



Global Initiative to
End All Corporal Punishment
of Children

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April 2013

Review of research on the effects of corporal punishment: working paper

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Introduction

Corporal punishment is a violation of children's rights. International human rights law is clear that children have a right to legal protection from all corporal punishment in all settings of their lives.¹ There is no need to look for evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment in order to know that it must be prohibited in law and eliminated in practice – just as there is no need for research to show that violence against women 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. The large and consistent body of evidence on the issue has been augmented still further in recent years by the increasingly sophisticated techniques which researchers have employed to address the arguments advanced by a few opponents of prohibition (see “Responses to arguments defending corporal punishment” below).

¹ 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)

This review includes more than 150 studies showing associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes: it presents an overwhelmingly convincing case that corporal punishment is harmful for children, adults and societies. Intended for use by advocates for children's right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, it illuminates how corporal punishment violates not just children's right to freedom from all violence, but also their rights to health, development and education. 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.

For further resources for advocates, including detailed information on applicable human rights standards, guidance on law reform and a shorter summary version of this review of research see www.endcorporalpunishment.org or email info@endcorporalpunishment.org.

This review of research is a working document. Comments, questions and suggestions are welcome; please send any contributions to elinor@endcorporalpunishment.org.

What is corporal punishment?

The Committee [on the Rights of the Child] defines "corporal" or "physical" punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting ("smacking", "slapping", "spanking") children, with the hand or with an implement - a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children's mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child.²

How prevalent is corporal punishment?

Enormous numbers of children experience corporal punishment in their homes, schools, care settings and the penal system in all world regions. A major UNICEF study of child discipline within the home in more than 30 low- and middle-income countries found that on average 75% of children experienced violent discipline, with 17% experiencing severe physical punishment (being hit or slapped on the face, head or ears or being hit over and over with an implement).³

Certain children are particularly likely to experience corporal punishment. For example, a 2012 meta-analysis of 17 studies found that children with disabilities were 3.6 times more likely to experience physical violence, including corporal punishment, than children without disabilities.⁴ Young children

² 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), para. 11

³ UNICEF (2010), *Child Disciplinary Practices at Home: Evidence from a Range of Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, NY: UNICEF

⁴ Jones, L. et al (2012), "Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies", *The Lancet*, 12 July 2012

are especially vulnerable to corporal punishment. Children from minority groups, including linguistic, ethnic and sexual minorities, may be more likely to experience corporal punishment than others, and corporal punishment may have a gender dimension, with girls and boys experiencing different types or frequencies of violent punishment. For summaries of research into the prevalence of, attitudes towards and children's experience of corporal punishment, see www.endcorporalpunishment.org.

Elizabeth Gershoff's meta-analysis

In 2002, a major meta-analysis was published of studies on lawful corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviours and experiences, carried out by Elizabeth Gershoff.⁵ The meta-analysis, which involved 88 studies, examined the associations between physical punishment and the following eleven "behaviours and experiences:"

- immediate compliance (child stops the misbehaviour)
- moral internalisation (child learns the intended lesson)
- quality of relationship between parent and child
- mental health in childhood
- aggression in childhood
- delinquent and antisocial behaviour in childhood
- child being a victim of "abuse"
- aggression and violence when adult
- criminal or anti-social behaviour when adult
- mental health when adult
- abusing child or spouse when adult

The meta-analysis found significant associations between corporal punishment and ten undesirable behaviours or experiences. The eleventh, "immediate compliance" had mixed results and its desirability is in any event ambiguous if children are unable to learn from the experience.

The studies showing these associations were published before 2001 and are referenced to this meta-analysis. All other studies summarised here were not included in the meta-analysis. They are mostly more recent and some address associations not included in the meta-analysis.

The effects of corporal punishment

Direct physical harm

⁵ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), "[Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review](#)", *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4), 539-579; see also Gershoff, E. T. (2008) [Report on physical punishment in the United States: what research tells us about its effects on children](#), Columbus, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline

Corporal punishment kills thousands of children every year, injures many more and is the direct cause of many children's physical impairments.⁶ Research in countries in all regions attests to the severity of the physical violence which children experience in the name of "discipline". For example, in research carried out in **Cambodia, China** (Hong Kong), **Fiji, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines** and **Viet Nam**, children reported that the most common type of punishment was being hit with hands and objects including whips, belts and chains, with words used to describe this including "beating", "whacking", "lashed" and "punched". Other punishments included being electrocuted, having their heads submerged in water, having their joints twisted, being forced to the ground, being pinched, having their hair pulled, being scratched and having adults stomp on their stomachs.⁷ In a study in **New Zealand** which asked 80 children aged 7-14 about their views on physical punishment, they described being hit on the face and head, hit with implements including belts and tennis rackets and being forced to ingest soap and mustard. The children who took part had no known or alleged history of child abuse or neglect.⁸ Physical punishment is intended to hurt, and in studies from around the world which ask children their views of physical punishment, children consistently state that it is physically painful. In a **UK** study with children aged 5-7, children's comments about "smacking" included "*it feels like someone banged you with a hammer*" (five year old girl) and "*it hurts and it's painful inside – it's like breaking your bones*" (seven year old girl).⁹

Most "child abuse" is corporal punishment – adults using violence to control and punish children. Research has consistently found that the majority of incidents substantiated by authorities as abuse occur in a punitive context.¹⁰ A major **Canadian** study found that nearly three quarters (74%) of all cases of "substantiated physical abuse" were cases of physical punishment and 27% of "substantiated emotional maltreatment incidents" were initiated as a form of punishment. In the vast majority of cases of "substantiated physical abuse", physical violence was the primary form of maltreatment. Of these cases, most involved forms of violence typically used as punishments: just over half (54%) involved children being slapped or "spanked", 30% involved children being shaken, pushed, grabbed or thrown, 21% involved children being hit with objects and 8% involved children being punched, kicked or bitten.¹¹ Similarly, a study of 830 substantiated physical abuse cases in the **USA** in the 1980s concluded that "almost invariably" parents defined their actions as "disciplinary procedures that were required in response to the child's behaviour".¹² And a **UK** study found that the intent to discipline or punish was a common precursor in many child homicide cases.¹³

The purported distinction between "ordinary" physical punishment and "abuse" is meaningless¹⁴: no line can or should be drawn between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" violence against children.

⁶ Krug E. G. et al. (eds) (2002), [*World Report on Violence and Health*](#), Geneva: World Health Organization

⁷ Beazley, H. et al (2006), [*What Children Say: results of comparative research on the physical and emotional punishment of children in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, 2005*](#), Bangkok, Thailand: Save the Children Sweden

⁸ Dobbs, T. (2007), "What Do Children Tell Us About Physical Punishment As A Risk Factor For Child Abuse?", *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 30:145-162

⁹ Willow, C. & Hyder, T. (1998), [*It Hurts You Inside: young children talk about smacking*](#), Save the Children & National Children's Bureau

¹⁰ Gil D. G. (1979), *Unraveling child abuse*. In D. G. Gil (Ed.), *Child abuse and violence*, New York: AMS Press

¹¹ Trocmé, N. et al (2010), *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Executive Summary & Chapters 1-5*, Public Health Agency of Canada: Ottawa, 2010; see also A. & Trocmé, N. (2013), [*Physical Abuse and Physical Punishment in Canada*](#), Child Canadian Welfare Research Portal Information Sheet # 122

¹² Kadushin A & Martin J A (1981), *Child abuse: An interactional event*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.249

¹³ Cavanagh K & Dobash P. (2007), "The murder of children by fathers in the context of child abuse", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31: 731–46

¹⁴ Durrant, J. E. (2008), "Physical Punishment, Culture and Rights: Current Issues for Professionals", *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 29: 55-66

However, some researchers have distinguished between “punishment” and “abuse” in order to study the links between more and less socially accepted forms of violence against children. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all ten of the studies on the topic of child protection found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical “abuse”.¹⁵ A study in **Canada** found that children who were “spanked” by their parents were at seven times greater risk of being severely assaulted (such as being punched or kicked) than children who were not physically punished.¹⁶ Further studies include a 2002 **US** study which found that mothers who reported that they had spanked their child were 2.7 times more likely to report that they had beaten, burned, kicked, hit with an object or shaken their child¹⁷ and one of over 1,200 12 year olds in **Sri Lanka**, which found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical abuse.¹⁸ A study in the **USA** found that children who had been “spanked” by their parents in the past month were 2.3 times as likely to suffer an injury requiring medical attention as children who had not been spanked.¹⁹

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.²⁰ The risk of escalation of physical punishment is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry:²¹ their anger can increase the level of force used beyond what was intended, and their intent may be retaliatory as well as punitive.²²

That corporal punishment and “abuse” are not two separate phenomena is further evidenced by studies which show that their effects are similar, varying only in degree. For example, a study in **Canada** found that people who had been physically punished as a child (defined as having something thrown at them, being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped or spanked) but had not experienced more severe forms of assault were more likely to experience psychiatric disorders as adults than those who had not been physically punished as children, but less likely than those who had experienced more severe forms of assault as children (being kicked, bitten, hit with a fist or object, beaten up, choked, burned, or scalded).²³

Increased aggression in children

¹⁵ See note 5

¹⁶ Clément, M. E. et al (2000), [*La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec*](#), Québec: Institut de la Statistique du Québec

¹⁷ Zolotor, A. J. et al (2008), “Speak softly—and forget the stick: Corporal punishment and child physical abuse”, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 35: 364-369

¹⁸ de Zoysa, P. et al (2008), “Outcomes of Parental Corporal Punishment: Psychological Maladjustment and Physical Abuse”, in T. Richardson & M. Williams (Eds.), *Child Abuse and Violence*, Nova Science Publishers Inc

¹⁹ Crandall, M. et al (2006), “Injury in the first year of life: Risk factors and solutions for high-risk families”, *Journal of Surgical Research*, 133, 7-10

²⁰ See note 5; Strauss M. & Douglas E (2008), “Research on spanking by parents: Implications for public policy”, *The Family Psychologist: Bulletin of the Division of Family Psychology* (43) 24: 18-20

²¹ See note 20

²² Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), [*Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*](#), Ottawa: Coalition of Physical Punishment of Children and Youth

²³ Afifi, T. O. et al (2005), “Physical punishment, childhood abuse and psychiatric disorders”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30: 1093–1103

There is abundant evidence that corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression in children. All 27 studies on the topic included in Gershoff's meta-analysis found an association,²⁴ and this has been confirmed by numerous other studies. Studies which use a prospective design have refuted the idea that children who are more aggressive experience more corporal punishment – research consistently suggests that experiencing physical punishment directly causes children's levels of aggression to increase.²⁵ The reasons may include that aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain, that children copy their parents' behaviour and that children learn that violence is an appropriate method of getting what you want. Children in a **New Zealand** study described feeling aggressive after being smacked: “[you act] like you want payback and revenge” (nine year old boy); “you hurt your sister, like you take it out on somebody else” (13 year old boy).²⁶ Children in the **UK** said that after they have been smacked, children “act naughty and start to hurt people” (five year old girl) and that “if they're very little, they might think it's right to smack and go off and smack somebody else” (seven year old girl).²⁷

Large-scale studies which have found links between children's experience of corporal punishment and their aggressive behaviour include a study involving more than 1,000 mothers in the **USA** who were interviewed and observed when their children were one, three and four years old, which found that children who experienced corporal punishment aged one were more likely to have both “internalising” and “externalising” behaviour problems aged three and four²⁸ and a study in the **USA** of 2,461 children, which found that children who were “spanked” more than twice in the previous month aged 3 were more likely to be more aggressive aged 5. The study controlled for the children's level of aggression at age 3, showing that the relationship was not due to more aggressive children experiencing more “spanking” – instead, it suggests that the spanking caused the increase in children's aggressive behaviour.²⁹

Many of the numerous studies which have found links between corporal punishment and aggression have focussed on children's aggression towards their peers. These include a study of 10-13 year old boys in **Nigeria**, which found that those who were identified as aggressive by their parents, peers and teachers experienced more physical punishment than those who were identified as “prosocial” (for example, because they were helpful and worked well with others): 77% of the aggressive boys had been beaten four times or more with an implement in the preceding two months compared to 9% of the prosocial boys.³⁰ A study in **Israel** compared the behaviour of and levels of corporal punishment experienced by children of Israeli origin and children of former Soviet Union origin living in Israel. It found that the more frequent experience of corporal punishment of children of former Soviet Union origin explained their lower level of “prosocial” behaviour.³¹

²⁴ See note 5

²⁵ Durrant, J. & Ensom, R. (2012), “[Physical punishment of children: lessons from 20 years of research](#)”, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 6 February 2012

²⁶ Dobbs, T. (2005), *Insights: children & young people speak out about family discipline*, Save the Children New Zealand

²⁷ See note 9

²⁸ Mulvaney, M. K. & Mebert, C.J. (2007), “Parental corporal punishment predicts behavior problems in early childhood”, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21(3): 389-397

²⁹ Taylor, C. A. et al (2010), “[Mothers' Spanking of 3-Year-Old Children and Subsequent Risk of Children's Aggressive Behavior](#)”, *Pediatrics* 125(5): 1057-1065

³⁰ Ani, C.C. & Grantham-McGregor, S. (1998), “Family and personal characteristics of aggressive Nigerian boys: Differences from and similarities with Western findings”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23(5): 311-317

³¹ Regev, R. et al (2012), “The adjustment of ethnic minority and majority children living in Israel: Does parental use of corporal punishment act as a mediator?”, *Infant and Child Development*, 21: 34-51

A study in the **USA** which examined how 106 three to six year-old children behaved in playgrounds found that children whose parents who used less “power assertive discipline” (including punishing, threatening and belittling the children) were more popular with other children and showed fewer disruptive playground behaviours, such as arguing and aggression.³² Another **US** study of five to seven and nine to 10 year old children and their mothers found that children whose mothers used more “power assertive discipline” were less popular with their peers and were more likely to use “unfriendly methods”, such as hitting another child, to resolve conflicts with their peers.³³ The effect continues into adolescence: a **US** study of 134 parents and children aged 10-15 found that children who were physically punished by their parents were more likely to approve of the use of violence in their peer relationships, to have been involved in a fight in the past year, to bully their peers and to have experienced violence from their peers in the last school term.³⁴

Children who experience corporal punishment from their parents are more likely to be aggressive towards their parents, as confirmed by a **US** study of 1,023 couples with a child aged between three and 17. It found that 40% of the mothers who used corporal punishment three or more times in the past year had been hit by their child in that year and 30% who had used corporal punishment once or twice had been hit, compared to only 13% who did not use it at all.³⁵

Corporal punishment in any setting can create a “culture of violence” where other forms of violence can thrive. An extreme example of this is shown by a study in all 50 states of the **USA**, which found that students in states where school corporal punishment was permitted were more than twice as likely to die in a school shooting than those in states where it was prohibited. The study also looked at the prevalence of corporal punishment in each state, and found that the more students were physically punished in schools, the higher the student mortality rate from school shootings. The study controlled for differences in poverty rates and the prevalence of conservative Christian religions associated with the use of corporal punishment. The researcher stated that the results suggest that “*the endorsement of school corporal punishment reflects a set of values that are punitive in nature and create a context conducive to the violence that characterizes school shootings*” (p. 182) and that school corporal punishment should therefore be prohibited.³⁶

Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour

Research has consistently found that 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 addition to the links with aggression in children (see above), corporal punishment has been implicated in a variety of studies as 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.³⁷

³² Hart, C.H. et al (1992), “Maternal and paternal disciplinary styles: Relations with preschoolers’ playground behavioral orientations and peer status”, *Child Development*, 63(4): 879-892

³³ Hart, C.H. et al (1990), “Children’s expectations of the outcomes of social strategies: Relations with sociometric status and maternal disciplinary styles”, *Child Development*, 61(1): 127-137

³⁴ Ohene, S. et al (2006), “Parental Expectations, Physical Punishment, and Violence Among Adolescents Who Score Positive on a Psychosocial Screening Test in Primary Care”, *Pediatrics* 117(2): 441-447

³⁵ Ulman, A. & Straus, M. A. (2003), “[Violence by children against mothers in relation to violence between parents and corporal punishment by parents](#)”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 34: 41-60

³⁶ Arcus, D. (2002), “[School shooting fatalities and school corporal punishment: A look at the states](#)”, *Aggressive Behavior*, 28: 173-18

³⁷ See note 5

In Gershoff's meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance. This, ironically, may be its most harmful attribute, because 13 of 15 studies found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child's long-term compliance to the desired behaviour.³⁸ Corporal punishment does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others. Instead of helping children to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, corporal punishment teaches children that it is desirable not to get caught: rather than behaving differently next time, they are therefore likely to repeat the undesired behaviour and use strategies to avoid being caught. Corporal punishment may also decrease long-term compliance through its effects on children's cognitive development – for example, by making children less able to regulate their own behaviour³⁹ – and by damaging adult-child relationships (see below), 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.

In a study of 238 3.5 year old children in the **USA**, children's parents filled in questionnaires about the "discipline" practices, including physical punishment that they used and about their children's behaviour and "moral regulation" (for example, how likely children were to try a prohibited but attractive activity when alone or to tell their parents when they did something wrong), preschool teachers filled in questionnaires about children's behaviour and children took part in tests, including a "gift task" in which they were asked not to look while a gift for them was noisily wrapped and then not to touch the gift. The study found that boys who experienced physical punishment more frequently had more aggressive and destructive behaviour problems and less moral regulation.⁴⁰ In another **US** study of 1,056 mothers of one to five year-old children, mothers reported on their use of verbal and physical punishment and rated the frequency of their children's behaviour problems. The study found that children who experienced more frequent verbal and physical punishment had more behaviour problems.⁴¹ This is corroborated by a study of 117 mothers of toddlers in the **USA** which found that children of mothers who used "overreactive" discipline, including verbal and physical punishment and expressing anger, had more behaviour problems. The study examined children's behaviour and mothers' parenting at two different points between the ages of one and a half and six years. It found no evidence that children's behaviour caused mothers' overreactive discipline, but did suggest that overreactive discipline caused children's behaviour problems.⁴²

A **US** study involving 1,397 4- to 9-year-old children found that children who were "spanked" more frequently had more social and emotional problems, such as bullying and destructive behaviour, anxiousness, sadness and dependency.⁴³ Other **US** studies found that experiencing physical punishment at home predicted 10-12 year old children's disruptive school behaviour two years later,⁴⁴ and that experiencing physical punishment between the ages of six and nine years predicted higher

³⁸ See note 5

³⁹ Talwar, V. et al (2011), "Effects of a Punitive Environment on Children's Executive Functioning: A Natural Experiment", *Social Development*, 20(4):805–824

⁴⁰ Kerr, D. C. R. et al (2004), "Parental Discipline and Externalizing Behavior Problems in Early Childhood: The Role of Moral Regulation and Child Gender", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 32(4): 369–383

⁴¹ Brenner, V. & Fox, R.A. (1998), "Parental discipline and behavior problems in young children", *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 159(2): 251–256

⁴² O'Leary, S.G. et al (1999), "A longitudinal study of mothers' overreactive discipline and toddlers' externalizing behavior", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 27(5): 331–341

⁴³ Eamon, M. K. (2001), "Antecedents and socioemotional consequences of physical punishment on children in two-parent families", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25(6):787–802

⁴⁴ Eamon, M. K., & Altshuler, S. J. (2004), "Can we predict disruptive school behavior?", *Children & Schools*, 26: 23–37

levels of antisocial behaviour two years later, even after controlling for initial levels of child antisocial behaviour and sex, family socioeconomic status and levels of emotional support and cognitive stimulation in the home.⁴⁵

Also in the **USA**, a study in which parents from more than 500 families were trained to decrease their use of physical punishment found that the subsequent reduction in the difficult behaviour of their children (aged 3-8 years) was largely due to the reduction in their parents' use of physical punishment.⁴⁶

The effect also exists in older children and adolescents. In 12 of the 13 studies included in Gershoff's meta-analysis, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in delinquent and antisocial behaviour.⁴⁷ A study of nearly 7,000 young people in the **USA**, whose mothers were interviewed six times during ten years, found that young people who experienced higher levels of corporal punishment manifested more antisocial behaviour problems than young people who did not experience corporal punishment, regardless of the level of their antisocial behaviour at the beginning of the study. No evidence was found for differences in the effect of corporal punishment across racial groups.⁴⁸

A study involving 919 adolescents in **Chile** found that corporal punishment by mothers and fathers was associated with more delinquent and aggressive behaviour by the young people.⁴⁹ In a **US** study of over 1,500 boys aged 6-18, half of whom were identified as displaying high levels of antisocial behaviour, participants engaging in more serious forms of delinquency (for example, stealing, carrying weapons, selling drugs and attacking someone to seriously hurt or kill them) reported experiencing higher levels of physical punishment.⁵⁰

A study involving 102 college students in the **USA** found that those who had experienced "minor" corporal punishment such as "spanking" or slapping as children had lower levels of empathy, while those whose parents had used explanation of the consequences of their actions as a discipline method had higher levels of empathy. Empathy was measured by a test where participants indicated their level of agreement with statements such as "I get really angry when I see someone being ill-treated". The authors of the study suggest that corporal punishment may prevent people from developing an internalised set of values, meaning that they need to rely on external sanctions when making decisions about moral issues.⁵¹

Perpetration and experience of violent, antisocial and criminal behaviour in adults

⁴⁵ Straus, M. A. et al (1997), "Spanking by parents and subsequent antisocial behavior of children", *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 151: 761-7

⁴⁶ Beauchaine T. P. et al (2005), "Mediators, moderators, and predictors of 1-year outcomes among children treated for early-onset conduct problems: a latent growth curve analysis", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73: 371-88

⁴⁷ See note 5

⁴⁸ Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2005), "Corporal Punishment and the Growth Trajectory of Children's Antisocial Behavior", *Child Maltreatment*, 10:283-292

⁴⁹ Ma et al (2012), "Corporal punishment and youth externalizing behaviour in Santiago, Chile", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36: 481-490

⁵⁰ Loeber, R. et al (2000), "Stability of Family Interaction from Ages 6 to 18", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 28(4): 353-369

⁵¹ Lopez, N. et al (2001), "Parental disciplinary history, current levels of empathy, and moral reasoning in young adults", *North American Journal of Psychology*, 3:193-204

Corporal punishment is closely related to other forms of violence perpetrated and experienced by adults. The acceptance of corporal punishment of children increases social tolerance of other forms of violence. A study of anthropological records of 186 cultural groups from all world regions found that societies which made more frequent use of corporal punishment endorsed other forms of violence more. Societies in which corporal punishment was used more frequently also deliberately educated children to be aggressive to a greater extent and engaged more in warfare. The study controlled for demographic and socioeconomic factors. The researchers noted that *“the findings are consistent with theories that adult violence becomes more prevalent in contexts in which corporal punishment is frequent, that the use of corporal punishment increases the probability that children will engage in violent behaviors during adulthood, and that violence in one social domain tends to influence behavior in other domains”* (p. 257).⁵² This is confirmed by Gershoff’s 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.⁵³

Corporal punishment is particularly closely related to intimate partner violence against women: the two kinds of violence often coexist and experiencing corporal punishment as a child increases the chance of both being a victim of and perpetrating intimate partner violence as an adult.

A US study involving nearly 2,000 families found that corporal punishment and intimate partner violence often coexist. Parents in households where intimate partner violence was perpetrated were twice as likely to inflict corporal punishment on their children.⁵⁴ This relationship was confirmed by a report which analysed data from interviews with more than 180,000 women in 12 countries in **Latin America and the Caribbean**. It found that, for all countries with data on the topic, the proportion of women who said that children in their current home were punished by being hit, beaten or slapped was higher among those who experienced partner violence than among those who did not experience partner violence. The same study found an association between experiencing corporal punishment as a child and experiencing partner violence as an adult: the proportion of women who reported experiencing partner violence was far higher among those who had been beaten as children than among those who had not been beaten as children – at least twice as high in most cases.⁵⁵

Experience of corporal punishment as a child was associated with perpetrating violence towards a partner or child as an adult in all five studies on the topic included in Gershoff’s meta-analysis.⁵⁶ A major study involving men in **Brazil, Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico and Rwanda** found that those who had experienced violence, including corporal punishment, during childhood, were more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence, hold inequitable gender attitudes, be involved in fights outside the home or robberies, pay for sex and experience low self-esteem and depression, and were less likely to participate in domestic duties, communicate openly with their partners, attend pre-natal visits

⁵² Lansford, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2008), “Cultural Norms for Adult Corporal Punishment of Children and Societal Rates of Endorsement and Use of Violence”, *Parenting: Science and Practice* 8: 257–270

⁵³ See note 5

⁵⁴ Taylor, C. A. et al (2012), “Use of Spanking for 3-Year-Old Children and Associated Intimate Partner Aggression or Violence”, *Pediatrics* 126(3), 415-424

⁵⁵ Bott, S. et al (2012), [*Violence Against Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comparative analysis of population-based data from 12 countries*](#), Washington DC: Pan American Health Organisation & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

⁵⁶ See note 5

with a pregnant partner and/or take paternity leave.⁵⁷ Other research showing links between physical punishment and gender inequality includes a study which involved 2,805 17-79 year olds in **Norway** and which found that physical punishment by parents was associated with gender-unequal decision-making in the home: 27% of respondents who said their father made the decisions at home reported physical punishment or witnessing violence at home, compared to 17% where the mother made the decisions and 10% of those whose parents made decisions on an equal basis.⁵⁸

A study of 717 boys in **Canada** found that experience of harsh parental practices (being punished by being hit, slapped, scolded all the time or called names and feeling rejected by parents) contributed to the boys being perpetrators of “dating violence” at 16 and 17 years old.⁵⁹ A study of 608 respondents in the **USA** who were interviewed at ages 12-19 and again ten years later found that those who had experienced “harsh physical discipline” including being “spanked” with a belt or strap, hit with a stick or closed fist and thrown against a wall were more likely to be violent towards a “romantic partner” as adults.⁶⁰

A study which used data from over 4,400 adults in the **USA**, who took part in a nationally representative survey of American heterosexual couples with and without children, found that the more often respondents had experienced physical punishment as teenagers, the more likely they were to physically assault their partners as adults and to approve of violence (slapping a partner’s face) in adult relationships.⁶¹ Another study in the **USA**, involving 188 married couples without children, found that individuals who were physically punished during childhood were more controlling with their spouse, less able to take their spouse’s perspective and more likely to engage in physical and verbal aggression with their spouse. The authors suggest that this is because physical punishment both teaches children destructive problem-solving strategies – verbal and physical aggression – and hinders them learning essential problem-solving skills – taking others’ perspectives and understanding how their behaviour affects others.⁶²

A study in Ngangelizwe, **South Africa**, which involved interviews with 30 16-26 year olds, found that physical assault and rape or coercive sex in the young people’s dating relationships were common and accepted as “normal” by the young people, their parents, the police and teachers. The report suggested that these findings should be understood in the broader context of life in Ngangelizwe where beating was used in a whole variety of contexts as a strategy for punishment, including parents beating their children and teachers beating their students.⁶³

The effects of corporal punishment can last long into adulthood and affect the next generation of children. Young children taking part in a study in the **UK** were concerned about the effects of parents smacking children, children then smacking their own children, and the “habit” continuing into future

⁵⁷ Contreras, M. et al (2012), [*Bridges to Adulthood: Understanding the Lifelong Influence of Men's Childhood Experiences of Violence, Analyzing Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey*](#), Washington DC: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Promundo

⁵⁸ Holter et al (2009), [*Gender Equality and Quality of Life: A Norwegian Perspective*](#), Nordic Gender Institute

⁵⁹ Lavoie, F. et al (2002), “History of family dysfunction and perpetration of dating violence by adolescent boys: a longitudinal study”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 30, pp375–383

⁶⁰ Swinford, S. P. et al (2000), “Harsh physical discipline in childhood and violence in later romantic involvements: The mediating role of problem behaviors”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 508–519

⁶¹ Straus, M. A., & Yodanis, C. L. (1996), “[Corporal punishment in adolescence and physical assaults on spouses later in life: What accounts for the link?](#)” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 825–841

⁶² Cast, A. D. et al (2006), “Childhood physical punishment and problem solving in marriage”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21:244–261

⁶³ Woods, K. & Jewkes, R. (1998), [*Love is a dangerous thing: micro-dynamics of violence in sexual relationships of young people in Umtata*](#), CERSA Women’s Health Medical Research Council

generations. A seven year old girl said, “...it’s mean and it hurts the child and they’ll just learn to smack people and they’ll go on and it won’t help at all”.⁶⁴ In a study in **New Zealand**, a 14 year old boy said: “It [smacking] doesn’t work. But the thing is that when your Mum and Dad were younger they would have probably been brought up the same way, like getting hit and stuff” and an 11 year old girl said “It teaches them, when they get children, to smack their kids”.⁶⁵

Children’s belief that corporal punishment perpetuates itself is confirmed by other studies – including a **US** study of nearly 350 mothers and fathers of two and three year old children, in which parents were asked about their experience of physical punishment as children, how they resolved conflicts in their marriages and how much they approved of physically punishing their children. The study found that mothers who had experienced physical punishment from their mother and fathers who had experienced physical punishment from their father were more likely to approve of physically punishing their own children. Fathers who perceived the “discipline” they had experienced as children to be “harsh” were also more likely to approve of physically punishing their children.⁶⁶ Another **US** study which involved 102 parents and children aged 3-7 found that parents who had experienced corporal punishment as children were more likely to approve of using corporal punishment on their own children and children whose parents approved of and used corporal punishment were more likely to approve of “spanking” and to think that hitting was a good strategy for resolving conflicts with their peers and siblings.⁶⁷

Mental harm and indirect physical harm

Corporal punishment is not only physically but also emotionally painful, as children describe. A ten year old boy taking part in a **New Zealand** study said, “The thing that makes you cry is that if you don’t see them and they go ‘whack’. That’s what makes you cry, even if it’s a light one you can just get scared cause you never know when it’s going to come”.⁶⁸ In a study in Scotland, **UK**, children used these words to describe how they felt after being hit: “Hurt, sore, scared, upset, unloved, terrified, worried, lonely, sad, angry, alone, abandoned, afraid, cross, frightened, sick, stunned, threatened, annoyed, bad, physically abused, hateful, emotionally hurt, unhappy, terrible, ashamed, disliked, confused, embarrassed, resentful, neglected, overpowered, humiliated, grumpy, disappointed, painful, miserable, intimidated, uncared-for, unwelcome, heartbroken, bullied, depressed, worried, shocked.”⁶⁹ The links between corporal punishment and poor mental health in childhood and adulthood are clear. In Gershoff’s meta-analysis, all 12 studies on mental health in childhood concluded that corporal punishment is significantly associated with a decrease in children’s mental health – including behaviour, anxiety and disruptive disorders and depression and hopelessness in adolescents. All eight on mental health in adulthood found an association between corporal

⁶⁴ See note 9

⁶⁵ See note 26

⁶⁶ Lunkenheimer, E. S. et al (2006), “The Intergenerational Transmission of Physical Punishment: Differing Mechanisms in Mothers’ and Fathers’ Endorsement?”, *Journal of Family Violence*, 21:509-519

⁶⁷ Simons, D. A. & Wurtele, S. K. (2010), “Relationships between parents’ use of corporal punishment and their children’s endorsement of spanking and hitting other children”, *Child Abuse & Neglect* 34: 639-646

⁶⁸ See note 8

⁶⁹ Cutting, E. (2001), “It doesn’t sort anything!” A report on the views of children and young people about the use of physical punishment, Edinburgh: Save the Children

punishment and poorer mental health, including low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.⁷⁰

The reasons for the effects may include disruption in parent-child attachment and disruption of the brain's mechanism for regulating stress.⁷¹ A study involving 44 low socioeconomic status mothers and toddlers in the **USA** examined children's levels of cortisol (a hormone released in response to stress) before and after a stressful experience (repeated separation from their mother, combined with the presence of a stranger). The study found that the more often children were "spanked" or "smacked" the higher their levels of cortisol after the stressful experience, suggesting that more frequent experience of corporal punishment made children react with more stress to a potentially frightening event. The authors suggest that the children were vulnerable to unexpected, challenging, or novel life events and could have difficulty dealing with stress in the future.⁷²

A **US** study involving 3,870 families found that children who were "spanked" when they were aged under one year old were more likely to be aggressive aged three and to be depressed or anxious aged five.⁷³ An 18 year longitudinal study of 1,025 **New Zealand** born children found that the more physical punishment they experienced during childhood, the more likely they were at age 18 to have had a psychiatric disorder, attempted suicide, been dependent on alcohol or cannabis, been a victim of assault aged 16-18 and committed criminal offences. Young people who had been exposed to frequent, severe punishment during their childhood had rates of these outcomes that were 1.5 to 3.9 times higher than those rates for young people who reported that their parents had never used physical punishment.⁷⁴ Another **New Zealand** study, of 42 children aged 8-12 and their families, examined the kinds of punishment parents used: "mild" (slapping a child on the hand or poking them), "moderate" (spanking a child or pulling them up by the arm) and "borderline abusive" (hitting a child with an object such as a belt or wooden spoon). Children who experienced more severe punishments were more likely to report feeling anxious and depressed.⁷⁵ Similar associations were found in a **US** study involving 16 year olds which found that experiencing harsh physical punishment was linked to greater adolescent depression.⁷⁶

A study of 12-year olds in **Sri Lanka** found that the level of corporal punishment the young people experienced was significantly associated with their level of psychological maladjustment, including low self-esteem, hostility and aggression and emotional instability. Experiencing violence at school – including corporal punishment by teachers – in the community and from peers impacted this relationship.⁷⁷

A study of 480 children aged 6-17 living in an urban poor area in **Brazil** found that those who had experienced severe physical punishment (defined as being hit with an object, kicked, choked,

⁷⁰ See note 5

⁷¹ See note 25

⁷² Bugental, D. B. et al (2002), "The hormonal costs of subtle forms of infant maltreatment", *Hormones and Behaviour* 43:237-244

⁷³ Gromoske, A. N. & Maguire-Jack, K. (2012), "Transactional and Cascading Relations Between Early Spanking and Children's Social-Emotional Development", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 74: 1054–1068

⁷⁴ Fergusson, D.M. and Lynskey, M.T. (1997), "Physical punishment/maltreatment during childhood and adjustment in young adulthood", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 21: 617-30

⁷⁵ Rodriguez, C. M. (2003), "Parental Discipline and Abuse Potential Affects on Child Depression, Anxiety, and Attributions", *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65:809–817

⁷⁶ Bender, H. L. et al (2007), "Use of harsh physical discipline and developmental outcomes in adolescence", *Development and Psychopathology*, 19: 227-242

⁷⁷ de Zoysa, P. et al (2008), "Corporal Punishment in the Sri Lankan Context: Psychological Outcomes for Our Children", in Devore, D. M. (2006), *New Developments in Parent-Child Relations*, Nova Science Publishers Inc

smothered, burnt, scalded, branded, beaten or threatened with a weapon) in the past year by their mother or mother's husband or partner were more than twice as likely as those who had not experienced these forms of punishment to suffer from two kinds of mental health problem together: problems which are inwardly directed such as anxiety or depression and problems which are outwardly directed such as aggressive behaviour.⁷⁸

Although many studies concentrate on more severe forms of corporal punishment, these associations have been shown to exist even where children experience corporal punishment infrequently. A study of 2,000 10-16 year olds in the **USA** found that the more often the young people had been "spanked", slapped or hit by parents or guardians in the past year, the more likely they were to have experienced psychological distress (including feeling sad, feeling alone and feeling bad about themselves). The association was significant at all levels of frequency of corporal punishment, including for young people who had experienced physical punishment once or twice in the past year. Those who experienced "frequent" corporal punishment (at least once a month) were also more likely to have been depressed in the past month. The study controlled for young people's experience of violence identified as abuse and for their age, gender and parent's income. The study also examined the effect of parental support (measured by young people answering questions such as "Do you and your parents have fun together?", "Do they trust you?" and "If you were in trouble would you talk to them?") and found that the association between experiencing frequent corporal punishment and psychological distress was greater when parents were more supportive: the difference in levels of psychological distress between frequently punished young people and those who were never physically punished was much greater among those with supportive parents. *"The findings... suggest... that using physical punishment is not beneficial to the well-being of children or adolescents even in the context of a supportive parent-child relationship. In fact, this "loving" context may affect the meaning that children attach to the punishment, such that they are more likely to attribute it to their own failures and deficiencies, or experience the discipline as arbitrary and unexpected. Indeed, believing that "they spank me often because they love me" may be more distressing than believing that "they spank me often because we don't get along" "*" (p. 164).⁷⁹ This is confirmed by a study which involved 89 children aged 9-12 in the **USA** and which found that children of parents who "spanked" them but who otherwise communicated with them in a positive and supportive way were more likely to be depressed than children who were "spanked" and whose parents did not communicate with them in a supportive way.⁸⁰

A nationally representative study in the **USA** found that people who had experienced physical punishment as children, but not more severe forms of violence, were more likely to experience mental health problems including major depression, mania, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug abuse and personality disorders.⁸¹ Similarly, a study of data from a survey of nearly 5,000 residents of Ontario, **Canada** aged 15-64 found that those who had been "spanked" or slapped more during childhood were more likely to have a psychiatric disorder, including anxiety disorder, major depression, alcohol or drug abuse and antisocial behaviour during their lifetime. For example, 5.8% of those who were never

⁷⁸ Bordin, I. A. et al (2009), "Severe physical punishment: risk of mental health problems for poor urban children in Brazil", *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 87(5):336-244

⁷⁹ Turner, H. A. & Finkelhor, D (1996), "Corporal Punishment as a Stressor among Youth", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58(1): 155-166

⁸⁰ Wimsatt, A. R. et al (2012), "Positive communication moderates the relationship between corporal punishment and child depressive symptoms," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 3 September 2012

⁸¹ Afifi, T. O. et al (2012), "Physical Punishment and Mental Disorders: Results From a Nationally Representative US Sample", *Pediatrics*, 2 July 2012

spanked or slapped during childhood had abused or been dependent on alcohol compared to 10.2% of those who were “rarely” slapped or spanked and 13.2% of those who were “sometimes” or “often” slapped or spanked.⁸² Physical punishment can cause alterations in the regions of the brain associated with vulnerability to the abuse of drugs and alcohol.⁸³ A study of 1,628 18-70 year olds in **China** found that those who reported experiencing physical punishment sometimes or often during their childhoods were about three times as likely to develop alcohol-related problems (for example, alcohol dependence, social and legal problems due to alcohol drinking and hazard-laden drinking such as drunk driving) than those who rarely or never experienced physical punishment during childhood.⁸⁴

Other US studies which have found links between corporal punishment and poor mental health include one involving students aged 18-29 which found that those who had experienced parental corporal punishment more frequently at age 13, especially corporal punishment by an angry parent, were more likely to have experienced symptoms of depression in the past two weeks⁸⁵ and one which found that the more corporal punishment adult respondents had experienced as teenagers, the more likely they were to have experienced symptoms of depression and thought about suicide in the past year.⁸⁶

Experiencing corporal punishment may also have a negative impact on physical health in children and adults. A study of 3,355 13- to 19-year-old students in Hong Kong, **China** found that those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months were more likely to feel that their health was poor and to experience physical illnesses (for example asthma), injuries and accidents, as well as anxiety and stress. Those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months were more than twice as likely to have stayed in hospital in the past three months as those who had not (6.2% compared to 2.7%). Seventeen per cent of those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months “thought of themselves as a worthless person” compared to 10% of those who had not been corporally punished in the past three months. Students who had experienced corporal punishment were more likely to take up habits which put their health at risk, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and fighting with others.⁸⁷

A 2012 study involving 700 people aged 40-60 in **Saudi Arabia** found that those who had been beaten once every six months or more by their parents during childhood were more likely to develop cancer and asthma as adults; those who had been beaten once or more per month were also more likely to develop cardiac disease. Being insulted by parents during childhood was associated with a greater risk of all three diseases. The study controlled for demographic factors including level of parental education. The researchers suggest that the links are due to the stress caused by the beatings and insults, which in turn leads to an increased risk of disease.⁸⁸

⁸² MacMillan, H. L. et al (1999), “Slapping and spanking in childhood and its association with lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders in a general population sample”, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 161(7): 805-809

⁸³ See note 25

⁸⁴ Cheng, H. G. et al (2011), “Childhood physical punishment and the onset of drinking problems: Evidence from metropolitan China”, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 118:31-39

⁸⁵ Turner, H. A., & Muller, P. A. (2004), “Long-term effects of child corporal punishment on depressive symptoms in young adults: Potential moderators and mediators”, *Journal of Family Issues*, 25:761-782

⁸⁶ Straus, M. A. (1999), “Corporal punishment of children and adult depression and suicidal ideation”, in Joan McCord (ed), *Coercion and Punishment in Long Term Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press

⁸⁷ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), “Prevalence and correlates of physical abuse in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents: A population-based approach”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23: 549-557

⁸⁸ Hyland et al (2012), “[Beating and insulting children as a risk for adult cancer, cardiac disease and asthma](#)”, *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 29 September 2012

Impaired cognitive development

Several studies suggest that corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children's cognitive development. This may be due to the effect of early experiences of fear and stress on the developing brain.⁸⁹ Results from neuroimaging studies suggest that experiencing harsh physical punishment may reduce the volume of the brain's grey matter in areas associated with performance on a scale used to measure intelligence in adolescence and adulthood.⁹⁰

There is evidence that most hunter/gatherer societies use little or no corporal punishment; this may be one factor which contributes to the healthy development of children in these societies: infants spend less time crying, children develop social skills faster, children are more emotionally secure, self-confident, curious and autonomous and adolescents are less likely to experience "identity crises" than in other societies.⁹¹

Studies of the association between corporal punishment and poorer cognitive development in young children from the **USA** include a study of over 2,500 children which found that those who were "spanked" aged 1 were more likely to score worse on a test of their mental development aged 3⁹² and a study of 779 children whose parents were interviewed when the children were born and at ages 1, 3 and 5 which found that children who were "spanked" by their mothers two times a week or more at age 3 were more likely to behave aggressively and break rules and to have a smaller vocabulary aged 5.⁹³ A study of 715 3-year-olds in the USA which found that girls who experienced "harsh discipline" and "low maternal warmth" had lower IQ scores than girls who did not.⁹⁴

A study in **Yemen** of nearly 1,200 children aged 7-10 and their families found that children who experienced "harsh corporal punishment" (being hit with an implement, tied up, bitten or pinched) performed worse at school than other children and were more likely to have behavioural and emotional difficulties.⁹⁵ A study of more than 1,000 13-17 year olds in **South Africa** found that the more frequent and severe physical punishment (including being pinched, slapped and hit with a stick) children experienced from their parents, the lower their scores on national school examinations.⁹⁶ The same holds true for psychological punishment: a study in **Canada** of 144 children aged 9-11 found that the more verbal aggression (including being rejected, demeaned, ridiculed, cursed, terrorised, criticised and insulted) children experienced from their parents, the lower their school marks in French (their native language), and the lower their self-esteem. Those who experienced frequent verbal

⁸⁹ Fox, N. A. & Shonkoff, J. P. (2011), "[How persistent fear and anxiety can affect young children's learning, behaviour and health](#)", *Early Childhood Matters* 116, The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation

⁹⁰ Tomoda A. et al (2009), "Reduced prefrontal cortical gray matter volume in young adults exposed to harsh corporal punishment", *Neuroimage* 47:66-71

⁹¹ Diamond, J. (2012), *The World Until Yesterday*, London: Allen Lane

⁹² Berlin, L. J. et al (2009), "Correlates and Consequences of Spanking and Verbal Punishment for Low-Income White, African American, and Mexican American Toddlers", *Child Development* 80(5):1403-1420

⁹³ MacKenzie, M. J. et al (2011), "Corporal Punishment and Child Behavioural and Cognitive Outcomes through 5 Years of Age: Evidence from a Contemporary Urban Birth Cohort Study", *Infant and Child Development*, published online in Wiley Online Library 25 Oct 2011

⁹⁴ Smith, J.R., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1997), "Correlates and consequences of harsh discipline for young children", *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 151(8):777-786

⁹⁵ Alyahri, A & Goodman, R. (2008), "Harsh corporal punishment of Yemeni children: occurrence, type and associations", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 32(8):766-773

⁹⁶ Cherian, V. I. (1994), "Self-reports of corporal punishment by Xhosa children from broken and intact families and their academic achievement", *Psychological Reports*, 74(3):867-874

aggression from their parents saw themselves as less competent in their school work, were less comfortable with their own behaviour and felt less worthy.⁹⁷

In a study of 337 children of African American mothers in the **USA**, the children were tested as infants and at age seven. The study found that children whose mothers used reasoning to resolve conflicts were more confident with words at age seven and that the more children were “spanked”, the more difficulties with attention and hyperactivity they had at age seven (for example, being easily distracted or having difficulty awaiting their turn).⁹⁸ A further study from the **USA**, in which over 1,500 children did tests of their cognitive ability (including tests of their reading and maths, memory of locations and motor and social development) when they were aged 2-9 and four years later, found that the more times children were “spanked” by their mothers in the week prior to the study, the less their cognitive ability had increased four years later.⁹⁹

School corporal punishment clearly violates children’s right to education, including by creating a violent and intimidating environment in which children are less able to learn. Research also shows that it can have similar effects to parental corporal punishment on children’s cognitive abilities. A study which examined the effects of school corporal punishment found that children who experienced and witnessed corporal punishment regularly scored worse on various cognitive tests than their peers. The study involved 63 children aged 3-6, who attended two private schools in a country in **West Africa**. In one of the schools (“the punitive school”), corporal punishment, including beating children with a stick, slapping their heads and pinching them, was administered routinely; in the other (“the non punitive school”) children were disciplined with time-outs and verbal reprimands. Children’s verbal ability, ability to delay gratification and ability to sort cards according to various criteria were tested. In kindergarten, children’s abilities were similar in the two schools, but in grade 1, children in the non-punitive school performed better on all the tasks than children in the punitive school.¹⁰⁰

The effects may last into adulthood. A study of 5,268 adults in the **USA** who took part in a survey in 1985 and 1,415 adults who took part in a survey in 1975 found that the more corporal punishment men had experienced from their parents as teenagers, the less likely they were to graduate from college.¹⁰¹ A study of 1,337 men in the **USA** who were surveyed in 1975 found that for men who had completed high school or higher education, the more corporal punishment they had experienced as teenagers from their parents, the less likely they were to have high status and highly paid jobs.¹⁰²

Damage to the parent-child relationship

⁹⁷ Solomon, C.R. & Serres, F. (1999), “Effects of parental verbal aggression on children’s self-esteem and school marks”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(4):339-351

⁹⁸ Jester, J. M. et al (1999), “Do Maternal Reasoning and Physical Punishment Contribute to Development of Verbal Competence and Behavior Problems?”, presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 1999

⁹⁹ Straus, M. A. & Paschall, M. J. (2009), “[Corporal Punishment by Mothers and Development of Children’s Cognitive Ability: A Longitudinal Study of Two Nationally Representative Age Cohorts](#)”, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 18:459-483

¹⁰⁰ See note 39

¹⁰¹ Straus, M. A. & Mathur, A. K. (1995), “[Corporal Punishment of Adolescents and Academic Attainment](#)”, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological, San Francisco, 7 April 1995

¹⁰² Straus, M. A. & Gimpel, H. S. (1992), “Corporal Punishment by Parents and Economic Achievement: A Theoretical Model and Some Preliminary Empirical Data”, paper presented at the 1992 meeting of the American Sociological Association

Corporal punishment inflicted on a child by her or his parents can cause damage to the parent-child relationship. In Gershoff's 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. One of the studies included found that two year olds who experienced physical punishment from their mothers were more likely to distance themselves from their mothers than two year olds who were not physically punished.¹⁰³

Studies suggest that the damage to the relationship is due to the association of the feelings of fear, anxiety and anger created by corporal punishment with the parent, leading to fear and avoidance of the parent. In studies of their experience of corporal punishment, children confirm this: they report feeling hurt, angry and frightened of their parents after experiencing physical punishment. Children in **New Zealand** said that *"It feels like they [parents] don't love you anymore"* (nine-year-old girl) and *"You feel real upset because they are hurting you and you love them so much and then all of a sudden they hit you and hurt you and you feel like as though they don't care about you because they are hurting you"* (13-year-old girl). They described trying to avoid their parents: *"You go to your room and never talk to them. And if... your parents come and talk to you, you push them away"* (13 year old girl).¹⁰⁴ When asked why adults don't "smack" each other, young children in the **UK** said it was because they love each other and are friends or respect each other.¹⁰⁵

Later studies corroborate these findings: a study of 169 mothers and babies aged 14 months in the **USA** found that babies who were spanked more frequently were less securely attached to their mothers. Attachment was measured by mothers sorting cards on which were descriptions of children's behaviour, for example "child readily shares with mother or lets her hold things if she wants to" and "Child sometimes signals mother that he wants to be put down, and then fusses or wants to be picked right back up"; these were arranged into nine piles ranging from "very much unlike my child" to "very much like my child".¹⁰⁶

A similar effect is evident in adolescence: a study of 3,355 13- to 19-year-old students in Hong Kong, **China** found that those who had experienced corporal punishment in the past three months were more likely to have poor familial relations and coping skills: twenty-eight per cent of them felt that they "did not know how to handle their emotional problems" compared to 20% of those who were not corporally punished, and 25.5% said they had "a bad relationship with family members", compared to 14% of those who were not corporally punished.¹⁰⁷ The effects may be long-lasting: a study of 274 students aged 18-26 in the **USA** found that those who experienced high levels of physical punishment during childhood were more likely to have poor relationships with their parents, high family conflict, symptoms of depression and poor social relationships at the time of the study.¹⁰⁸

A study carried out in **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan** involved nearly 400 disadvantaged 8-16 year olds, including children from poor rural homes, children with disabilities, survivors of trafficking, homeless children, working children, children in conflict with the law and children engaged in or affected by armed conflict. Challenging the myth that children end up in

¹⁰³ See note 5

¹⁰⁴ See note 26

¹⁰⁵ See note 9

¹⁰⁶ Coyl, D. D. et al (2002), "Stress, Maternal Depression, and Negative Mother-Infant Interactions in Relation to Infant Attachment", *Infant Mental Health Journal* 23(1-2):145-163

¹⁰⁷ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), "Prevalence and correlates of physical abuse in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents: A population-based approach", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23: 549-557

¹⁰⁸ Leary, C. E. et al (2008), "Parental Use of Physical Punishment as Related to Family Environment, Psychological Well-being, and Personality in Undergraduates", *Journal of Family Violence* 23:1-7

vulnerable situations only because of poverty, the study found that physical and psychological punishment was one of the main reasons for some children to leave home and drop out of school, which eventually led to them doing sex work, being jailed and/or living on the streets.¹⁰⁹

Responses to arguments defending corporal punishment

Despite the near-consensus on the harmful effects of corporal punishment from those working on the topic across a wide range of academic disciplines, a small number of supporters of physical punishment continue to maintain that it is not harmful. This section contains brief responses to some of the arguments which have been advanced against the enormous body of evidence showing corporal punishment's negative effects.

“It is not possible to prove that there is a causal relationship between corporal punishment and negative outcomes in children.”

It is true that no research can ever conclusively prove a causal relationship for corporal punishment, as for many other issues. Child development is dependent on multiple interrelated factors and children cannot be subjected to randomised blind-control trials. However, over the past twenty years, researchers have employed increasingly sophisticated research designs and statistical techniques to investigate the nature of the relationship between corporal punishment and a variety of child outcomes. As summarised in this paper, the results have consistently found that physical punishment increases the risk of a wide range of negative outcomes, while no study has found that physical punishment enhances children's development.¹¹⁰ The evidence that corporal punishment causes negative outcomes is overwhelming.

“The harmful outcomes associated with physical punishment may actually be due to other factors.”

It has been suggested that the associations between corporal punishment and behaviour problems or aggression in children are due to aggressive children being physically punished more, rather than to physical punishment affecting their behaviour (the “chicken and egg” question). Similarly, it has been suggested that the associations are due to confounding variables – for example, that parents with a higher income are less likely to use physical punishment and more likely to have children with better developmental outcomes. To address these issues, researchers have carried out prospective studies which control for children's levels of aggression and antisocial behaviour at the beginning of the study and for a wide range of demographic features including socioeconomic status. These have consistently confirmed that physical punishment is a risk factor for children's behaviour problems and aggression, regardless of socioeconomic or other status.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Choudhury, I. & Jabeen, S.F. (2008), *Perception of Children on Parenting Practices*, Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia

¹¹⁰ See note 83

¹¹¹ For example, Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2005), “Relationship of Corporal Punishment and Antisocial Behavior by Neighborhood”, *Archives Of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 159(10): 938-942; and see notes 28, 29, 48, 44, 45 and 46

“Studies showing negative outcomes are about “abuse” rather than “ordinary” physical punishment.”

The purported distinction between “ordinary” physical punishment and “abuse” is meaningless¹¹²: no line can or should be drawn between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” violence against children (see “Direct physical harm” above). However, in order to study the effects of socially accepted “physical punishment” separately from the effects of socially unaccepted “physical abuse”, many researchers have drawn a distinction and found overwhelming evidence that even “light” or “infrequent” corporal punishment is damaging to children.¹¹³

It has also been suggested that research on the harmful effects of physical punishment has not addressed other “disciplinary techniques” which parents use and therefore has not separated the negative effects of corporal punishment and these other techniques. However, a study involving children in six countries which examined 11 discipline techniques used by parents (including teaching children about good and bad behaviour, taking away privileges and promising treats or privileges) found that only corporal punishment and expressing disappointment with the child were associated with both increased aggression and increased anxiety. Yelling at or scolding a child was associated with increased aggression and sending children to their room and shaming them were associated with increased anxiety.¹¹⁴ There are many positive, non-violent discipline techniques which do not inflict damage on children and are effective in teaching them how to behave.

“The effects of physical punishment vary across cultures or according to context.”

The suggestion that the effects of physical punishment vary across cultures has sometimes been used to promote claims that ending corporal punishment is a European/North American idea and not a universal right. However, there is little evidence of cultural variation in negative effects, and the few studies advanced in its support deal only with purported differences in the effects on children’s antisocial or aggressive behaviour: no evidence has been found of differences in the effects on children’s mental or physical health or other outcomes. As is clear from this review, research in most world regions has found evidence of the harmful effects of corporal punishment.

Several studies which have examined the effects of corporal punishment on children from different ethnic groups have found no significant differences.¹¹⁵ A study which explicitly addressed the idea that the effects of corporal punishment are not bad where children consider it to be normal involved children in six countries (**China, India, Italy, Kenya, the Philippines and Thailand**) and found that in all countries, corporal punishment was associated with aggressive and anxious behaviour even after adjusting for children’s beliefs about the normality of corporal punishment.¹¹⁶ A few researchers have suggested that physical punishment is not harmful where it occurs in a loving context. However, research suggests that a loving or supportive context can increase rather than decrease the negative effects of corporal punishment.¹¹⁷

¹¹² See note 14

¹¹³ For example, see note 5

¹¹⁴ Gershoff, E. T. et al (2010), “Parent discipline practices in an international sample: Associations with child behaviors and moderation by perceived normativeness”, *Child Development*, 81(2): 480-495

¹¹⁵ For example, see notes 48 and 45

¹¹⁶ See note 114

¹¹⁷ For example, see notes 79 and 80

A study which compared the effects of corporal punishment on societies rather than on individuals found consistent effects on cultural groups from all world regions: in societies which made more frequent use of corporal punishment, there was greater endorsement of other forms of violence at a societal level.¹¹⁸

The perception that corporal punishment is more a non-European than a European cultural “tradition” or that non-white parents in Europe, North America and Australasia are more likely to use corporal punishment than white parents is not grounded in fact.¹¹⁹ In fact, the institutionalization of corporal punishment in many societies around the world was driven by European colonialism and slavery. Moreover, all countries have high levels of corporal punishment before they outlaw it: for example over 90% of Swedish parents used it before the laws was changed in 1957 and 1966 to remove this right (it was explicitly banned in 1979).¹²⁰ Thus no tradition or state can claim physical punishment is special to them. Only hunter/gatherer societies, arguably the most “traditional” societies in existence, use little or no corporal punishment.¹²¹

Prohibiting and eliminating corporal punishment is a human rights imperative; from a human rights perspective, the suggestion that children from non-European cultures should be afforded less protection than their European counterparts is of course entirely unacceptable. No culture owns corporal punishment but all have a responsibility to disown it.

Conclusion

The evidence that corporal punishment is harmful to children, adults and societies is overwhelming – the more than 150 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, education and cognitive development. Far from teaching children how to behave, it impairs moral internalisation, increases antisocial behaviour and damages family relationships. It increases aggression in children, is linked to intimate partner violence and inequitable gender attitudes and increases the likelihood of perpetrating and experiencing violence as an adult. 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.

¹¹⁸ See note 52

¹¹⁹ See note 14

¹²⁰ Modig, C. (2009), [*Never Violence – Thirty Years on from Sweden’s Abolition of Corporal Punishment*](#), Save the Children Sweden & Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

¹²¹ See note 91