some countries that have banned corporal punishment, attitudes regarding corporal punishment began changing prior to the implementation of the legal bans in ways that enabled such bans to be passed; after the bans, additional changes in attitudes and behaviours have occurred.[6] In other countries, legal bans were passed with the goal of changing attitudes and behaviours. There is variability between countries in how much parents' and teachers' behaviour adheres to the legal bans. Despite notable between-country differences in parents' use of corporal punishment, there are also within-country differences in parents' use of corporal punishment that can be accounted for by a variety of socio-demographic, child and parent factors.

Problems

Corporal punishment has become an increasingly problematic global human rights issue. In 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. To date, all countries except the United States have ratified the CRC. Countries that have ratified the CRC are obliged to examine their policies, laws and cultural norms to ensure that they uphold children's right to protection.[7] The UN defines physical violence (including corporal punishment) toward children as a breach of their rights under the CRC and has set a goal of putting "an end to adult justification of violence against children, whether accepted as

‘tradition’ or disguised as ‘discipline.’”[8(p5)] The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals guiding the international agenda through 2030 have reiterated the goal to “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.” Progress toward meeting the goal is operationalized as the percentage of children who experienced any corporal punishment or psychological aggression (e.g., calling the child lazy, stupid, or other insults) by caregivers in the past month.[9]

In addition to corporal punishment being a human rights issue, it has been found to be ineffective in bringing about desired behaviours and is a risk factor for a wide range of child adjustment problems.[10,11] For example, children who have been corporally punished are at greater risk for externalizing behaviour problems such as aggression and delinquency as well as internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety.[10,11]

Research Context

At least three factors are important in describing the research context of studies on corporal punishment. One factor is the age of the child being punished. Parents’ use of corporal punishment peaks during the toddler and preschool years and declines thereafter.[12] In understanding prevalence rates of corporal punishment as well as how corporal punishment affects children’s adjustment, it is important to consider the age of the children involved.

Second, corporal punishment is multidimensional, and its assessment can involve understanding how frequently parents use corporal punishment, how severely it is administered (e.g., with a bare hand or with an object), and the context in which it is administered (e.g., pervasively or as a last resort after attempts to manage behaviour through non-physical means have failed). Prevalence levels that indicate what proportion of parents have ever used corporal punishment generally are high (e.g., over 90% of American parents have used corporal punishment at some point).[12] The frequency with which corporal punishment is used varies by child age.[3,12] Frequency, severity and pervasiveness of corporal punishment are related to more child adjustment problems.

The third factor in understanding the research context of studies of corporal punishment is that studies vary in their methodological rigour. For example, studies vary in measures of the frequency, severity and nature of corporal punishment; whether they include convenience or representative samples; whether they are cross-sectional or longitudinal; whether they use

current or retrospective data; and whether they control for confounding variables that could provide alternate explanations for links between corporal punishment and children's adjustment. These methodological features of studies have implications for the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Studies that statistically control for early child behaviour problems when examining links between corporal punishment and future child behaviour problems, for instance, can examine whether corporal punishment leads to an increase in child behaviour problems above and beyond early behaviour problems that may have elicited corporal punishment.

Key Research Questions

Research has addressed four key questions regarding parents' use of corporal punishment. First, how does corporal punishment affect children's future behavioural, cognitive and social adjustment? Second, through what mechanisms does corporal punishment affect children's future adjustment? Third, does it affect all children in similar ways, or do certain characteristics of children or settings in which it is used make corporal punishment more or less detrimental for some children than others? Fourth, what factors predict whether parents will use corporal punishment?

Recent Research Results

A large body of research suggests that experiencing corporal punishment is related to a range of future adjustment problems. In a classic meta-analysis of 88 studies, corporal punishment was found to predict more aggression, delinquent and antisocial behaviour, mental health problems, and risk of becoming physically abused during childhood as well as less moral internalization and lower quality of parent-child relationships.[10] Furthermore, experiencing corporal punishment during childhood was found to relate to more adulthood aggression, criminal and antisocial behaviour, mental health problems, and later abuse of one's spouse or own child.[10] In the meta-analysis, the only positive child outcome predicted by corporal punishment was children's immediate compliance.[10]

Corporal punishment also predicts a number of cognitive problems, including lower IQ scores.[13,14] However, these findings remain controversial, with some researchers arguing that the link between corporal punishment and child adjustment problems results not because corporal punishment causes more problematic child outcomes but because children with more behaviour problems elicit more of all kinds of discipline, including corporal punishment, from their parents.[15,16]

These researchers also point to the methodological limitations of research on corporal punishment (e.g., mothers reporting on both their behaviour and the child's behaviour leading to inflation of correlations because the information is from a single source) to argue that the existing evidence is not sufficient to establish a causal link between parents' use of corporal punishment and children's subsequent adjustment problems.[15,16] On the other hand, given the many risks of corporal punishment and the lack of evidence that corporal punishment improves children's behaviours (which would presumably be parents' goal in using corporal punishment), the risks of using corporal punishment appear to be too great to ignore.

There is some evidence that one of the major mechanisms through which corporal punishment affects children's future adjustment is through children's perceptions of their parents' warmth and acceptance versus hostility and rejection.[17] If parents' use of corporal punishment leads children to perceive their parents as being hostile and rejecting, then those perceptions of rejection and hostility will lead to an escalation of children's behaviour problems and a decrease in the quality of their social relationships. However, if children continue to perceive their parents as being warm and accepting, then parents' use of corporal punishment may not lead to children's adjustment problems. One problem with corporal punishment is that parents often use it as an angry response executed in the heat of the moment. For example, 85% of the middle-class, primarily European American parents in one study reported experiencing moderate to high levels of anger, remorse and agitation when dealing with their children's misbehaviour.[18] In another study, 54% of mothers in an American sample reported that in over half of the times in which they had used corporal punishment, it was the wrong response to have used.[19] If children perceive that their parents are out of control and lashing out at them in anger, these cognitive and emotional responses to corporal punishment could lead to more problematic child adjustment in the future.[20]

Another mechanism through which corporal punishment affects children's adjustment is by altering the way that children cognitively process social information. For example, compared to children who are not corporally punished, those who are corporally punished are more likely to interpret other people's behaviour as having hostile intent, are more likely to generate aggressive solutions in provocative social situations, and are more likely to evaluate aggression as being a good way to act in social situations.[21] Each of these cognitive biases in turn increases the likelihood that children will themselves behave aggressively.[22]

Not all children respond to corporal punishment in the same way, and several factors may alter the way in which corporal punishment is related to children's adjustment. One of these factors is cultural normativeness. In a study of six countries (China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines and Thailand), mothers' more frequent use of corporal punishment was related to higher levels of child aggression and anxiety in all six countries, but the association between corporal punishment and child adjustment problems was strongest in countries where the use of corporal punishment was non-normative and weakest in countries where the use of corporal punishment was normative.[23] Researchers also have found some evidence that corporal punishment is more detrimental if it is used with children younger than two years of age or older than 13 years of age, if it is used more often than once a week, and if it is harsh (e.g., using objects rather than using a bare hand).[24]

Although most research has focused on corporal punishment as a predictor of child adjustment problems, there is a smaller body of research that has investigated factors that predict whether parents use corporal punishment. These studies have found that demographic, child behaviour, and parent factors affect whether parents use corporal punishment. For example, parents are more likely to use corporal punishment if they have children with difficult temperaments or have high levels of family stress.[25] Particular cultural contexts also make it more or less likely that parents will use corporal punishment. For instance, according to ethnographic data collected by anthropologists in 186 preindustrial societies, corporal punishment is more prevalent in societies with higher levels of social stratification and with undemocratic political decision making, perhaps because parents may use corporal punishment to socialize children to live in a society with power inequalities where submissive and obedient child behaviours are particularly valued.[26] Furthermore, several religious and cultural groups endorse corporal punishment through adages such as "spare the rod, spoil the child."[27]

Overall, the research literature can best be characterized as demonstrating that children's behaviour problems and parents' use of corporal punishment should be regarded as part of a reciprocal system in which children's behaviour problems elicit corporal punishment, which then leads to escalation in children's behaviour problems in a coercive cycle that perpetuates over time.[28,29] Therefore, research that focuses both on factors that predict parents' use of corporal punishment as well as child outcomes that result from parents' use of corporal punishment better capture the full complexity of this bidirectional system. In addition, research that includes mechanisms that help account for these associations over time and that attempts to understand

other factors that may alter the links between corporal punishment and child adjustment are important to advancing research on corporal punishment.

Research Gaps

Despite much progress in understanding the complex associations between corporal punishment and children's adjustment, the research still has gaps, just one of which will be highlighted here. Genetic and environmental factors interact to shape behavioural outcomes. To date, few studies have attempted to understand in what ways genetic factors may interact with the experience of corporal punishment to alter children's adjustment. One study demonstrated that risk of delinquent behaviour conferred by a particular monoamine oxidase A genotype was exacerbated by the experience of corporal punishment.[30] Genetically informative studies will be important in the future both to disentangle genetic and environmental influences on children's adjustment and to understand how they act in conjunction with one another.

Conclusions

A large proportion of parents use corporal punishment to try to manage their children's behaviour, but a preponderance of evidence indicates that corporal punishment has the unintended consequence of increasing rather than decreasing children's future behaviour problems. Children's cognitive and emotional perceptions regarding their experience of corporal punishment serve as mechanisms linking parents' use of corporal punishment with children's future adjustment problems, and contextual factors such as cultural normativeness can strengthen or weaken links between corporal punishment and children's adjustment. Societal level factors and children's behaviour problems also influence whether parents use corporal punishment.

There are two main problems with the use of corporal punishment. The first problem is highlighted by scientific research that demonstrates no benefits of corporal punishment in terms of promoting long-term desired behaviours and many risks related to children's adjustment. The second problem is a moral and ethical one rather than scientific one in that eliminating violence against children, including the use of corporal punishment, has increasingly become a focus of the international community in an effort to ensure children's right to protection as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

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Numerous professional societies have advocated for the abolishment of corporal punishment. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement that the use of corporal punishment is “minimally effective in the short-term and not effective in the long-term,” and recommended that “Parents be encouraged and assisted in the development of methods other than spanking in response to undesired behaviour.”[31(pp1-2)] Beyond the level of parents, the UN, the World Health Organization and other international bodies have been campaigning for countries to ban the use of corporal punishment in all settings.[32]

In part as a result of their obligation to promote children’s right to protection from violence as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, countries have increasingly incorporated educational and behavioural interventions related to corporal punishment into their national parenting programs.[33] These programs have taken a variety of forms. For example, one approach has been to implement preventive interventions to reduce parental stress, substance use, and poverty and to increase parents’ access to supportive services in an attempt to reduce their use of corporal punishment.[34] Another approach has been to provide parents with information related to the risks of corporal punishment and information about alternative, non-violent discipline methods. For example, in the Philippines, Parent Effectiveness Service is a multifaceted parenting program that includes information designed to help parents manage the behaviour of their young children.[33] Yet another approach has been to launch public awareness campaigns as part of national strategies to reduce parents’ use of corporal punishment. For instance, information about the ban of corporal punishment was printed on milk cartons in Sweden at the time of the initial legislation.[6] Yet other interventions have focused on decreasing teachers’ use of corporal punishment and increasing positive discipline in school settings.[35]

Given both the widespread use of corporal punishment and the widespread belief in the necessity of using corporal punishment in some countries, efforts to eliminate violence against children will need to alter the belief that corporal punishment is necessary to rear a child as well as provide caregivers with nonviolent alternatives to replace corporal punishment. The challenge will be to work with adults to devise alternate child behaviour management strategies that do not rely on the use of corporal punishment.

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