Corporal punishment of children: summary of research on its impact and associations

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Introduction

Corporal punishment – violence inflicted on children by parents, teachers, carers and others in the name of “discipline” – is experienced by a large majority of children in many states worldwide. Some children, including children with disabilities and young children, are particularly likely to experience it.

Corporal punishment is a violation of children’s rights and international human rights law requires prohibition of all corporal punishment, including in the family home. There is no need to look for evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment in order to know that it must be prohibited and eliminated – just as there is no need for research to show that violence against other groups of people is harmful before efforts are made to end it.

However, research on the issue can be useful for advocacy – and the message from research is very clear: corporal punishment carries multiple risk of harm and has no benefits. A major 2002 meta-analysis of 88 studies found associations between lawful corporal punishment by parents and ten negative outcomes, and a major 2016 meta-analysis, which used 75 studies published over 50 years, involving a total of 160,927 children, confirmed the findings of the earlier meta-analysis and found evidence of associations with five more negative outcomes. The large and consistent body of evidence on the topic includes studies using sophisticated techniques which researchers have employed to address the arguments advanced by a few opponents of prohibition. The body of evidence is now overwhelming – more than 250 studies show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes, while no studies have found evidence of any benefits.

Intended for use by advocates for children’s right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, this summary of research illuminates how corporal punishment violates not just children’s right to freedom from all violence, but also their rights to health, development and education, and has damaging effects on society as well as individuals. It supports arguments that prohibition is a low-cost effective public health measure, for example in the prevention of domestic violence, mental illness and antisocial behaviour and to aid welfare, education and developmental outcomes for children.

The information in this summary is taken from the Global Initiative’s longer working paper which reviews research on the impacts of and associations with corporal punishment. For a copy of the working paper, detailed information on applicable human rights standards, guidance on law reform, reports on the legality of corporal punishment in every state worldwide and research into the prevalence of and attitudes towards corporal punishment see www.endcorporalpunishment.org or email info@endcorporalpunishment.org.

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5 For more information, see the Global Initiative’s review of research on the impacts of and associations with corporal punishment, of which this document is a summary
The public health case for prohibition

The negative effects of corporal punishment on individual children and adults add up to negative effects on society as a whole. Ending corporal punishment is essential in ending physical “child abuse”, and in creating societies which are overall less violent (see also “Direct physical harm” and “Corporal punishment and partner violence” below). Research suggests that the more a society uses violence for socially approved purposes, the more individuals in that society are likely to use violence for purposes which are not socially approved, and that the approval and prevalence of corporal punishment in societies is linked to the use or endorsement of other forms of violence, including fighting, torture, the death penalty, war and murder.6

In a few states which have prohibited all corporal punishment, the positive effects of the decreased use of physical punishment are becoming visible.7 Research in Sweden has found huge declines in the prevalence of corporal punishment since prohibition was achieved in 1979.8 A 2000 study which examined the impact of the ban found that there had been a decrease in the number of 15 to 17 year olds involved in theft, narcotics crimes, assaults against young children and rape and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people.9 Studies in Finland have found that there has been a clear reduction in all forms of corporal punishment and other parental violence against children since prohibition in 198310 and that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered.11 In Germany, which achieved full prohibition in 2000, research has shown significant decreases in violent punishment, which has been linked to decreases in violence by young people in school and elsewhere and to reductions in the proportion of women experiencing physical injury due to domestic violence.12

In recognition of the human rights imperative to prohibit all corporal punishment and the importance of prohibition for reducing all forms of violence against children and other violence in societies and improving physical and mental health and other developmental outcomes for children and adults, in 2013 nine international health professionals’ organisations issued a statement calling for prohibition and elimination of all corporal punishment.13

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7 For more information on research showing reductions in the use of physical punishment in countries which have prohibited it, see www.endcorporalpunishment.org
8 Modig, C. (2009), Never Violence – Thirty Years on from Sweden’s Abolition of Corporal Punishment, Save the Children Sweden and Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs
9 Durrant, J. (2000), A Generation Without Smacking: the impact of Sweden’s ban on physical punishment, Save the Children
13 The statement is available at www.endcorporalpunishment.org
Corporal punishment and partner violence: the relationships

Corporal punishment and partner violence are closely linked. Studies have found that social settings in which corporal punishment is prevalent tend to be social settings in which partner violence is prevalent.\(^{14}\) Corporal punishment and intimate partner violence often coexist: studies have found that parents in households where intimate partner violence was perpetrated are more likely to inflict corporal punishment on their children\(^ {15}\) and that approval of husbands hitting their wives is associated with a belief that corporal punishment is necessary to rear children.\(^ {16}\) Associations have been found between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and perpetrating violence towards a partner as an adult,\(^ {17}\) experiencing violence from a partner as an adult,\(^ {18}\) holding inequitable gender attitudes\(^ {19}\) and verbally coercing or physically forcing a partner to have sex as an adult.\(^ {20}\)

The effects of corporal punishment

Direct physical harm

Corporal punishment kills thousands of children each year, injures many more and is the direct cause of many children’s physical impairments.\(^ {21}\) Research in countries in all regions attests to the severity of the physical violence which children experience in the name of “discipline”. Corporal punishment includes children being hit with hands and objects; being kicked, shaken and forced to maintain uncomfortable positions; and a wide range of other painful and degrading treatment.\(^ {22}\)

Most violence against children commonly referred to as “abuse” is corporal punishment. Research has consistently found that the majority of incidents substantiated by authorities as physical “abuse” are cases of physical punishment.\(^ {23}\) The intent to discipline or punish has been shown to be a common precursor in many child homicide cases.\(^ {24}\)

When research has distinguished between physical punishment and “abuse”, it has found associations. All ten of the studies on child protection in the major 2002 meta-analysis found that


\(^ {17}\) Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit


\(^ {20}\) Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit


\(^ {22}\) Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), *General Comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (arts. 19; 28, para. 2; and 37, inter alia)* [CRC/C/GC/8](http://www.unhcr.org/aiga/)


corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical “abuse”; the 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies and confirmed this finding. Other studies have found similar associations and links between corporal punishment and involvement with child protection services.

All physical punishment, however “mild” and “light”, carries an inbuilt risk of escalation: its effectiveness in controlling children’s behavior decreases over time, encouraging the punisher to increase the intensity of the punishment. The risk of escalation is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry: their anger can increase the level of force used beyond what was intended, and their intent may be retaliatory as well as punitive.

Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour

Far from teaching children how to behave, corporal punishment in fact makes it less likely that they learn the lessons adults want them to learn. In the 2002 meta-analysis, 13 of 15 studies on the topic found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child’s long-term compliance to the desired behaviour. The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies on low moral internalization and confirmed the association.

Corporal punishment has been found to be a factor in behaviours such as bullying, lying, cheating, running away, truancy, school behaviour problems and involvement in crime as a child and young adult. In 12 of the 13 studies included in the 2002 meta-analysis, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in delinquent and antisocial behaviour. The 2016 meta-analysis examined nine studies on antisocial behaviour and confirmed the association. It also examined 14 studies on children’s externalizing behaviour problems and eight on children’s internalizing behaviour problems and found associations between corporal punishment and both types of behaviour problem. The link with behaviour problems has been confirmed by numerous later studies, including longitudinal studies involving both young and older children.

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26 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit
31 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
33 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
Corporal punishment can reduce empathy\(^{37}\) and moral regulation.\(^{38}\) It does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others; rather than helping children to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, it teaches them that it is desirable not to get caught. Corporal punishment may also decrease the likelihood of long-term compliance by damaging adult-child relationships, introducing fear and undermining the powerful behavioural motivations of children’s love and respect for their parents and other adults involved in their care and education.

**Increased aggression in children**

There is abundant evidence that corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression in children. All 27 studies on the topic included in the 2002 meta-analysis found an association.\(^{39}\) This was confirmed by the 2016 meta-analysis, which examined seven studies on the topic.\(^{40}\) All the other numerous studies on the topic have also confirmed the association.\(^{41}\) Children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers,\(^{42}\) to approve of the use of violence in peer relationships, to bully and to experience violence from their peers,\(^{43}\) to use violent methods to resolve conflict\(^{44}\) and to be aggressive towards their parents.\(^{45}\)

The reasons may include that aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain, that children learn that violence is an appropriate method of getting what you want and that children copy their parents’ behaviour. Children describe feeling aggressive after being physically punished.\(^{46}\)

**Adult perpetration of violent, antisocial and criminal behaviour**

The violent behaviour of children who have experienced corporal punishment persists into adulthood. In the 2002 meta-analysis, all four studies on aggression in adulthood found a significant association with childhood experience of corporal punishment and four of the five studies on corporal punishment and criminal and antisocial behaviour in adulthood found an association.\(^{47}\) The 2016 meta-analysis examined three studies on adult antisocial behaviour and confirmed the association.\(^{48}\)

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39 Gershoff, E. (2002), op cit

40 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit

41 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit


47 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

Corporal punishment perpetuates itself. Adults who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to inflict it on their own children and children who experience it are more likely to approve of its use. The 2016 meta-analysis examined five studies on the topic and found an association between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and holding positive attitudes about spanking as an adult.

Mental harm

Corporal punishment is emotionally as well as physically painful and its links to poor mental health in childhood are clear. In the 2002 meta-analysis, all 12 studies found that corporal punishment is significantly associated with a decrease in children’s mental health, including with behaviour disorders, anxiety disorders, depression and hopelessness. The 2016 meta-analysis examined ten studies on childhood mental health problems and confirmed the association. It additionally examined three studies on self-esteem and found an association between children experiencing corporal punishment and having low self-esteem. Other studies have found associations with suicide attempts, alcohol and drug dependency, low self-esteem, hostility and emotional instability.

The associations hold true in adulthood. All eight studies on mental health in adulthood in the 2002 meta-analysis found an association between corporal punishment and poor mental health, including low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies. The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies on adult mental health problems and confirmed the association. Significant later studies include nationally representative studies in Canada, Finland and the USA which found associations with mental health problems including depression, anxiety disorder and alcohol and drug abuse.

Indirect physical harm

Corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s physical health. Associations have been found between corporal punishment and children feeling that their health was poor, experiencing physical illnesses such as asthma, suffering injuries and accidents, being hospitalised and developing habits which put their health at risk, such as smoking, fighting with others and alcohol consumption.

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50 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit
51 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
52 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit
54 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit
57 Österman, K. et al (2014), op cit
The effect can continue into adulthood. Studies have found associations with developing cancer, asthma, alcohol-related problems, migraine, cardiovascular disease, arthritis and obesity as an adult.

Damage to education

Studies suggest that corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s cognitive development. The 2016 meta-analysis examined eight studies related to cognitive development and found an association between experience of corporal punishment and impaired cognitive ability. Other studies have found associations between corporal punishment and lower IQ scores, smaller vocabularies, poorer cognitive abilities, slower cognitive development, and poorer school marks. Similar associations have been found for school corporal punishment.

School corporal punishment violates children’s right to education, including by creating a violent and intimidating environment in which children are less able to learn. A 2016 review which drew on more than 20 studies on the effects of school corporal punishment found that it injures children, damages their learning and is linked with mental health and behaviour problems. School corporal punishment is often a reason given by children for not attending or for dropping out of school. It has negative effects on the quality of education in schools as a whole: research has found links between the legality of corporal punishment in schools and poorer test results.

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64 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit
68 Straus, M. A. et al (2014), op cit
73 Center for Effective Discipline (2010), *Paddling Versus ACT Scores - A Retrospective Analysis*, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline
The negative impact of corporal punishment on children’s cognitive development and education may last into adulthood. In some studies, adults who experienced corporal punishment as children were less likely to graduate from college and to have high status and highly paid jobs.

### Damage to the parent-child relationship

Corporal punishment inflicted on a child by her or his parents can severely damage the parent-child relationship. In the 2002 meta-analysis, all 13 studies on the topic found an association between corporal punishment and a decrease in the quality of the parent-child relationship. The 2016 meta-analysis examined five studies on the topic and confirmed the association between corporal punishment and negative parent-child relationships. Other studies have found that corporal punishment is associated with poor attachment by babies to their mothers and with poor family relationships in adolescence.

Corporal punishment can make children feel rejected by their parents, and teach them to fear and avoid their parents: children report feeling hurt, angry and frightened of their parents after being physically punished.

### Conclusion

The evidence that corporal punishment is harmful to children, adults and societies is overwhelming – the more than 250 studies included in this review show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes, while no studies have found evidence of any benefits. Corporal punishment causes direct physical harm to children and impacts negatively in the short- and long-term on their mental and physical health and education. Far from teaching children how to behave, it impairs moral internalisation, increases antisocial behaviour and damages family relationships. It increases aggression in children and increases the likelihood of perpetrating and experiencing violence as an adult. It is closely linked to other forms of violence in societies, and ending it is essential in combating other violence, including partner violence. Respect for children’s rights to protection, health, development and education requires that all corporal punishment of children be prohibited in law and eliminated in practice.

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76 Gershoff, E. T. (2002), op cit

77 Gershoff, E. T. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016), op cit


81 Dobbs, T. (2005), op cit