

Please Stop Publishing Inadequate Science about Spanking

Dear *Pediatrics* Editor:

The MacKenzie et al. article in *Pediatrics* is yet another inadequately supported attempt to disenfranchise parents from appropriate use of disciplinary spanking. This is the third study that *Pediatrics* has featured to the media recently, emphasizing unconditional anti-spanking conclusions despite unusually weak evidence. Two retrospective studies by Afifi et al.^{1,2} claimed to provide evidence against all disciplinary spanking, when the key survey questions used only the terms “push, grab, shove, slap, or hit,”² not “spank.” Now the article by MacKenzie et al. claims to have evidence against all spanking when only two of 16 outcomes were significant (after all controls were included), and the mean effect of spanking at the age of 3 was actually slightly in a beneficial direction. Overall, the mean effect size was equivalent to a meager odds ratio of 1.06 (OR = 1.00 indicates no association at all), easily explained by unmeasured confounding variables.

In defending their opposition to spanking, all three articles cited Gershoff’s³ meta-analysis, but its evidence against spanking is weak as well, based solely on cross-sectional (61%), retrospective (26%), and longitudinal (13%) correlations. Correlations make all corrective actions appear to be harmful for treating chronic problems, whether disciplinary or medical. For instance, patients who received radiation treatment last year are more likely to have cancer this year than the rest of us who did not have cancer and did not receive radiation treatment, thus making the treatment *appear* harmful. Even a perfect cancer treatment would appear harmful according to cross-sectional correlations, since during-treatment cancer would count as evidence against it. It would appear ineffective according to longitudinal correlations because cancer patients would then become indistinguishable from everyone else. Thus even a perfect corrective action would be regarded as harmful by most of Gershoff’s³ correlational evidence and ineffective ($r = .00$) according to her strongest correlational evidence.

Two recent meta-analyses of disciplinary spanking have moved beyond these biased correlations. Based on studies controlling statistically for pre-existing differences, one meta-analysis found tiny adverse effects of spanking of children under the age of 7 on externalizing behavior problems (partial $r = .06$, equivalent to OR = 1.24), which could easily be explained by unmeasured confounds.⁴ The second meta-analysis found that physical punishment led to more adverse outcomes than alternative disciplinary tactics only when it was used *severely* or as the *main disciplinary method*.⁵ When compared directly to other disciplinary measures (e.g., time-out), customary spanking was found to result in similar outcomes, except for one study favoring spanking. Conditional spanking (nonabusive usage when 2- to 6-year-olds respond defiantly to milder tactics) was actually associated with significantly less noncompliance or aggression than 10 of 13 other disciplinary measures to which it has been compared, including the only four randomized trials of spanking.

By co-sponsoring the only scientific conference on corporal punishment [Friedman & Schonberg, *Pediatrics* 1996;98(4, Part 2)], AAP became the leading society in promoting objective science on this important topic. Featuring unconditional anti-spanking conclusions to the media based on such weak evidence compromises that leadership position.

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November 2013

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