

A Critique of Elizabeth Gershoff's¹ Overview of Research on Parental Corporal Punishment

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The Crucial Questions

Dr. Gershoff's 2002 review is very thorough, but fails to answer the crucial questions, even though it might appear to answer them. For parents, the crucial questions are:

- What are the effects of nonabusive spanking on children?
 - Do they depend on the child's age, situation, cultural context, etc.?
- If parents use spanking, what is the best way to use it?
- How do the effects of spanking compare with alternative disciplinary tactics that parents could use instead?
- How do punishments such as spanking support or undermine positive aspects of discipline and teaching?

Limitations of Gershoff's Review: Severe Corporal Punishment & Misleading Associations

Dr. Gershoff's review fails to answer these crucial questions because most of the studies (1) emphasize severe forms of corporal punishment and (2) base their conclusions on misleading associations with child outcomes. In most cases these problems were due to the studies with which Gershoff worked. Such a research approach would make any disciplinary tactic look bad. Examples:

- Most studies in her review included overly severe forms of corporal punishment in their study: e.g., "slapped on face,"²⁻⁸ being beaten,^{3,9,10} hit with a fist and causing bruises or cuts¹¹.
- Most conclusions were based on misleading associations with outcomes, when those outcomes were actually caused by the child's excessive misbehavior, not the parental response to the misbehavior. They are misleading because most (if not all) disciplinary tactics show the same associations with detrimental outcomes.
 - The strongest evidence of detrimental child outcomes in her review was that spanking frequency in one year correlated 0.18 with one of five aggressive variables later on, on average.
 - A few studies in Gershoff's review used the same methods to study other disciplinary tactics as well as corporal punishment. They usually found more detrimental associations for alternative tactics than for corporal punishment! For example, there were four applicable studies of aggressive types of behaviors in children under 13 (using the studies' statistics that are done the same for all disciplinary tactics and, where possible, minimizing problems pointed out by Baumrind et al., 2002).¹²
 - Larzelere et al. (1998)¹³: Using the associations emphasized by Gershoff, the frequency of spanking 2- and 3-year-olds was associated with

disruptive behavior 20 months later ($\underline{r} = .15$, i.e., $\underline{d} = .30$). But the frequencies of all *other disciplinary tactics* were over twice as strongly associated with more disruptive behavior 20 months later (nonphysical punishment, $\underline{r} = .31$; reasoning, $\underline{r} = .47$; “other”, $\underline{r} = .33$). I call them “misleading correlations” because they make every disciplinary tactic look bad.

- [Radke-]Yarrow et al. (1968)¹⁴: corporal punishment was associated with less aggression in school two months later ($\underline{r} = -.19$), whereas 5 other disciplinary tactics averaged no association ($\underline{r} = -.02$).
- Sears (1961)¹⁵: physical punishment was associated with less antisocial aggression 2 years later ($\underline{r} = -.07$), whereas 2 other tactics averaged no association ($\underline{r} = .00$).
- Straus and Mouradian (1998)¹⁶: calm physical punishment was concurrently associated with more antisocial aggression and impulsivity ($\underline{r} = .07$), whereas 3 other tactics were more strongly associated with those outcomes ($\underline{r} = .19$).

Conclusion: It is the *excessive* child misbehavior that leads to a wide range of detrimental outcomes. The excessive misbehavior also causes parents to use all disciplinary tactics more frequently, not just spanking. The misleading associations used in Gershoff’s review would make any disciplinary tactic look bad, and thus cannot tell the difference between effective and counterproductive disciplinary methods.

Implications

Because of the above problems, the review does not answer the most important two questions:

Implications for Parents: Beyond Misleading Associations

Parents need better information about *how* to discipline their children in the most effective manner. Effective discipline is based on a foundation of a positive, loving parent-child relationship and uses proactive discipline skillfully. In responding to misbehavior, parents need to use milder disciplinary tactics skillfully. The most effective way to use spanking is to back up milder disciplinary tactics, such as reasoning and time out, with 2- to 6-year-old children. Research has shown that this strategy is not only effective in itself, but the child then cooperates with the milder disciplinary tactics, making the spank back-up less necessary as the child gets older.¹⁷ Nine studies support this with more conclusive evidence than mere associations.^{13 18-25} There is no evidence against this particular way of using spanking in a loving parent-child context. This combination of milder disciplinary tactics with spanking was more effective than 6 alternative disciplinary responses across these 9 studies, although two alternative combinations matched its effectiveness, on average.

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