Summary of research on the effects of corporal punishment

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Introduction

Corporal punishment – violence inflicted on children by parents, teachers, carers and others in the
name of “discipline” – is experienced by a large majority of children in many states worldwide.¹ Some
children, including children with disabilities² and young children, are particularly likely to experience
it.

Corporal punishment is a violation of children’s rights and international human rights law requires
prohibition of all corporal punishment, including in the family home. There is no need to look for
evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment in order to know that it must be prohibited

² 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
and eliminated – 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. A major 2002 meta-analysis of 88 studies found associations between lawful corporal punishment by parents and ten negative outcomes.\(^3\) Since then, the already large and consistent body of evidence on the topic has been augmented still further – including through the use of increasingly sophisticated techniques which researchers have employed to address the arguments advanced by a few opponents of prohibition\(^4\) and through studies which address associations not included in the meta-analysis. The body of evidence is now overwhelming – more than 150 studies show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative outcomes, while no studies have found evidence of any benefits.

Intended for use by advocates for children’s right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, this summary of research 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.

*The information in this summary is taken from the Global Initiative’s longer working paper which reviews research on the effects of corporal punishment. For a copy of the working paper, detailed information on applicable human rights standards, guidance on law reform, reports on the legality of corporal punishment in every state worldwide and research into the prevalence of and attitudes towards corporal punishment see [www.endcorporalpunishment.org](http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org) or email info@endcorporalpunishment.org.*

**The effects of corporal punishment**

**Direct physical harm**

*Corporal punishment kills thousands of children each year, injures many more and is the direct cause of many children’s physical impairments.*\(^5\) Research in countries in all regions attests to the severity of the physical violence which children experience in the name of “discipline”. Corporal punishment includes children being hit with hands and objects; being kicked, shaken and forced to maintain uncomfortable positions; and a wide range of other painful and degrading treatment.\(^6\)

*Most violence against children commonly referred to as “abuse” is corporal punishment.* Research has consistently found that the majority of incidents substantiated by authorities as physical

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\(^4\) For more information, see the Global Initiative’s review of research on the effects of corporal punishment, of which this document is a summary


\(^6\) 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)
“abuse” are cases of physical punishment. The intent to discipline or punish has been shown to be a common precursor in many child homicide cases.

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. The risk of escalation is increased by the fact that adults who inflict physical punishment are often angry: their anger can increase the level of force used beyond what was intended, and their intent may be retaliatory as well as punitive. All ten of the studies on child protection in a major 2002 meta-analysis found that corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical “abuse”; later studies have found similar associations.

Increased aggression in children

There is abundant evidence that corporal punishment is associated with increased aggression in children. All 27 studies on the topic included in the major meta-analysis found an association, and this has been confirmed by numerous other studies. Children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers, to approve of the use of violence in peer relationships, to bully and to experience violence from their peers, to use violent methods to resolve conflict and to be aggressive towards their parents.

The reasons may include that aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain, that children learn that violence is an appropriate method of getting what you want and that children copy their parents’ behaviour. Children describe feeling aggressive after being physically punished.

Poor moral internalisation and increased antisocial behaviour

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. Although in the meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance, 13 of 15

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7 For example, A. & Trocmé, N. (2013), Physical Abuse and Physical Punishment in Canada, Child Canadian Welfare Research Portal Information Sheet # 122
11 See note 3
12 For example, Clément, M. E. et al (2000), La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, Québec: Institut de la Statistique du Québec
13 See note 3
studies found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child’s long-term compliance to the desired behaviour.\textsuperscript{19}

Corporal punishment has been found to be 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. In 12 of the 13 studies included in the meta-analysis, corporal punishment was found to be significantly associated with an increase in delinquent and antisocial behaviour\textsuperscript{20}; the link with behaviour problems has been confirmed by numerous later studies involving both young\textsuperscript{21} and older\textsuperscript{22} children.

Corporal punishment can reduce empathy\textsuperscript{23} and moral regulation.\textsuperscript{24} It does not teach children how to behave or help them understand how their behaviour affects others; rather than helping children to develop the desire and motivation to behave well of their own accord, it teaches them that it is desirable not to get caught. Corporal punishment may also decrease the likelihood of long-term compliance by damaging adult-child relationships, 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.

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

The violent behaviour of children who have experienced corporal punishment persists into adulthood: corporal punishment in childhood is associated with aggressive, antisocial and criminal behaviour in adulthood.\textsuperscript{25}

Corporal punishment is closely related to intimate partner violence, and often coexists with it.\textsuperscript{26} Experience of corporal punishment as a child was associated with violence towards a partner or child as an adult in all five studies on the topic included in the meta-analysis. The associations with both perpetration and approval of intimate partner violence have been confirmed in other studies.\textsuperscript{27} Associations have also been found between girls’ experience of corporal punishment and their

\textsuperscript{19} See note 3
\textsuperscript{20} See note 3
\textsuperscript{25} See note 3
subsequent experience of partner violence as adult women\(^{28}\) and between boys’ experience of corporal punishment and their subsequent inequitable gender attitudes as adult men.\(^{29}\)

**Corporal punishment perpetuates itself.** Adults who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to inflict it on their own children and children who experience it are more likely to approve of its use.\(^{30}\)

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**Mental harm and indirect physical harm**

**Corporal punishment is emotionally as well as physically painful and its links to poor mental health in childhood are clear.** In a major meta-analysis, all 12 studies found that corporal punishment is significantly associated with a decrease in children’s mental health, including with behaviour disorders, anxiety disorders, depression and hopelessness.\(^{31}\) Later studies have found associations with suicide attempts, alcohol and drug dependency, low self-esteem, hostility and emotional instability.\(^{32}\)

**The associations hold true in adulthood.** All eight studies on mental health in adulthood in the meta-analysis found an association between corporal punishment and poor mental health, including low self-esteem, depression, alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.\(^{33}\) Significant later studies include a nationally representative US study which found associations with major depression, mania, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug abuse and personality disorders.\(^{34}\)

**These negative effects may also impact on physical health.** Associations have been found between corporal punishment and children feeling that their health was poor, experiencing physical illnesses such as asthma, suffering injuries and accidents, being hospitalised and developing habits which put their health at risk, such as smoking, fighting with others and alcohol consumption.\(^{35}\) The effect may continue into adulthood: one study found associations with developing cancer, asthma or cardiac disease as an adult;\(^{36}\) another found that adults who had experienced corporal punishment as children were more likely to develop alcohol-related problems.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{31}\) See note 3


\(^{33}\) See note 3


Impaired cognitive development

Studies suggest that corporal punishment can have a negative impact on children’s cognitive development: associations have been found between corporal punishment and lower IQ scores, smaller vocabularies, poor cognitive abilities and poor school marks; these associations have been found for school as well as parental corporal punishment.

The effects may be lifelong: in some studies, children who experienced corporal punishment were less likely to graduate from college and to have high status and highly paid jobs.

Damage to the parent-child relationship

Corporal punishment inflicted on a child by her or his parents can severely damage the parent-child relationship. In the 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 found that two year olds who were physically punished by their mothers were more likely to distance themselves from their mothers than two year olds who were not physically punished. Later studies have found that corporal punishment is associated with poor attachment by babies to their mothers and with poor family relationships in adolescence and young adulthood. Corporal punishment can teach children to fear and avoid their parents: children report feeling hurt, angry and frightened of their parents after being physically punished.

Conclusion

The evidence that corporal punishment is harmful to children, adults and societies is overwhelming – more than 150 studies show associations between corporal punishment and a wide range of negative

41 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
45 See note 3
49 See note 18
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.

*Briefing prepared by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children*

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