

Physical Punishment, Maltreatment, and the Continuum of Violence Against Children

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What Is Physical Punishment?

"corporal" or "physical" punishment [is] any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.

--U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007, para. 11.



The most common form of physical punishment used by parents in the United States is "spanking".

What Is Physical Punishment?

“Physical punishment” and “spanking” are euphemisms for “hitting” or otherwise hurting children.

In a recent study, my colleagues and I asked parents to define “spanking”.

The majority used terms such as “hitting”, “smacking”, “swatting” or “striking.”

In other words, they could not define spanking without using a term of violence.

Physical Punishment is Prevalent

63% of 2- to 4-year-old children around the world are physically punished by their parents .

732 million children live in countries where school corporal punishment is permitted.

(UNICEF, 2017).

Nearly 100,000 children in the U.S. are paddled in schools each year.



https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/EVAC-Booklet-FINAL-10_31_17-high-res.pdf

<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018>

There have been hundreds of studies of child outcomes associated with corporal punishment.

My colleagues and I conducted a systematic review, focusing on longitudinal studies that examined change in the outcome over time.

Physical punishment and child outcomes: a narrative review of prospective studies



Anja Heilmann, Anita Mehay, Richard G Watt, Yvonne Kelly, Joan E Durrant, Jillian van Turnhout, Elizabeth T Gershoff

Physical punishment is increasingly viewed as a form of violence that harms children. This narrative review summarises the findings of 69 prospective longitudinal studies to inform practitioners and policy makers about physical punishment's outcomes. Our review identified seven key themes. First, physical punishment consistently predicts increases in child behaviour problems over time. Second, physical punishment is not associated with positive outcomes over time. Third, physical punishment increases the risk of involvement with child protective services. Fourth, the only evidence of children eliciting physical punishment is for externalising behaviour. Fifth, physical punishment predicts worsening behaviour over time in quasi-experimental studies. Sixth, associations between physical punishment and detrimental child outcomes are robust across child and parent characteristics. Finally, there is some evidence of a dose-response relationship. The consistency of these findings indicates that physical punishment is harmful to children and that policy remedies are warranted.

Introduction

The WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission¹ on children has highlighted social, economic, commercial, and environmental threats to child health and has called for

The purpose of this narrative review is thus to summarise the past two decades of research on physical punishment in a format that is accessible to policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners. Although

Lancet 2021; 398: 355-64

Published Online

June 28, 2021

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00582-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00582-1)

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Of the 98 effect sizes we examined, NONE indicated an overall beneficial effect of corporal punishment on children.

	Studies examining outcome (n)	Independent samples examining outcome (n)	Among the independent samples			
			Detrimental outcomes	Beneficial outcomes	No significant associations	Mixed findings*
Externalising behaviours						
Externalising behaviour	27	19	13	0	3	3 (Det/NS) ^{10,21} (Det/Ben) ²²
Aggressive behaviour	20	6	5	0	1	0
Antisocial behaviour or conduct problems	8	5	4	0	0	1 (Det) ^{23,24} (NS) ^{25,26}
Internalising behaviours						
Internalising behaviours	15	10	5	0	3	2 (Ben/NS) ²² (Det/Ben) ²⁷
Total behaviour problems (externalising and internalising)	6	5	4	0	0	1 (Det) ²⁸ (Det/NS/NS) ²⁹
Prosocial behaviour or social competence						
Prosocial behaviour or social competence	5	5	0	0	5	0
Inattention or ADHD symptoms						
Inattention or ADHD symptoms	2	2	1	0	1	0
Cognitive abilities						
Cognitive abilities	8	6	2	0	1	3 (Det/NS/NS) ^{30,31} (Det/Ben) ³²
Interpersonal relationships						
Interpersonal relationships	3	3	1	0	1	1 (Det/NS/NS) ³³
Stress reactivity						
Stress reactivity	1	1	1	0	0	0
Involvement with CPS†						
Involvement with CPS†	3	2	2	0	0	0
Total	98	64	38	0	15	11

Det=detrimental. Ben=beneficial. NS=not significant. ADHD=attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. CPS=child protective services. *Differential findings across measures or subgroups within the same study or across studies within the same dataset. †Only one of the independent samples examining child abuse or neglect controlled for previous maltreatment.

Table: Overview of included studies, by child outcome

Heilmann, A., Mehay, A., Watt, R. G., Kelly, Y., Durrant, J. E., van Turnhout, J., & Gershoff, E. T. (2021). Physical punishment and its outcomes for children: A narrative review of prospective studies. *The Lancet*, 398, 355-364. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00582-1

Our study, and the last sentence in the article, was featured on the cover of *The Lancet* the week our article appeared:

THE LANCET

Volume 398 · Number 10297 · Pages 277-364 · July 24-30, 2021

www.thelancet.com

“There is no time to waste—all countries should heed the UN’s call to uphold children’s human rights and promote their wellbeing by prohibiting physical punishment in all forms and all settings.”

See [Review](#) page 355

Does Spanking Improve Children's Behavior?

Journal of Family Psychology

© 2016 American Psychological Association
0893-3200/16/\$12.00 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>

Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analyses

Elizabeth T. Gershoff
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Andrew Grogan-Kaylor
University of Michigan

Whether spanking is helpful or harmful to children continues to be the source of considerable debate among both researchers and the public. This article addresses 2 persistent issues, namely whether effect sizes for spanking are distinct from those for physical abuse, and whether effect sizes for spanking are robust to study design differences. Meta-analyses focused specifically on spanking were conducted on a total of 111 unique effect sizes representing 160,927 children. Thirteen of 17 mean effect sizes were significantly different from zero and all indicated a link between spanking and increased risk for detrimental child outcomes. Effect sizes did not substantially differ between spanking and physical abuse or by study design characteristics.

- 75 studies, over 50 years, from 13 different countries
- 160,927 children were included

Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: New meta-analyses and old controversies. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30, 453-469.

Does Spanking Improve Children's Behavior?

Spanking does not make children more compliant in the short term.

Spanking is also not linked with reductions in aggression or antisocial behavior.

Spanking is not linked with long-term compliance or internalization of morals.

Does Spanking Improve Children's Behavior?

Instead, spanking is linked with worse, not better, behavior in children.

In our meta-analyses, we found that spanking was associated with significantly more aggression and antisocial behavior problems.

None of the studies showed a link between spanking and better behavior.

Is Spanking Linked with Unintended Negative Outcomes in Childhood?

- Our meta-analyses revealed that spanking is linked with several unintended outcomes:
 - Mental health problems
 - Difficult relationships with parents
 - Lower self-esteem
 - Lower academic performance

Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: New meta-analyses and old controversies. *Journal of Family Psychology, 30*, 453-469.

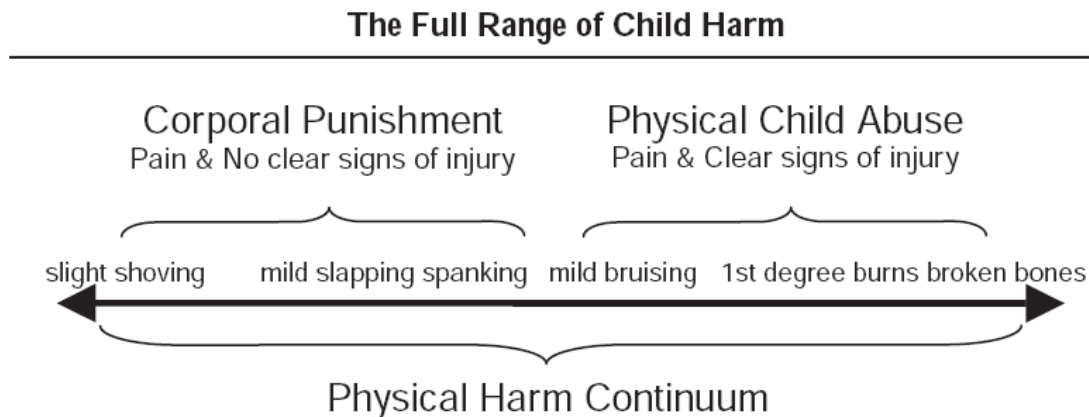
Is Spanking Linked with Unintended Negative Outcomes in Adulthood?

- Our meta-analyses revealed that adults who report a history of spanking in childhood report:
 - More mental health problems
 - More antisocial behavior
 - More positive attitudes about and use of corporal punishment with their own children.
 - Cycle of violence from generation to generation.

Can Spanking Lead to Physical Abuse?

Spanking is hitting.

Family violence experts consider spanking and physical abuse to be on a continuum of violence against children.



Dussich, J. P. J., & Maekoya, C. (2007). Physical child harm and bullying-related behaviors: A comparative study in Japan, South Africa, and the United States. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51, 495-509.

Can Spanking Lead to Physical Abuse?

A review of child maltreatment cases in Canada determined that **75%** of substantiated physical abuse cases involved **intentional physical punishment.**

Can Spanking Lead to Physical Abuse?

My colleague and I found a strong, statistically significant association between spanking and the risk of physical abuse.

We conducted a separate meta-analysis of studies where the same participants were asked both about spanking and about behaviors that could be considered physical abuse (e.g., use of objects to hit children).

Table 3
Effect Sizes for Studies That Reported Effect Sizes Separately for Spanking and Physical Abuse

Study	Outcome	Predictor	d	95% Confidence interval		Beneficial outcomes	Detrimental outcomes
Lau et al. (2003)	child externalizing behavior problems	spanking	.15	-.30	.60	-	+
		physical abuse	.65	.19	1.10		
Lau et al. (2005)	child externalizing behavior problems	spanking	.19	.16	.22	-	+
		physical abuse	.33	.30	.37		
Bugental, Martorell, and Barraza (2003)	child mental health problems	spanking	1.23	.77	1.69	-	+
		physical abuse	.40	-.21	1.01		
Lau et al. (2003)	child mental health problems	spanking	.42	-.03	.87	-	+
		physical abuse	.62	.17	1.07		
Lau et al. (2003)	child low self-esteem	spanking	.00	-.45	.45	-	+
		physical abuse	.37	-.08	.82		
Fergusson et al. (2008)	adult antisocial behavior	spanking	.45	.33	.57	-	+
		physical abuse	.25	.13	.37		
Lynch et al. (2006)	adult antisocial behavior	spanking	.10	.00	.20	-	+
		physical abuse	.51	.41	.62		
Fergusson et al. (2008)	adult mental health problems	spanking	.21	.09	.33	-	+
		physical abuse	.55	.43	.66		
Miller-Perrin, Perrin, and Kocur (2009)	adult mental health problems	spanking	.04	-.55	.63	-	+
		physical abuse	.58	-.01	1.17		
Schweitzer, Zafar, Pavlicova, and Fallon (2011)	adult mental health problems	spanking	1.12	.38	1.86	-	+
		physical abuse	.96	.23	1.70		
Overall		spanking	.25	-.22	.27	-	+
		physical abuse	.38	.29	.41		

The size of the association between spanking and negative outcomes was two thirds the size of the association for physical abuse and those same outcomes.

Our findings support the notion of a continuum of violence against children, with physical punishment and physical abuse points along that continuum:

Physical punishment is **associated with the same negative outcomes for children** as physical abuse, just to a slightly smaller degree.

A recent study using brain scan data found that children who have been corporally punished have more brain activation in response to threat than do children who have never been corporally punished.

Highlighted areas show brain regions in which corporally punished children were more reactive than children never corporally punished. These regions are involved in regulating emotions and processing social information about the intentions of others.

Their findings were similar to brain research on children who have been physically abused, leading the authors to conclude that the impacts of physical punishment on the brain are the same as those for more severe forms of violence.

This study suggests that one reason why physical punishment and physical abuse have the same outcomes for children is that **they alter children's brain structure and functioning in similarly damaging ways.**

Can Spanking Lead to Physical Abuse?

Several state laws say, “Yes”:

Physical abuse can include:

“**cruel punishment**” in Connecticut and Ohio

“**excessive corporal punishment**” in Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, South Carolina, West Virginia

“**excessive or unreasonable corporal punishment**” in Wyoming

Spanking is an ACE Comparable to Maltreatment

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have become a focus of concern in public health and medicine.

The original ACEs study asked participants whether they had been spanked as a child, but the data had never been analyzed.

Spanking is an ACE Comparable to Maltreatment

We collaborated with the CDC to examine data from the original ACES study:

Child Abuse & Neglect 69 (2017) 10–19



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health[☆]



Melissa T. Merrick^{a,*}, Katie A. Ports^a, Derek C. Ford^a, Tracie O. Afifi^b, Elizabeth T. Gershoff^c, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor^d

Reanalysis of Original ACES Study Data

	Drug Use	Moderate to Heavy Drinking	Suicide Attempt (lifetime)	Depressed Affect
ACE Exposure	OR_{adj}	OR_{adj}	OR_{adj}	OR_{adj}
Sexual abuse	1.48	1.35	2.31	1.18
Emotional abuse			2.27	
Physical abuse	1.29	1.19		1.33
Spanking	1.42	1.29	1.39	
Physical neglect				
Emotional neglect			1.65	1.38
Mother treated violently				
Household mental illness	1.42		3.41	1.65
Incarcerated household member			1.50	
Household substance abuse	1.55	1.82		1.23
Parental separation/divorce				

Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

A common argument is that, because rates of spanking vary across cultures, the effects of spanking will vary according to how “normative” it is.

--This argument is known as the “cultural normativeness” theory.

Although initial studies in the US found the effects of spanking to be different for Black and White families, many later studies have failed to replicate these findings.

Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

In a study of mothers and their children in China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand, we found that spanking predicted higher aggression and more anxiety problems in children.

Even when children or parents believed most people in their communities used spanking (ie it was normative), it was still linked with these negative outcomes, just to a slightly lesser degree.

Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

In a study of over 11,000 children, the majority of all groups spank:

89% of Black parents

80% of Latino parents

78% of White parents

73% of Asian parents

Do the Outcomes Linked with Spanking Vary by Country or Culture?

Black parents reported more frequent use of spanking than parents from the other three race and ethnic groups.

Yet despite these differences across these groups in frequency of spanking, we did not find any differences in outcomes.

Spanking predicted increases in children's behavior problems over time, over and above children's initial behaviors, for all four U.S. cultural groups.

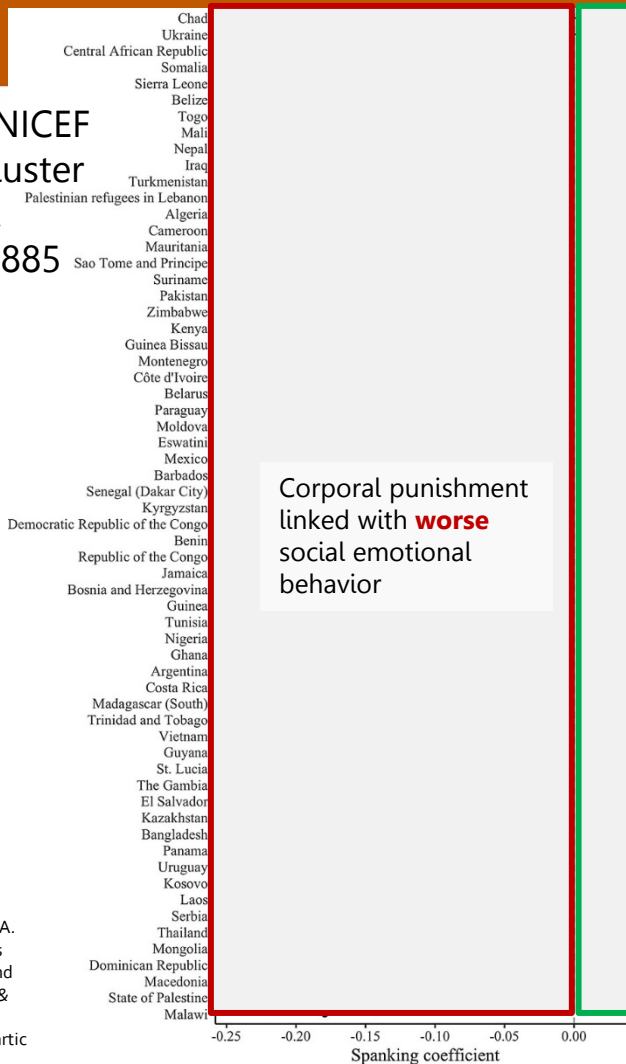
Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by the Warmth of the Parent?

- In a long-term study of 3,000 children in the U.S., we found that spanking at age 3 predicted increases in children's aggression from age 3 to age 5 for all children.
 - The warmth of the parents did not buffer the negative effects linked with spanking.
- We also found that the more warm parents are, the better behaved their children are.
 - The opposite was true for spanking.

Data comes from UNICEF
Multiple Indicator Cluster
Surveys (MICS).
Sample size is 215,885
children

Corporal
punishment by
parents is linked
with worse social
emotional
behavior in
all 60 low- and
middle-income
countries

Pace, G. T., Lee, S. J. & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2019). Spanking and young children's socioemotional development in low- and middle-income countries. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 88, 84-95.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213418304095>



Corporal punishment
linked with **worse**
social emotional
behavior

Corporal punishment
linked with **better**
social emotional
behavior

Physical Punishment is A Violation of Children's Human Rights

- The U.N. has stated that physical punishment of children a form of violence that is inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The U.N. has called on all countries* that have ratified the Convention to prohibit all forms of physical punishment.

**In other words, all countries in the world, except the U.S.*

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2007, March 2). *CRC General Comment No. 8 (2006): The Right of the Child to Protection from Corporal Punishment and Other Cruel or Degrading forms of Punishment* (U.N. CRC/C/GC/8). Retrieved from: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc7772.html>

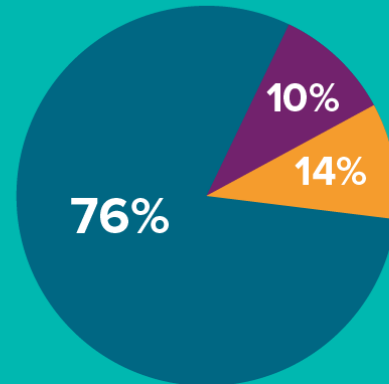


**End Violence
Against Children**



**End Corporal
Punishment**

Percentage of the global child population protected by law from corporal punishment



- Fully protected in the home and all other settings
- Protected in some settings outside the home
- Not fully protected by law in any setting

**End Violence
Against Children****End Corporal
Punishment**

Countries That Have Banned All Physical Punishment of Children

2021 - Republic of Korea, Colombia

2020 - Japan, Seychelles, Guinea

2019 - Georgia, South Africa, France, Republic of Kosovo

2018 - Nepal

2017 - Lithuania

2016 - Mongolia, Montenegro, Paraguay, Slovenia

2015 - Benin, Ireland, Peru

2014 - Andorra, Estonia, Nicaragua, San
Marino, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Malta

2013 - Cabo Verde, Honduras, North Macedonia

2011 - South Sudan

2010 - Albania, Congo (Republic of), Kenya, Tunisia, Poland

2008 - Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Republic of
Moldova, Costa Rica

2007 - Togo, Spain, Venezuela, Uruguay, Portugal, New
Zealand, Netherlands

2006 - Greece

2005 - Hungary

2004 - Romania, Ukraine

2003 - Iceland

2002 - Turkmenistan

2000 - Germany, **Israel**, Bulgaria

1999 - Croatia

1998 - Latvia

1997 - Denmark

1994 - Cyprus

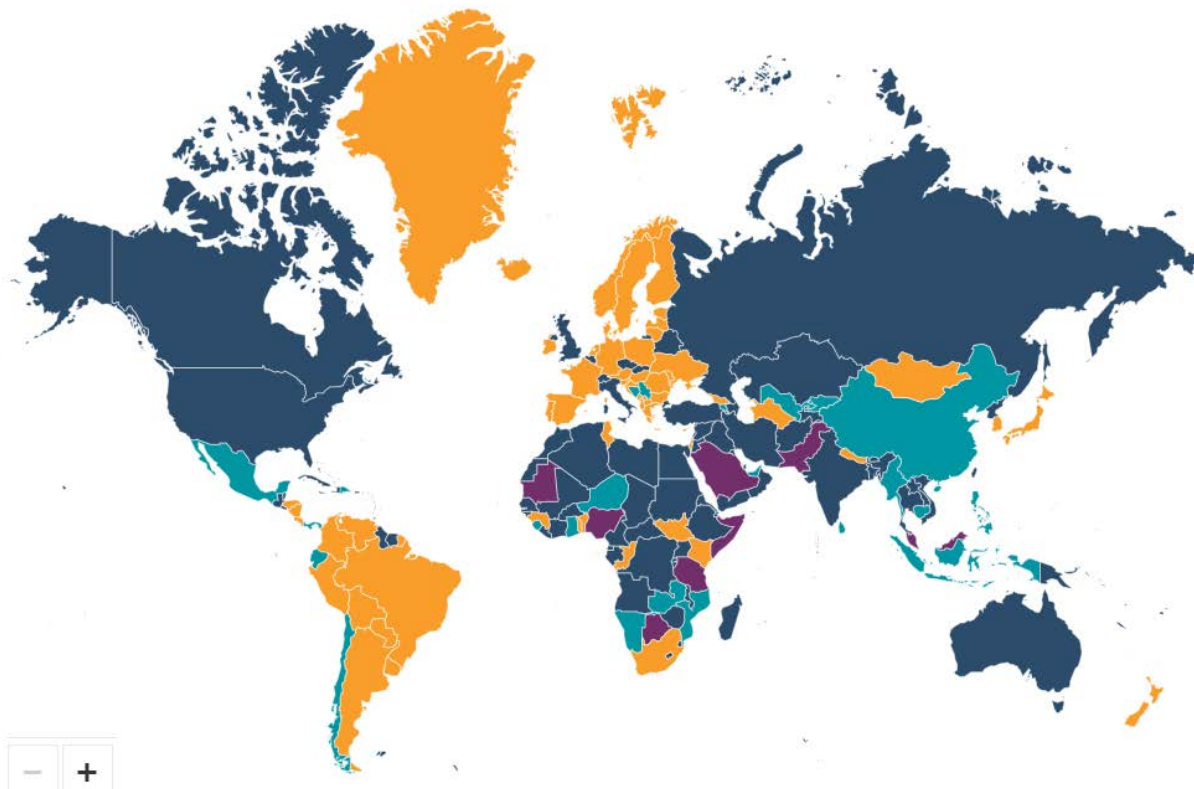
1989 - Austria

1987 - Norway

1983 - Finland

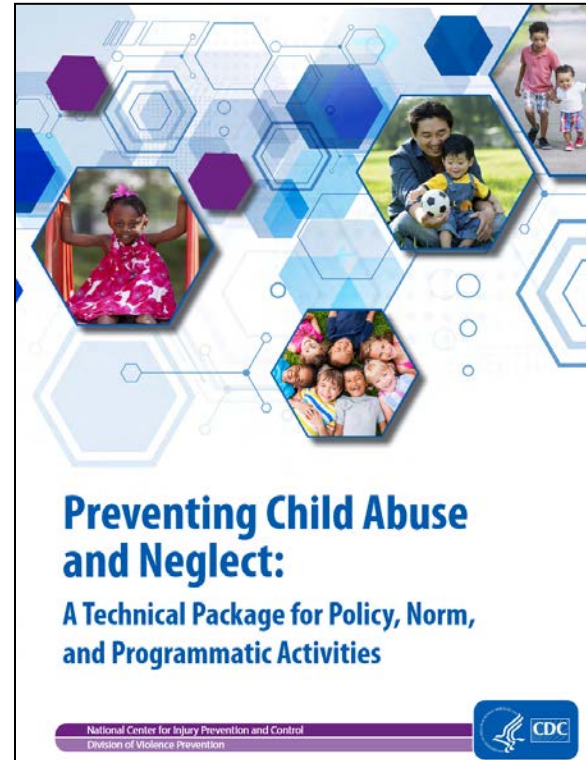
1979 - Sweden

Legal Status of Corporal Punishment Around the World



<https://endcorporalpunishment.org/countdown/>

In a report issued in April 2016, the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** called for educational and legislative interventions to reduce support for and use of physical punishment as a means of preventing physical abuse of children.



Fortson, B. L., Klevens, J., Merrick, M. T., Gilbert, L. K., & Alexander, S. P. (2016). Preventing child abuse and neglect: A technical package for policy, norm, and programmatic activities. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html>.

Aside from legal bans, what are some effective strategies for reducing parents' use of physical punishment?

<https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4317534?tab=2>

Five professional organizations have published policy statements that recommend parents not spank their children and call on their members to discourage it:

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children
- American Psychological Association
- National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

Pediatrics

November 2018

From the American Academy of Pediatrics

Policy Statement

Effective Discipline to Raise Healthy Children

Robert D. Sege, Benjamin S. Siegel, COUNCIL ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT, COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH

“The AAP recommends that parents do not use spanking, hitting, slapping, threatening, insulting, humiliating, or shaming.”

Sege, R. D., Siegel, B. S., and the Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2018). Effective discipline to raise healthy children. *Pediatrics*, 142(6), e20183112.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/11/01/peds.2018-3112>



February 18, 2019

Impact of Physical Discipline on Children May Be Harmful in the Long Term, According to APA Resolution

Association adopts policy calling for use of alternatives that foster supportive family environment

“THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the American Psychological Association recognizes that scientific evidence demonstrates the negative effects of physical discipline of children by caregivers and thereby **recommends that caregivers use alternative forms of discipline that are associated with more positive outcomes for children.**”

<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/02/physical-discipline>

<https://www.apa.org/about/policy/physical-discipline.pdf>

No Hit Zones

- No Hit Zones prohibit hitting of any kind, including parents spanking children.
- Staff are provided online or in person training
 - about the research on spanking,
 - about the institution's position that no violence of any kind, including spanking, is allowed,
 - and about ways they can intervene if they see a parent spank or hit a child.
- The goals are to reduce violence in the institution and to reduce acceptance of hitting children generally.

Evaluation of a No Hit Zone

Gundersen Medical Center implemented an NHZ in late spring 2014.

Most staff were trained in the NHZ through online training; some received in-person training.

NHZ posters were put up around the hospital. Brochures for parents explaining the NHZ and advising how they can discipline their children without hitting were made available throughout the hospital.

Six months later, they surveyed their staff with the same set of questions as the baseline questionnaire.



HANDS ARE NOT FOR HITTING

Tell others what you want to see rather than hitting them. Hitting or spanking has long-term negative effects, and sends a message to others that violence is okay.

NO HIT ZONE

Gundersen Health System has a No Hit Zone policy to help maintain a safe and healing environment for patients, families and staff.

**GUNDERSEN
HEALTH SYSTEM®**
Where Caring Meets Excellence

Evaluation of a No Hit Zone

- After the NHZ, staff were significantly **more** likely to:
 - agree that spanking is harmful to children
 - agree that hospital staff have an obligation to intervene
 - believe it is appropriate for staff to intervene when parents are spanking, slapping, or striking with a belt
 - say they feel knowledgeable about alternatives to talk with parents
 - say they have comfortable strategies to intervene when they observe a parent hitting a child in the hospital

Most staff comments were positive:

- “It gives me the tools I need to diffuse a situation and hopefully change future behaviors.”
- “Though it is more difficult to intervene than ignore, the NHZ has made it easier to intervene by letting the parent know that this is an organizational policy that I am carrying out rather than my own values being placed on them as parents.”

No Hit Zones Can Be Established Anywhere



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No Hit Zone



Dane County District Attorney Ismael Ozanne is proud to announce that the District Attorney's Office, including its public lobbies, is now a No Hit Zone. The No Hit Zone initiative stems from the District Attorney's Office commitment to reducing the use of corporal punishment to discipline children because of the proven negative outcomes associated with such punishments. Today, we know, corporal punishment of children puts children at risk of developing increased aggression, antisocial behavior, and mental health problems as well as physical injury. Ending the use of corporal punishment will reduce the risk that any given child will suffer child abuse, or engage in criminal conduct as an adult or juvenile.

No Hit Zones represent an explicit and public call to all people in those environments to refrain from the use of violence. The purpose of the Dane County District Attorney's Office No Hit Zone is to create and reinforce an environment of safety and comfort for all people who come into the District Attorney's Office and its public spaces. The District Attorney's Office invites other agencies, businesses, schools and families to decide that they, too, want to live, work and learn in No Hit Zones.



With this commitment in mind, the Dane County District Attorney's Office joins children's hospitals across the country, such as the University of Louisville-Kosair Children's Hospital, University of Michigan - C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, Children's Mercy Hospitals in Kansas, and Gundersen Health System in La Crosse, WI, in establishing a safe and violence free zone, especially for children, with the introduction of the No Hit Zone.



<https://www.countyofdane.com/da/nohit.aspx>

News

Stoughton 'no hit zone' looks to stop corporal punishment

By: Velena Jones [✉](#) [f](#) [t](#)

Posted: Dec 06, 2017 09:40 PM CST Updated: Dec 06, 2017 09:40 PM CST



http://www.unifiednewsgroup.com/stoughton_courier_hub/news/no-hit-anti-bullying-measures-are-separate-efforts-at-ending/article_44b1a3ab-20f8-58d1-9159-ce1797a9fa38.html

<https://www.channel3000.com/news/stoughton-no-hit-zone-looks-to-stop-corporal-punishment-1/668714368>

NEWS

Madison Heights officials put up signs for 'no-hit zones' where parents can't spank children

10 city-owned properties designated as 'no-hit zones'

By Shawn Ley - Reporter, Derick Hutchinson

Posted: 7:07 PM, October 05, 2018

Updated: 7:07 PM, October 05, 2018



<https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/madison-heights-officials-put-up-signs-for-no-hit-zones-where-parents-cant-spank-children>



Register your
No Hit Zone

Become an
Advocate

Access
Toolkit

- Toolkit
- Committee
- Parenting Resources
- Certified Advocates
- No Hit Zones
- Contact



Healthy Kids • Safer Communities

Become a No Hit Zone

<https://nohitzone.com/>

Energizing No Hit Zones: Uplighting Prevention Conference



SAVE THE DATE!

Presented By:



<https://www.championsforchildrenhr.org/no-hit-zone-conference/>

Thank You

Please feel free to contact me with questions or for further information:

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