

Is Corporal Punishment a Good Idea?

Interview with Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, Ph.D.

Conducted by Dale McGowan, author of *Parenting Beyond Belief*. First appeared November 7, 2007 on the website of the Institute for Humanist Studies.



Elizabeth Gershoff earned her PhD in Child Development and Family Relationships at the University of Texas at Austin and received postdoctoral training in preventive interventions at the Arizona State University Prevention Research Center. In her current research, funded by NICHD, NIMH, and the CDC, Dr. Gershoff focuses on the impacts of poverty, community violence, and neighborhoods on child and youth development over time. Her research combines longitudinal and hierarchical methods for understanding the dynamic and multilayered contexts of children's lives. Other areas of research/scholarly interest: school-based violence prevention, the impact of various parenting techniques on child behavior.

In 2002, during her time at the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, Gershoff completed a large-scale meta-analysis of 88 studies looking at both positive and negative behaviors in children that were associated with corporal punishment. The results were published in the July 2002 issue of *Psychological Bulletin*.

While conducting the meta-analysis, which included 62 years of collected data, Gershoff looked for associations between parental use of corporal punishment and 11 child behaviors and experiences, including several in childhood (immediate compliance, moral internalization, quality of relationship with parent, and physical abuse from that parent), three in both childhood and adulthood (mental health, aggression, and criminal or antisocial behavior) and one in adulthood alone (abuse of own children or spouse).

Gershoff found "strong associations" between corporal punishment and all eleven child behaviors and experiences. Ten of the associations were negative such as with increased child aggression and antisocial behavior. The single desirable association was between corporal punishment and increased immediate compliance on the part of the child.

Dale McGowan: Dr. Gershoff, can you tell me what led you to your current research emphasis on the effects of exposure to violence on child development?

Dr. Gershoff: I had been interested in parenting affects on children since beginning graduate school, and the more I learned about how children think, feel, and behave, I began to realize that physical punishment went against everything we were learning in psychology about how to teach and motivate children.

DM: Would you say your ethical objections to violence against children drives your research, or that the conclusions of your research drive your ethical objections—or is it symbiotic?

Dr. Gershoff: That is a very difficult question. For me personally, I began with the research. When it became abundantly clear to me that physical punishment was potentially harmful, and even potentially injurious to children, I felt I had an ethical obligation to make these research findings understood by as many people as possible.

DM: Your 2002 meta-analysis is among the most often-cited research in opposition to physical punishment. First, can you define a meta-analysis for those who are unfamiliar with the term?

Dr. Gershoff: A meta-analysis is a method of research synthesis that statistically combines existing data to discern the average strength of the findings.

DM: What is the best way to express the conclusions you reached from that analysis?

Dr. Gershoff: The primary conclusion from the meta-analyses of 88 studies conducted over 62 years is that parental corporal punishment is associated significantly eleven child outcomes and experiences. Ten of these outcomes are negative (e.g., increased aggression, decrease mental health), and only one was positive, namely immediate compliance.

DM: Are the use and approval of physical punishment declining (worldwide and/or in the U.S.)?

Dr. Gershoff: Use of physical punishment by parents in the US has declined over the last several decades, although even now most (upwards of 85%) of children are physically punished at some point in their lives. Physical punishment in US schools has declined dramatically over the last several decades and is now banned in 29 states. Physical punishment by parents around the world appears to be declining, helped in part by the fact that 19 countries now ban *all* physical punishment of children.

DM: One repeated claim by advocates of physical punishment is that it is often needed to keep children safe. The most common example is preventing a child from running into the street. Is this the same as physical punishment?

Dr. Gershoff: No. Physically restraining a child from running into the street is *not* physical punishment. Spanking a child *after* they have run into the street to show them what they did was wrong is physical punishment.

My retort to this issue is—why is the child in a position where they can run into the street in the first place? It is the job of us as parents to keep our children safe and teach them how to be safe when we can't be by them physically. A young child running into the street is an example to me of a *failure* to instill discipline in the child and a failure by the parent to create a safe environment for their child.

DM: You have noted the inherent limitations of research in this area, including the difficulty in designing experimental studies to assess familial practices. Can you elaborate on that limitation?

Dr. Gershoff: A true experiment involves randomly assigning people to an experimental and a comparison (control) condition. Random assignment allows researchers to account for all ways that people might be different from each other (race, religion, gender, etc). We cannot randomly assign children to families that will spank or not, nor can we even randomly assign parents to be spankers or not—people who are willing to spank are different from people who are not willing on several dimensions and so they are not comparable in an experimental way.

DM: Does this limitation preclude drawing scientifically meaningful conclusions about physical punishment?

Dr. Gershoff: No. After several hundred studies on this topic that all converge on one conclusion despite different measures, research designs, samples, and eras, there is no doubt that more physical punishment is associated with more problem child behavior. We gain greater confidence in this conclusion from longitudinal studies, that account for how problematic the children are to begin with, and from intervention studies, that show that training parents not to use corporal punishment results in reductions of child problem behavior.

DM: What is the best that can be said for the objections of Larzelere, Baumrind, et al?

Dr. Gershoff: They have pointed out some valid problems with the research to date, particularly the issue that most research has been cross-sectional and thus does not support causal conclusions.

DM: Do you think the physical punishment of children will ultimately go the way of sanctioned wife-beating and other formerly acceptable practices? If so, what timeframe do you envision?

Dr. Gershoff: Yes, I do. It took a generation to change attitudes about violence against women; I expect it may take that long to change attitudes about violence against children. Evidence from Sweden after their ban went into effect has shown that although adults

have changed their attitudes since the ban, what is most striking is that almost no children born after the 1979 ban think physical punishment of children is acceptable.

DM: If the physical punishment of children were to become the exception rather than the norm, what do you think might be the effect on society?

Dr. Gershoff: I think it will be part and parcel of a more respectful way of treating children that can only have positive effects on them. Having children grow up with dignity and with respect from adults will likely increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. I do not think we would see any dramatic decrease in child problem behavior, however, unless the reforms extended to many areas of children's lives (schools, neighborhoods, etc).