
Physical Abuse

Ricky LeTourneau “was disciplined to death” by foster mother Deborah Wolfenden after she lost control of her temper and beat him in January 1990. . . . [She] lost the battle for control. She lost control of herself. She lost control over her temper and her ability to discipline reasonably.

(The Times Record, Brunswick, Maine, April 27, 1992, p. 1)

Ricky’s death illustrates the tendency for physical discipline to become physical abuse. There is a fine line between physical abuse and legal, socially approved spanking and other modes of disciplining children. A number of leading researchers argue that spanking and other legal forms of corporal punishment of children are some of the major causes of physical abuse. Despite this, the idea that spanking increases the risk that a parent will go too far and cross the line to physical abuse has been largely ignored. Corporal punishment is not mentioned as a possible cause of physical abuse in the many publications of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect or in reports of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993). The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse recommended that federal funds be denied to organizations that permit corporal punishment of children, and the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect (a major national voluntary organization) mounted a campaign against corporal punishment by teachers. Neither organization has said that parents should never hit children.1

These omissions illustrate the extent to which corporal punishment has been ignored by major agencies concerned with the

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prevention and treatment of child abuse. Is the same omission made in scholarly books on physical abuse? This chapter will look at that question.

Past research on the link between corporal punishment and physical abuse also will be examined. We need to see if corporal punishment has been ignored because the research evidence is not very convincing. We will also identify some of the processes that might link corporal punishment to physical abuse. Finally, the chapter will describe a study to test the possible link between corporal punishment and physical abuse.

Another Conspiracy of Silence

Chapter 1 showed that the authors of textbooks on child development and advice books for parents almost totally ignore the research on corporal punishment. They are not the only ones. The authors of books on the causes and prevention of physical abuse also largely ignore corporal punishment, even though its connection with physical abuse has been pointed out by highly respected social scientists for many years. As long ago as 1970, David Gil wrote:

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 aimed at gradually changing this particular aspect of the prevailing child-rearing philosophy, 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 (p. 141).

Others (Feshbach, 1980; Gelles and Straus, 1988; Haeuser, 1991; Maurer, 1976; Steinmetz and Straus, 1974; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980; and Williams, 1983) also concluded that reducing corporal punishment is essential to reducing physical abuse.

The authors just mentioned, as well as others such as Greven (1991), argue that physical abuse is rooted in cultural norms that make many types of violence acceptable or desirable, including, of course, corporal punishment. Doing something about physical abuse, therefore, requires changing the larger social context, including corporal punishment. Zigler and Hall (1989), for example, say that “ultimate control of the abuse problem lies in changing our societal attitudes towards and acceptance of aggression as an appropriate mechanism for problem solving.” Bybee (1979) argues that the strong support for corporal punishment sets the psychological stage for other types of violence and escalation of that violence. Parke (1982, p. 39) concludes that “just as the availability of and prior experiences in using a gun make murder more likely under conditions of stress and anger, so previously experiencing and utilizing violent child-rearing tactics make child abuse more likely.” Daro’s discussion of the “environmental theory” of child abuse (1988, p. 49) holds that social tolerance of corporal punishment is a likely precondition of physical abuse.

Despite the fact that these and other well-respected scholars have argued that corporal punishment increases the risk factor of physical abuse, this idea is missing in the publications of leading agencies concerned with child abuse. To find out if the same holds true for books on child abuse, we analyzed 120 of them (see Appendix D for the list). More than half (57 percent) had nothing on spanking as a risk factor for physical abuse. An additional 22 percent, although mentioning spanking as a possible risk factor, did not discuss whether parents should avoid spanking children. Nine percent recommended avoiding physical discipline, but qualified it by phrases such as “if possible.” Only 12 percent of the 120 books unambiguously stated that corporal punishment is never appropriate.

The Research Evidence

Perhaps corporal punishment is absent from books and articles on preventing physical abuse because the research evidence is not convincing. Let’s look at that evidence.

Corporal Punishment by Abusive Parents

Lynch and Roberts (1982) studied 33 physically abusive families and found that corporal punishment was the most commonly used means of punishment, with 72 percent of the families frequently
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hitting their children. But since they did not have a comparison group of non-abusive parents, there is no way of knowing if the abusive parents used more corporal punishment than other parents.

Other studies however, did use comparison groups and found that abusive parents tend to use corporal punishment more than non-abusive parents. Smith (1975) compared 214 abusive and 76 non-abusive parents and found that 50 percent of abusive mothers and 37 percent of abusive fathers frequently used corporal punishment on their children, compared to 13 percent of the non-abusive mothers and 10 percent of the non-abusive fathers. Similarly, Oates (1980) compared 56 abusive and 56 non-abusive parents and found that 54 percent of abusive mothers frequently used corporal punishment versus only 11 percent of the non-abusive mothers.

Not all studies have supported the idea that abusive parents use corporal punishment more than non-abusive parents. Elmer (1967) compared 11 abusive and 12 non-abusive families and concluded that whipping and spanking were the most frequent forms of discipline in both the abusive and non-abusive families. Baher et al., (1976) found that of 25 abusive mothers, 12 used corporal punishment, which is probably less than the general population rate. Trickett and Kuczynski (1986) compared 20 abusive and 20 non-abusive families and found that corporal punishment was the main form of discipline used by both abusive and non-abusive parents. They found, though, that 40 percent of abusive parents, but no non-abusive parents, used severe forms of corporal punishment, such as striking child with an object or in the face, pulling hair, or spanking the child with pants down.

**Corporal Punishment in the Childhood of Parents**

This approach is based on the escalation theory, but tests it indirectly. It assumes that the more parents were themselves hit as children, the more likely they are to be heavy users of corporal punishment on their own children, increasing the risk that it will escalate into physical abuse. Three studies by Straus and his colleagues have taken this approach. Straus (1980) studied the parents in the first National Family Violence Survey (see Appendix B). Moore and Straus (1987) studied a sample of 958 New Hampshire parents, while Straus and Smith (1990, p. 360) studied the Hispanic-Ameri-
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**Non-Compliance and Escalation**

Clinical work with abusive parents has shown that much physical abuse starts as an attempt to correct and control through corporal punishment. When the child does not comply or, in the case of older children, hits back and curses the parent, the resulting frustration and rage leads some parents to increase the severity of the physical attack and kick, punch, or hit with an object. Kempe and Kempe (1978), for example say:

> [Abusive parents] ... may be discouraged when spanking obviously brings no result, but they truly see no alternative and grow depressed both by their own behavior and their babies responses. Helplessly, they continue in the same vicious circle: punishment, deteriorating relationship, frustration, and further punishment (p. 27).

Wolfe et al. (1981) call this sequence "child-precipitated" abuse because it begins when a child misbehaves. If corporal punishment is not effective, abusive parents increase the severity of the punishment until the point where a child may be injured. Devenson (1982) and Marion (1982) reached similar conclusions on the basis of clinical evidence. Marion also points out that corporal punishment creates a false sense of successful discipline because of the temporary end it puts to undesirable behavior. She also cites research that shows the corporal punishment tends to increase undesirable behavior in children. Besides the clinically based conclusions we just mentioned, there has been some research on this increasing intensity, or escalation. Frude and Gross (1980) studied 111 mothers and found that 40 percent were worried that they could possibly hurt their children.
These tended to be the mothers who used corporal punishment frequently. Gil (1970) studied 1,380 abused children and found that 63 percent of the abuse incidents were an “immediate or delayed response to specific [misbehavior] of the child.”

The research by Kadushin and Martin (1981) on 66 abusive parents is probably the most direct test of the escalation theory. They describe a number of specific situations in which escalation occurs, such as a child who fails to respond to the punishment, attempts to fight back or run away, or the parent who becomes frustrated and then enraged when using corporal punishment, as in the following two examples:

Then I started to spank her and she wouldn’t cry—stubborn, she’s just like I am, she wouldn’t cry—like it was having no effect, like she was defying me. So I spanked her all the harder (p. 173).

It all started when Camille [age 14] slammed the door on her little sister’s leg. Camille was in the bathroom and realized there was no toilet tissue. She asked her little sister, the 9 year old, to get some tissue, which she did do, and apparently her sister wasn’t rushing out of the bathroom fast enough and Camille kind of pushed the door, and in the process, she caught her sister’s leg in the door, and with the child screaming as she did from the pain, it got me very angered ... And I think at that moment I lost control completely, and I went over and I swatted Camille with my—you know, my hand, and Camille turned around and she swung back to strike me, which she did do and that got me even more aggravated. And before I know what really was going on, I had pounded Camille several times. She had run a tub of bath water to take a bath, and suddenly I realized I had knocked Camille into the bathtub. And apparently I had struck her in the face, which by no means was intentional. But she had a swollen eye, and she didn’t say anything to me that night (p. 175).

Evaluating the Evidence

Three of the five studies that compared abusive and non-abusive parents found that abusing parents were more prone to use corporal punishment or severe corporal punishment. Three out of five studies is far from conclusive. On the other hand, the clinical evidence, the indirect tests of the escalation theory by Straus et al. and the only scientific study that directly tested the idea that corporal punishment tends to escalate into physical abuse (Kadushin and Martin, 1981) strongly supported the findings of the three studies.

A hard-nosed evaluation would point out that there has not been a definitive experimental study showing that corporal punishment causes physical abuse. On the other hand, that also can be said about every other presumed cause. The research evidence on corporal punishment is as strong or stronger than the evidence on other causes of physical abuse that have been studied, such as poverty or teenaged motherhood (Connelly and Straus, 1992). Yet I have never heard or read a demand for definitive experimental evidence before teenaged motherhood or poverty can be considered causes of abuse.

At a 1993 conference to plan a national agenda on reducing family violence, many causes of family violence and how to prevent them were discussed. When I brought up corporal punishment, there was an instant demand for me to cite the evidence—something that had not been requested in the previous day and a half of the conference during which many potential causes of family violence were mentioned. I then outlined the evidence just presented and also the results of the research in this chapter. The rejoinder essentially was, It’s all correlational evidence, and We need evidence based on randomized field trials. I agreed, but then pointed out that none of the strategies for preventing child abuse mentioned in the previous day and a half had been tested by a randomized trial experiment, yet no one objected. Those who demanded experimental evidence on whether reducing corporal punishment will reduce the rate of physical abuse were correct. Their error was in not demanding the same level of evidence for other presumed causes of physical abuse.

Reasons for Ignoring Corporal Punishment

The evidence on corporal punishment is as good (or no worse) than the evidence on other presumed causes of physical abuse. In addition, some respected scholars have concluded that spanking children is a major cause of physical abuse? Why, despite this, is corporal punishment...
nored in books and literature on child abuse. We will consider three possibilities.

Contradicts Deeply Embedded Cultural Norms

Probably the main reason for ignoring the idea that corporal punishment is one of the causes of physical abuse is because the concept conflicts with cultural norms supporting corporal punishment. These norms influence social scientists, child-abuse professionals, parent educators, and parents. Almost everyone is against teenagers having children regardless of whether it is a cause of child abuse, so there is consensus that reducing teenaged pregnancy would be a good way to reduce physical abuse and other social problems, such as welfare dependency. Corporal punishment, however, is something that 84 percent of the population thinks is necessary. So, both the general public and social scientists demand definitive evidence before concluding that corporal punishment is one of the causes of child abuse. At the national conference mentioned earlier, many potential causes were discussed. The only cause of physical abuse about which questions were raised because of lack of experimental evidence was corporal punishment. There seems to be a double standard concerning the evidence that is needed, and this leads many social scientists and almost all agencies concerned with preventing or treating physical abuse to dismiss corporal punishment. The same applies to agencies that fund research, and that reduces the chances of more definitive research being done.

There are many indicators of the degree to which corporal punishment is a culturally expected aspect of parent behavior:

- Corporal punishment, as defined in Chapter 1, is legal in every state of the U.S.
- At least 84 percent of Americans believe that “a good hard spanking is sometimes necessary” (Chapter 2).
- More than 90 percent of American parents use corporal punishment on toddlers (Chapter 2), and more than half continue this into the early teen years (Chapter 3).
- The laws permitting corporal punishment are not forgotten features of an earlier period. The child-abuse legislation passed in all 50 states of the U.S. in the 1960s reconfirmed them by explicitly excluding use of corporal punishment from what is prohibited. Ironically, if the theory is correct that corporal punishment increases the risk of physical abuse, this legislation may have put children at increased risk of physical abuse by legally reinforcing the traditional appropriateness of corporal punishment.
- A study by Carson (1986) found that non-spanking parents tend to be perceived as ineffective and their children as badly behaved. Their neighbors, friends, and relatives offer indirect and sometimes direct suggestions to spank, such as, “What that child needs is a good spanking.”

Misperception of Typical Abuse Cases

Another reason corporal punishment may be ignored as a cause of physical abuse is a distorted perception of physical abuse. This perception comes from the fact that newspapers and television—to attract more readers or viewers—tend to show only cases involving sadistic and mentally ill parents who burn, maim, and kill children. By contrast, 95 percent of physical-abuse cases do not involve severe injuries (Garbarino, 1986) and typically are rooted in corporal punishment rather than psychopathology. This matches the conclusion reached by pioneer child-abuse researchers such as Gelles (1973), and Kempe and Kempe (1978), who argued that psychopathology is involved in no more than 10 percent of physical-abuse cases. It is possible that the horrifying image of extreme but not typical cases diverts attention from the typical case, which is most often rooted in corporal punishment.

Absence of Linking Processes Theory

Still another reason books and agencies concerned with child abuse would ignore corporal punishment might be if there were no satisfactory explanations of how or why corporal punishment leads to physical abuse. Without an explanation, people tend to think the idea is preposterous. But there are, in fact, numerous theories about the link between corporal punishment and child abuse. Every author who has written about corporal punishment as a cause of
physical abuse has offered an explanation. We have already considered one of these theories—the idea that much physical abuse occurs when parents escalate the level of the attack when their children continue to misbehave or strike back at them. The following section reviews three additional theories and presents a theoretical model integrating all four.

Theories that Might Explain the Link

Cultural Spillover Theory

The idea behind the cultural spillover theory is that cultural norms that make violence legitimate for socially approved purposes, such as corporal punishment of children or capital punishment of murderers, tend to be applied to non-legitimate purposes, such as use of physical force and violence to obtain sex, namely, rape (Baron and Straus, 1987, 1989).

The results of a study of 958 New Hampshire parents are consistent with the cultural spillover theory because they show that parents who approved of corporal punishment had a much higher rate of going beyond that and severely assaulting their children than did parents who did not approve of corporal punishment (Straus, 1991). However, a study of 171 abusive parents by Shapiro (1979) did not support cultural spillover theory because a majority of the parents did not believe that spanking is the best form of discipline.

Depression

Another theory that might explain the link between corporal punishment and physical abuse involves depression. Chapter 5 showed that the more corporal punishment a person experienced as an adolescent, the greater the chance of being depressed as an adult. At first this may seem to contradict the long tradition of conceptualizing depression and suicide as internally directed aggression, with some people directing aggression inward and others outward in hostile acts towards others. But recent research shows that many depressed people do both (Berkowitz, 1993). So, depression could be a link between having been a victim of corporal punishment and physically abusing a child.

Marital Violence

The third theory was suggested by research showing that the more corporal punishment experienced as a child, the greater the chance of physically assaulting a spouse later in life (Straus, 1991; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Putting this together with research showing that marital violence greatly increases the chance of physical abuse (Kaufman-Kantor, 1990; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980) suggests that violence between the parents is the link between corporal punishment and physical abuse of children.

The three theories just described and the escalation theory presented earlier probably complement each other. Chart 6–1 brings them together in a model that can be tested using a powerful statistical technique called “path analysis” (see Appendix C). This model was used to guide the research in the balance of this chapter. Specifically, we tested the idea that part of the reason why corporal punishment increases the risk of physical abuse is because parents who were hit by their own parents tend to be more accepting of violence as a means of correcting wrongdoing, are more likely to be involved in a violent marriage, and are more likely to be depressed.²

Characteristics of Abusing Parents

Before using more complicated statistical methods, it is a good idea to compare parents who physically abused a child with those who did not. The table giving those statistics is in Appendix C. It shows that, consistent with the theory, the abusing parents:

CHART 6–1. Why does corporal punishment lead to child abuse?
• Were more often hit by their own parents
• Had more symptoms of depression
• Were more likely to believe that there are occasions when it would be all right for a husband to hit his wife or a wife to hit her husband
• Were more likely to have actually experienced marital violence

In addition, comparing the abusing parents to the non-abusing parents showed that the abusing parents:

• Were the same age as the non-abusing parents
• Were slightly lower in socioeconomic status
• Had substantially higher conflict with their spouses
• Were more likely to be a minority-group family
• Had somewhat more children living at home
• Had abused a somewhat younger child
• Were about equally divided between fathers and mothers

Each of the characteristics just listed could overlap with the four characteristics in the theory. If that is the case, one or more of them could be the “real” explanation. For example, abusing parents had more conflict with each other, and that might be the real cause. So some method is needed that can answer the question of whether corporal punishment makes a difference when the amount of conflict between the parents is held constant. Path analysis does just that. It tells us the extent to which corporal punishment makes a difference over and above the amount of conflict. It shows the net effect of corporal punishment after allowing for each of the variables just listed.

Corporal Punishment and Physical Abuse

The results of the path analysis are in Chart 6-2. Each of the arrows in the chart shows that there is a statistically dependable relationship between the variable at the left and the variable it points to. The coefficients (which range from 0 to 1), such as .13, show how strong the relationship is.

The top left arrow shows that corporal punishment experienced by parents is related to depression, as predicted (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed analysis of the links between corporal punishment and depression). The arrow at the top right shows that depression is related to physical abuse. The coefficient of .10 indicates that the connection between depression and physical abuse is almost as strong as the connection between corporal punishment and depression (.13).

At the middle of Chart 6-2, the arrow from “Corporal Punishment Experienced by Parents to Approval of Interpersonal Violence” shows that the more corporal punishment, the greater the approval of interpersonal violence. This in turn is related to physical abuse. The path coefficients of .09 and .07 are slightly lower than the other coefficients, which shows that whether parents approve of violence is somewhat less important than whether the abusing parent suffers from depression or whether there is violence between the parents.

At the bottom of Chart 6-2, the arrow between corporal punishment and “Couple Violence” (.12) shows that the more corporal punishment these parents were subjected to when they were adolescents, the more likely they are to end up in a violent marriage. This, combined with the path from “Couple Violence” to “Physical Abuse” shows that one of the reasons corporal punishment increases the chances of physical abuse is because it increases the chances of a violent marriage, and parents who are violent to each other are more likely to be violent to their children.

Finally, the arrow that goes directly from corporal punishment to physical abuse shows there is a connection between these two in addition to the connection through the three variables from the theory (depression, violent attitudes, and couple violence) and in addition to the seven control variables.
The path analysis clearly supports the theory that corporal punishment is related to physical abuse, even after many other variables are taken into consideration. The trouble is that path coefficients are not very clear to anyone except those who deal with these sorts of statistics every day. But Chart 6-3 may be clearer because rather than showing coefficients, it shows the percentage who physically abused their children. The top line is for fathers, the bottom dashed line is for mothers, and the center line is for both parents. The middle line is adjusted to hold constant all the other variables.

The most important point to note about Chart 6-3 is that the percent of parents who physically abused a child goes up strongly with increasing amounts of corporal punishment. The rate for parents who were not hit by their own parents—the "None" group at the left side—is high (about 7 percent), but not nearly as high as the rate of abuse by parents who were hit the most—the 30-or-more group at the right side (about 24 percent). So the chance of physically abusing a child is more than three times greater for parents who were hit the most when they were teenagers.

Several other things need to be mentioned about Chart 6-3. First, the lines for mothers and fathers separately are similar. That means corporal punishment has a similar effect on men and women.

Second, the relationship shown is a net effect, after controlling or standardizing for seven other variables.

Third, Chart 6-3 does not show that everyone who was hit a great deal as a teenager will abuse a child. On the contrary, although a rate of 24 percent is astounding, it also needs to be read the other way around—it shows that 76 percent of parents who were hit a lot did not seriously attack their children. The opposite is also true. Just because parents were not hit as teenagers there is no guarantee that they will avoid physically abusing their children. In fact, about 8 percent did. That is an extremely high rate of abuse, even though it is a third of the rate for parents who were hit the most.

Finally, even though the highest rate of physical abuse is for the parents who were hit many times as teenagers, being hit even once at that age increases the chance that a person will abuse his or her own children. The risk is very small, but it is still there.

Conclusions

During the past 25 years, many well-respected scholars have argued that corporal punishment by parents increases the chances that they will go too far and physically abuse their children. The scientific evidence showing that corporal punishment is a risk factor for physical abuse, although not conclusive, is as good or better than the evidence for other suspected causes. Despite the evidence and the prestigious backing of this theory, corporal punishment has been virtually ignored as a cause of physical abuse by government and private agencies, and by authors of books on child abuse.

The main reason corporal punishment is neglected is probably because hitting children to correct and control them is so deeply
ingrained in American culture that the idea of eliminating it is regarded as ridiculous, outrageous, or impractical. One purpose of this chapter was to make that idea seem less ridiculous by setting forth a possible theory and testing that theory.

Our review of previous studies and our analysis suggest that corporal punishment can lead to physical abuse by a process that works at several levels. At the immediate incident level, escalation occurs in a specific sequence between a parent and child: a parent spanks a child, the child rebels rather than complies, and the now even-angrier parent attacks the child in a way that crosses the boundary between legal corporal punishment and physical abuse.

Viewed developmentally, the more corporal punishment is used, the greater the risk of escalation because corporal punishment does not help a child develop an internalized conscience and leads to more physically aggressive behavior by the child (see Chap. 7 and Sears, Maccoby, and Levin, 1957; Marion, 1982; Straus, 1991). So the more parents rely on hitting, the more they will have to do it over time, and the greater the chance of the child hitting back (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980), further increasing the risk that corporal punishment will lead to physical abuse.

At the macro-cultural level, corporal punishment creates a social climate that approves of violence to correct wrongdoing and to achieve other socially desirable ends. This makes the public, and parents themselves, more tolerant of physical abuse. Cultural approval or tolerance of this sort is illustrated by a 1993 New Hampshire Supreme Court decision, which said that a child had not been physically abused even though he had welts visible five days after being beaten with a belt by his mother.

At the inter-generational level of analysis, corporal punishment increases the chance that when the child is an adult he or she will approve of interpersonal violence, be in a violent marriage, and be depressed. Thus, corporal punishment is one way physical abuse is transmitted from generation to generation.

The research in this chapter was at the inter-generational level. We found that more than half of the parents remembered being hit one or more times during their early teens (see Chapter 3), and that the parents who experienced corporal punishment were more likely to physically abuse their own children. Even one instance of being hit by parents at that age increased the chances of later being physically abusive. Parents who were hit the most had the greatest chance of physically abusing their own child.

Why does being hit as a child increase the chances of physically abusing your own children? We found three reasons: corporal punishment is tied in with attitudes favoring violence, with an increased chance of violence between the parents, and with an increased chance of depression. Each of these three reasons is associated with physical abuse.

Although the results in this chapter indicate that corporal punishment fosters physical abuse, there are important limitations to keep in mind. First, our study is about corporal punishment of parents when they were in their early teen years, and may not apply to parents who were hit only when they were younger. Second, the research used recall data, whereas experimental and prospective data is needed for a more definitive conclusion. Third, our study tested only part of the model developed in the theoretical section of this chapter.

Even with these limitations in mind, the research has important implications. At the very least, it suggests that more progress toward preventing physical abuse can be made if researchers and organizations concerned with reducing physical abuse stop ignoring corporal punishment. There is a certain irony in this conclusion because it is doubtful that any of the agencies mentioned in the introduction approve of parents hitting a teenaged child, yet they are silent on the issue. To start with, there should be programs to alert parents of teenagers to the risks they unknowingly subject their children to by hitting them even once. In the long run, we believe future research will show that this same principle applies to children of all ages.
REFERENCES


