

UC Davis

UC Davis Previously Published Works

Title

There Is Still No Evidence That Physical Punishment Is Effective or Beneficial: Reply to Larzelere, Gunnoe, Ferguson, and Roberts (2019) and Rohner and Melendez-Rhodes (2019)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w39s5w8>

Journal

American Psychologist, 74(4)

ISSN

0003-066X

Authors

Gershoff, Elizabeth T
Goodman, Gail S
Miller-Perrin, Cindy
[et al.](#)

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.1037/amp0000474

Peer reviewed



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Am Psychol. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2020 May 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Am Psychol. 2019 ; 74(4): 503–505. doi:10.1037/amp0000474.

There is Still No Evidence that Physical Punishment is Effective or Beneficial: Reply to Larzelere, Gunnoe, Ferguson, & Roberts (2019) and Melendez-Rhodes & Rohner (2019)

Elizabeth T. Gershoff,

University of Texas at Austin

Gail S. Goodman,

University of California, Davis

Cindy Miller-Perrin,

Pepperdine University

George W. Holden,

Southern Methodist University

Yo Jackson, and

Pennsylvania State University

Alan E. Kazdin

Yale University

Abstract

In our original article (authors, 2018), we summarized the extensive body of research demonstrating that parents' use of physical punishment is ineffective and linked with risk of detrimental outcomes for children. We agree with several points raised in two commentaries on our article (Larzelere, Gunnoe, Ferguson, & Powers, 2019; Melendez-Rhodes & Rohner, 2019) - that statistical rigor is needed before making conclusions, and that potential contextual moderators need to be considered. However, neither commentary negated the scientific inferences and conclusions of the Authors et al. article nor presented any convincing evidence that physical punishment is beneficial to children. The preponderance of evidence clearly indicates physical punishment is harmful, a finding that is increasingly being recognized by professional organizations, including the American Psychological Association.

Keywords

physical punishment; spanking

In our original article (Authors, 2018), we summarized the large and consistent body of research linking physical punishment with detrimental outcomes for children. We appreciated the two commentaries on our article and begin our response by recognizing

Author contact information: Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin, 108 E. Dean Keeton Street, Stop A2702, Austin, Texas 78712; liz.gershoff@austin.utexas.edu; 512 471 4800. .

areas of agreement. We agree that the best studies are those that address children's pre-existing behavior and other potential selection factors (Larzelere, Gunnoe, Ferguson, & Roberts, 2019); that is why we summarized studies that used rigorous statistical approaches that increase causal inference, such as fixed effects regression and propensity score matching, and still found that physical punishment predicted increases in children's behavior problems.

We agree with Melendez-Rhodes and Rohner (2019) that consideration of contextual moderators, including overall parenting style and cultural background, is important when investigating the potential influences of parenting practices; in our review, we cited a number of studies that used race-ethnicity, parenting style, and neighborhoods as moderators. These studies collectively found that physical punishment is linked with detrimental outcomes for all children, regardless of context. We did not include several studies by Rohner and his colleagues on punishment and parental acceptance in our summary because they included parent behaviors such as "beating severely with an object" (Rohner, Bourque, & Elordi, 1996, p. 844) or "burning, shoving, and beating with a whip, leather or other implement" (Rohner, Kean, & Cournoyer (1991, p. 684) that most people would consider to be abusive.

We also agree with the comments that physical punishment should be discouraged and that yelling can be harmful to children (Melendez-Rhodes & Rohner, 2019). However, recognizing that yelling can be harmful does not negate the fact that physical punishment can also be harmful. There is no evidence that either is needed to change child behavior. Parents should avoid both as much as possible.

We are in accord with the authors of both commentaries that more research on forms of discipline beyond physical punishment is needed; parents are very interested in information on "what works," but meaningful research on methods other than physical punishment is in short supply. However, it is also true that there can always be "more research;" the question with regard to physical punishment is what to do now with the considerable research available. There is virtually no evidence indicating that physical punishment is beneficial or is a necessary back up when alternatives are ineffective. There is always another way to socialize children that does not involve hitting them.

We disagree with Melendez-Rhodes and Rohner's (2019) implication that identifying moderators or mediators of the association between physical punishment and child harm somehow calls that association into question. Although we agree mediators can explain why the association is there, and moderators can point to situations in which the association is stronger or weaker, they do not inherently contradict the finding that physical punishment is linked with harm to children. The authors did not present any rationale or evidence that physical punishment is effective or beneficial.

We also strongly disagree with Larzelere and colleagues (2019) that "opposing spanking or alternatives with mostly correlational evidence may hurt families more than it helps them" (p. xx). In our original article (Authors, 2018) and elsewhere (Holden, Grogan-Kaylor, Durrant, & Gershoff, 2017), we have refuted such critiques about the state of the evidence,

including misrepresentations of the evidence and mistaken claims that spanking after using a time out is effective (it is not, once initial differences between treatment and control groups are accounted for: Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). The default for us as a field of psychological science must be protecting children and promoting their development. There is no body of replicated evidence indicating physical punishment has positive benefits for children. Rather, there are hundreds of studies indicating that physical punishment can be harmful.

Finally, we wish to address Larzelere and colleagues' assertion that "Spanking is controversial" (p. xx). Scientists, clinicians, and policymakers must act based on the best available evidence regardless of controversy; if public health officials waited for cigarette manufacturers to stop disputing facts about smoking and lung cancer, we would never have had the social policies that so successfully reduced smoking, and with it, reduced the incidence of lung cancer within a generation. There is growing consensus that the evidence showing physical punishment to be ineffective and harmful to children is consistent and compelling, as seen in recent policy statements by the American Academy of Pediatrics (Sege et al., 2018), the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (2016), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2012), and, as of February 2019, the American Psychological Association. Furthermore, 54 countries have passed legislation to ban the physical punishment of children in all settings (Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment, 2019). The evidence and its implications are clear: Parents and caretakers should never discipline children with physical punishment.

References

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (2012, July 30). Policy statement on corporal punishment. Retrieved from: http://www.aacap.org/aacap/policy_statements/2012/Policy_Statement_on_Corporal_Punishment.aspx
- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. (2016). Position statement on corporal punishment of children. Retrieved from: <https://apsac.memberclicks.net/assets/documents/Publications/apsac%20position%20statement%20on%20corporal%20punishment%20of%20children%20-%20final%20approved%207-26-16.pdf>
- American Psychological Association. (2019). Resolution on physical discipline of children by parents. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/physical-discipline.pdf>
- Authors. (2018). The strength of the evidence against physical punishment of children and its implications for parents, psychologists, and policymakers. *American Psychologist*, 73, 626–638. doi:10.1037/amp0000327 [PubMed: 29999352]
- Gershoff ET, & Grogan-Kaylor A (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30, 453–469. doi:10.1037/fam0000191 [PubMed: 27055181]
- Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. (2019). Progress. Retrieved from <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/countdown/>
- Holden GW, Grogan-Kaylor A, Durrant JE, & Gershoff ET (2017). Researchers deserve a better critique: Response to Larzelere, Gunnoe, Roberts, and Ferguson (2017). *Marriage and Family Review*, 53, 465–490. doi:10.1080/01494929.2017.1308899
- Larzelere RE, Gunnoe MJ, Ferguson CJ, & Roberts MW (2019). The insufficiency of the evidence used to categorically oppose spanking and its implications for families and psychological science: Implications for families and psychological science: Comment on Gershoff et al. (2018). *American Psychologist*, XX, xx-xx.

- Melendez-Rhodes T, & Rohner RP (2019). Perceived parental acceptance-rejection mediates or moderates the between corporal punishment and psychological adjustment: Comment on Gershoff et al. (2018). *American Psychologist*, XX, xx-xx.
- Rohner RP, Kean KJ, & Cournoyer DE (1991). Effects of corporal punishment, perceived caretaker warmth, and cultural beliefs on the psychological adjustment of children in St. Kitts, West Indies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 681–693. doi:10.2307/352743
- Rohner RP, Bourque SL, & Elordi CA (1996). Children’s perceptions of corporal punishment, caretaker acceptance, and psychological adjustment in a poor, biracial southern community. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 842–852. doi:10.2307/353974
- Sege RD, Siegel BS, Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, American Academy of Pediatrics. (2018). Effective discipline to raise healthy children. *Pediatrics*, 142, e20183112. Doi:10.1542/peds.2018-3112