

# No Longer Up for Debate: Physical Punishment Causes Negative Outcomes for Children

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## INTRODUCTION

A large body of research consistently links parents' use of physical punishment, including spanking, to an increased risk of harm to their children. Children who are spanked are more aggressive, have more mental health problems, have lower cognitive ability, and have a higher risk for physical abuse than their peers who are not spanked. These research findings hold up across populations, settings, and cohorts. However, despite these research findings, the majority of parents and a substantial minority of psychologists continue to believe that spanking is effective at improving child behavior and does not have detrimental effects on children.

These beliefs are often not challenged by the media, which typically frames stories about spanking as a “debate” among researchers. Part of the difficulty of convincing the public, as well as some psychologists, that physical punishment of children causes harm is that it is unethical to conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to study this issue. That is, it is unethical for researchers to randomly assign some children to be in a “hit” experimental group and others to be in a “not hit” control group.

RCTs are typically considered the gold standard of research evidence because they can demonstrate causality: in this case, that spanking and other forms of physical punishment are the direct cause of negative outcomes in children. But when experimental studies are unethical, are there other research approaches to apply to the body of evidence to conclude that a causal relationship exists between physical punishment and harm to children?

In this research brief, the authors apply standard criteria for establishing a causal relationship between physical punishment and poor outcomes among children. They review a large body of evidence that employs advanced statistical methods to tackle key questions that have dogged causal claims. One of these questions is whether children's behavior problems are the consequence or the cause of physical punishment—do children with worse behavior get punished more, or does physical punishment cause a child to start behaving badly? Another key question is whether negative child outcomes have more to do with the characteristics of the parent—do the parents who use physical punishment have other characteristics, such as a lack of warmth, that account for children's poor outcomes? The authors also explore the impact of racial and ethnic differences in the use of physical punishment, parenting style, and neighborhood quality to confirm that the findings are generalizable across contexts.

## KEY FINDINGS

- > Research on physical punishment meets five standard criteria in the medical and social sciences for drawing causal conclusions.
- > A small but rigorous group of studies using statistical methods to approach causal designs have found physical punishment predicts increased risk of negative outcomes for children.
- > The outcomes linked to physical punishment such as spanking are the same as those linked to physical abuse, suggesting that both parent behaviors are on the same continuum of violence against children.
- > Links between physical punishment and negative child outcomes do not vary by race or ethnicity, parenting style, or neighborhood quality.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research linking physical punishment with harm to children is, with only a few exceptions, consistent across dozens of studies and has been replicated across a range of study designs and methods. Therefore, it is time to end the so-called debate about the efficacy of physical punishment: spanking and other forms of physical punishment do not benefit children and instead cause them harm. The message to policymakers, psychologists, and parents is clear: it is time to implement multiple strategies to end this outdated parenting practice (see *Box*).

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO END PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN?

### POLICYMAKERS

- > Fund state- and nationwide education campaigns to reduce physical punishment and increase use of alternative, and more effective, methods of discipline.
- > Propose laws that would afford children equal protection under the law and would not allow parents to defend harmful actions by saying they were doing them as “discipline.”
- > Pursue laws banning physical punishment in the 19 states where this form of discipline is currently legal.

### PSYCHOLOGISTS

- > Caution parents against using physical punishment because they are ethically bound to safeguard the welfare and rights of others, including children.
- > Take a stand against physical punishment. Professional membership organizations such as the American Psychological Association should work to educate its members and the public about the harms of physical punishment and about the benefits of alternative positive forms of discipline.

### PARENTS & THE PUBLIC

- > Want what is best for children and thus have the right to know that a large body of undisputed research shows that physical punishment is ineffective and harmful to children.
- > Need education about alternatives to physical punishment.

## REFERENCE

Gershoff, E.T., Goodman, G.S., Miller-Perrin, C.L., Holden, G.W., Jackson, Y., & Kazdin, A.E. (2018). The strength of the causal evidence against physical punishment of children and its implications for parents, psychologists, and policymakers. *American Psychologist* 73(5):626-638. DOI:10.1037/AMP0000327.

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