COMMENTARY

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND PRIMARY PREVENTION
OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACTS

Objective: To bring to the attention child maltreatment professionals the potential for primary prevention of physical abuse of ending or reducing corporal punishment by parents.

Method: The October 1999 special issue of Child Abuse & Neglect on “A National Call to Action: Working Toward the Elimination of Child Maltreatment” was reviewed in relation to coverage of corporal punishment by parents.

Results: Corporal punishment was not mentioned in any of the nine articles.

Conclusions: The combination of research showing that corporal punishment is a major risk factor for physical abuse and research showing the wide prevalence and chronicity of corporal punishment suggests that the “National Call For Action” should include steps to end use of corporal punishment as a mode of discipline. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Corporal punishment, Physical abuse, Primary prevention, Parents, Children.

INTRODUCTION

THE NINE ARTICLES in the October 1999 special issue of Child Abuse & Neglect on “A National Call to Action: Working Toward Elimination of Child Maltreatment” identify many important steps to eliminate child maltreatment. Some are in the form of general approaches such as media and other educational efforts and shifting more of the effort from treatment to prevention, and some are in the form of specific preventative steps such as making contraceptives more widely available.

However, none of the nine articles called for action on one of the most prevalent and best documented risk factors for physical abuse—corporal punishment by parents.

The purpose of this commentary is to demonstrate that the omission of corporal punishment from the special issue is part of a wider pattern, to show that ending use of corporal punishment is a potentially important aspect of primary prevention of physical abuse, to explain why this potential

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Requests for reprints and a list of publications on corporal punishment by members of the Family Research Laboratory should be sent to Murray A. Straus, Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.
has been ignored, and to suggest that ending use of CP should become an explicit goal of those concerned with preventing physical abuse.

DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

For purposes of this commentary, corporal punishment 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 the child’s behavior. This includes spanking on the buttocks and slapping a child’s hand for touching a forbidden or dangerous object. A conceptual analysis of this and other definitions is given elsewhere (Straus, 1994).

The 1995 Gallup survey of child abuse found that 94% of parents of toddlers reported using corporal punishment (CP) in the previous 12 months and 35% hit infants (Straus & Stewart, 1999). Another national study found that, on average, CP occurs about three times a week for 2- and 3-year-old children (Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995). Even among college educated mothers the mean is 2.5 times a week (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). I believe this indicates that CP is more prevalent and more chronic than all but a few child maltreatment specialists realize.

CONSEQUENCES OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT FOR CHILDREN

The high prevalence and chronicity of CP has a dual importance. First, in view of the evidence from five recent prospective studies of the harmful side effects of CP (Straus, 2000, Chapter 12) these statistics indicate that American children are being subjected to a socialization experience which increases the risk of the child developing major social and psychological problem, such as physical violence and depression.

Second, in view of the research showing that CP is a risk factor for physical abuse (Gil, 1970; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus & Yodanis, 2000), these statistics indicate the widespread prevalence of a major risk factor for physical abuse.

A generation ago David Gil’s (1970) pioneer study of 1,380 children found that 63% of the abuse incidents were an “immediate or delayed response to specific (misbehavior) of the child. Gil concluded:

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)

Kadushin and Martin’s (1981) in-depth study of 66 cases of physical abuse also found that two thirds were instances of CP that had escalated out of control. Straus and Yodanis (2000) studied a nationally representative sample of American parents and found that the more CP these parents had experienced, the greater the probability that, in bringing up their own children, of going beyond legal CP and engaging in severe physical attacks on their children.

Studies like those just cited, plus clinical observation, led Ziegler and Hall (1989) to conclude 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.” A number of other leading scholars and clinicians have also concluded that reducing CP is essential to reducing physical abuse (Feshbach, 1980; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Haeuser, 1991; Maurer, 1976; Steinmetz & Straus, 1973; Williams, 1983).
THE NEGLECT OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT BY CHILD MALTREATMENT SCHOLARS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Despite the strong research evidence just cited, and the clear conclusions drawn by the authors of those studies that eliminating CP is essential for reducing physical abuse, this major risk factor has been virtually ignored by the field. The omission of CP from the nine articles in the National Call to Action special issue is only one of many examples of the failure of child maltreatment scholars and clinicians to deal with CP. Another example is the omission of CP as a possible cause of physical abuse in publications of the National Center On Child Abuse and Neglect. CP is also not discussed in the reports of the US Advisory Board On Child Abuse and Neglect. That Advisory Board does have a clear statement against CP, but it is for schools, foster parents, group homes, and so on, that is, for everyone except parents (US Advisory Board, 1991, p. 52). Similarly, the National Committee To Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect mounted a national campaign against CP by teachers, but not parents. These omissions tell us about the extent to which CP has been ignored by major agencies concerned with prevention and treatment of child abuse. This same omission applies to scholarly books on physical abuse (Straus, 2000, p. 83).

Another indication of the failure to accept the evidence that CP is a risk factor for abuse is that, in rebuttal to urging CP as a focus of primary prevention efforts, I have often been told by social scientists (who presumably know the difference between a risk factor and a one-to-one deterministic relation) that most parents who use CP do not abuse. That of course, is correct, but the same can be said for most parents living in poverty.

Although child maltreatment organizations have not taken a stand against CP, in 1998 the American Academy of Pediatrics (1998) did. That, however, raises the question of practical ways to end use of CP. The experience of Sweden since the passage of a no-spanking law in 1979 demonstrates that it can be done in a non-punitive way (Durrant, 1999); for example, no-spanking messages on milk cartons. There are many other inexpensive and practical ways of getting a no-spanking message to parents, such as a "never spank" poster and leaflets in every maternity ward and in the office of every pediatrician.

To my surprise, most of the child maltreatment scholars and parent educators to whom I have mentioned no-spanking messages on milk cartons, on posters in pediatricians offices, and a warning notice on birth certificates, do not favor those steps. When I ask if they favor posters and warning notices about cigarettes, the answer is almost always yes. They typically go on to explain that a "negative approach" will not succeed for spanking because parents must first be taught alternatives. There are at least three reasons for thinking this is a specious argument. First, parent education and no-spanking education are not mutually exclusive. Second, the belief that training in alternatives is a precondition of advising no-CP ignores the fact that almost all parents already use many other disciplinary strategies in addition to CP. Third, the belief that parents must first be taught alternatives presumes that CP has greater efficacy than other discipline techniques. Even research by defenders of CP shows that non-corporeal methods are just as effective (Larzelere, Sather, Schneider, Larson, & Pike, 1998; Roberts, 1988), although Larzelere presents and discusses those finding in a way that disguises the equal effectiveness of non-corporeal discipline.

Although almost every parent can use additional skills in child management, there is no research evidence that it takes such training to stop spanking. Consistent with the cultural norms supporting CP, it is just presumed to be true. The same presumption is not applied to whether prior training is needed before advising parents to never engage in psychological attacks on children. It has not stood in the way of a "negative approach" to ending psychological aggression as a means of discipline.

We do not have misgivings about telling parents to never call a child who spills his food "a filthy pig" because we truly believe that psychological attacks are a harmful mode of discipline. We apparently lack the same certainty that physical attacks, such as slapping the hand of a child who
spills food, is bad for children. The National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA, now Prevent Child Abuse America) conducted a national media campaign on psychological attacks by parents in which they used a "negative" approach. It included a poster picturing a sad faced child and the words "Stop using words that hurt." Unfortunately, the NCPCA refused to do the same for physical attacks that go by the euphemism of spanking.

WHY IS CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IGNORED?

Perhaps CP has been ignored in thinking about prevention of physical abuse because a hard-nosed evaluation would point out that there has not been a definitive experimental study showing that CP causes physical abuse. That does not seem like a plausible explanation because the same is true for every other presumed cause. The research evidence on CP is as strong or stronger than the evidence on other causes of physical abuse that were discussed in the special issue. For example, there is no experimental evidence supporting the preventative value of reducing unwanted child births or poverty. Nor need there be experimental evidence because there is agreement that unwanted births and poverty are bad regardless of whether they increase the risk physical abuse. I suggest that a key difference is that child maltreatment professionals, despite words to the contrary, are not convinced that CP is inherently bad for children, nor that it is a major risk factor for abuse.

Of course there are some major differences between poverty and CP as risk factors, but these differences argue in favor of attending to CP. For example, about 20% of children live in poverty, compared to 94% who experience CP. So CP is by far the more prevalent risk factor. The percentage of cases where corporal punishment escalates into physical abuse is small. However, the small "effect size" is counterbalanced by the wide prevalence of CP. It is a well-established principle in epidemiology that a widely prevalent risk factor with small effect size, that is, spanking, can have a much greater impact on public health than a risk factor with a large effect size, but low prevalence, such as genetic abnormalities predisposing to violence (Rose, 1985; Rosenthal, 1984, p. 131).

Another important difference between CP and poverty is that the prospects for ending poverty in the US, important as they are, are not very good. I am not suggesting that we abandon the effort to end poverty in favor of ending CP. They are not mutually exclusive goals. There is no need to let our concern with poverty blind us to the needs of children who do not live in poverty and are at risk because their parents use CP.

CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS

I suggest that a major reason why child maltreatment organizations and parent educators have avoided dealing with CP as an important risk factor for physical abuse (and for psycho-social problems of children), and why individual scholars ignore the research evidence, is that conceptualizing CP as a risk factor contradicts a deeply embedded element of American culture—that use of CP is sometimes necessary.

Despite the necessity of using CP being embedded in the cultural norms and beliefs, changes in society are making CP less popular (Straus, 2000, Chapter 11; Straus & Mathur, 1996). The emerging consensus is that it is best to avoid CP, but it may sometimes be necessary. I find very few who believe that a child should never, ever, under any circumstances be hit as a disciplinary tactic. They do not realize that there is a contradiction in expressing opposition to CP, while also believing that CP may sometimes be necessary. This contradiction reflects an accommodation to the conflict between the changing attitudes towards CP and the cultural myth that CP is sometimes
necessary and harmless when done in moderation by loving parents. It is just as contradictory as being against slapping a spouse for misbehavior, while also believing that a slap may sometimes be necessary, and is harmless if done in moderation by a loving partner. We do not insist on provide training in conflict resolution skills as a precondition for a no-wife-slapping educational effort, and we should not require it for a no-CP educational effort, just as we have not required it for a no verbal attacks educational effort.

A no-spanking educational effort, however, faces obstacles because the cultural norms and beliefs about the necessity of using CP are reinforced and supported in many ways; for example, by the network of family and friends which is a major source of information and advice about how to bring up children. In a study of 1,002 mothers in Minnesota, I found that, in the 6 months prior to the interview, 53% had been advised by a family member or friend to spank. In addition, there are more subtle ways in which the norms favoring CP are supported. For example, support for CP occurs every time words like spanking, a good hard spanking, whooping, and licking are used instead of "hitting". They signal that hitting children is an approved disciplinary strategy. Consequently, child maltreatment professionals may have to insist on terms such as hitting and physically attacking, which condemn rather than support such behavior by parents, just as we found it necessary to rid our culture of terms that implicitly justify inequality between races and between men and women.

I think it will also be necessary for parent education programs to stop ignoring CP. Most parent education programs do a fine job in enhancing child management skills. But because toddlers typically repeat a misbehavior within hours (and in some cases minutes) no matter what the mode of correction, even very skilled parents will be tempted to resort to CP unless the program does what most now do not do, which is to make clear that spanking is never an acceptable mode of discipline.

CONCLUSION: END CORPORAL PUNISHMENT TO REDUCE THE RISK OF PHYSICAL ABUSE AND OTHER HARM TO CHILDREN

Whatever the linguistic and educational strategy, the findings of research on CP suggests that an effort to end the violent socialization of children that goes by the euphemism of spanking needs to be a part of the "Call To Action" to eliminate child maltreatment because CP is a risk factor for the more severe attacks that we call physical abuse, and because, regardless of whether CP escalates into physical abuse, bringing up children violently puts children at a higher risk for the development of many social and psychological problems (Straus, 2000).

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REFERENCES


RÉSUMÉ

Objectif: Porter à l'attention des intervenants le fait de réduire les punitions corporelles est susceptible de prévenir les mauvais traitements physiques.

Méthode: On a passé en revue l'édition spéciale (octobre 1999, intitulée A National Call to Action: Working toward the Elimination of Child Maltreatment) de notre revue, pour en relever les discussions portant sur les punitions corporelles.

Résultats: La question des punitions corporelles ne paraît dans aucun des neuf articles.

Conclusions: Les recherches indiquent que les punitions corporelles sont un facteur de risque élevé pour les mauvais traitements physiques et démontrent que les punitions corporelles règnent considérablement. Ceci porte à croire que le “National Call For Action” devrait comprendre des mesures pour mettre fin aux punitions corporelles en tant que mesure disciplinaire.