

Spare the Dog, Hit the Child: Preliminary Findings Regarding Parents' Beliefs About Spanking and Hitting Children

Elizabeth T. Gershoff^{1, 2}, Shawna J. Lee³, Joyce Y. Lee⁴, Olivia D. Chang³, and Catherine A. Taylor⁵

¹ Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas at Austin

² Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

³ School of Social Work, University of Michigan

⁴ College of Social Work, The Ohio State University

⁵ School of Social Work, Boston College

Objective: The goal of this study was to determine if parents view spanking as a form of hitting and view hitting children as more acceptable than hitting other family members, including dogs. **Method:** Parents of children 0–8 years of age from across the United States ($N = 286$; 85% White; 56% women) were recruited through Prolific to participate in an online survey. **Results:** Although 90% of parents agreed with a definition of spanking that included the word “hitting” and 33% used the term “hitting” in their definitions of spanking, parents also rated spanking as less severe than hitting. The percentage of participants who agreed that it is acceptable for parents to hit children (30%) was significantly higher than the percentage that reported it was acceptable to hit other family members (dog, 17%; wife, 1%; parent with Alzheimer’s, 0%; Tukey tests, $p < .001$). Nearly a third of parents reported that completing the survey had changed their beliefs about spanking. **Conclusions:** This study demonstrated that American parents hold inconsistent beliefs about hitting children, including a judgment that it is more acceptable to hit a child than to hit a dog. These results exemplify the need for systemic parent education and policy interventions to bring children’s human rights to live free from family violence in line with the recognized rights of adults.

Keywords: spanking, hitting children, physical punishment, family violence

Battery, defined as physically striking and harming another person, is illegal in all U.S. states (Legal Information Institute, 2023)—almost. There is one form of battery that is permitted in all states: parents’ physical punishment of their children (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). Physical punishment of children is a unique form of battery in the United States because the perpetrator can appeal to a “defense of parental discipline” and avoid criminal liability when a child is harmed if the intent was to correct the child’s behavior (Gima, 2014). This U.S. exception of physical punishment from other forms of battery is in contrast to the 65 countries that have banned all physical punishment of children (End Corporal Punishment, 2023).

There is abundant evidence that physical punishment is not an effective means of teaching children appropriate behavior and instead puts children at significant risk for behavior problems, mental health problems, and lower academic achievement (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021). As a result, the

American Academy of Pediatrics (Sege et al., 2018), the American Psychological Association (2019), the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007), and the World Health Organization (2021) have each concluded that physical punishment is harmful to children and should be eliminated.

Yet physical punishment remains prevalent in the United States. The most common form of physical punishment in the United States is “spanking,” which typically refers to hitting a child on their behind with an open hand (Brown et al., 2018; Fréchette & Romano, 2017). Half of American parents report that they spank their children (Finkelhor et al., 2019), and slightly more than half (52%) of American adults agree that it is sometimes necessary to spank a child (NORC at the University of Chicago, 2023). In the present study, we sought to understand parents’ definitions of and beliefs about spanking as a means of identifying potential targets for interventions to reduce parents’ use of spanking and other forms of physical punishment.

Defining “Spanking”

The term “spank” goes back at least 300 years when it was defined in an early English dictionary as “to slap with the open hand” (Bailey, 1727). The contemporary *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023b) definition is remarkably similar, stating that the verb “spank” means “to slap or smack (a person, esp. a child) with the open hand.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* in turn defines the verb “slap” as “a smart blow, esp. one given with the open hand” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023a) and “smack” as “to strike ... with the open hand” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023c), with both definitions using terms that clearly connote hitting or assault (“blow”

This article was published Online First August 5, 2024.

Elizabeth T. Gershoff  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0160-0062>

The writing of this article was supported by grant P2CHD042849 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health (principal investigator: Elizabeth T. Gershoff). The authors thank Brendan Fay for suggesting the title of the article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas at Austin, 108 East Dean Keeton Street, Stop A2702, Austin, TX 78712-1248, United States. Email: liz.gershoff@utexas.utexas.edu

and “strike”). As these definitions illustrate, terms like “spank,” “slap,” and “smack” are often used interchangeably.

Modern parents continue to use a range of terms to refer to physical punishment. More than two decades ago, a researcher in a large Southeastern U.S. city conducted a naturalistic observation of parents’ threats of physical punishment while they were in public settings such as stores, restaurants, and bus stops (Davis, 1996). They found that while 37% of parents were observed to use the term “spank,” 22% used “whip,” “switch,” or “paddle”; 6% used the term “smack”; 4% said “slap”; and the remaining 31% used other terms such as “pop,” “beat,” “punch,” or “hurt” (Davis, 1996). Within this variety of terms, it appears that parents do impose a hierarchy. In another study, U.S. adults read scenarios of physical punishment using five different terms and rated their acceptability; they rated “spank” as most acceptable followed in decreasing acceptability by “swat,” “hit,” “slap,” and “beat” (Brown et al., 2018).

Acceptability of Violence Toward Children and Other Family Members

One reason that parents may view spanking as acceptable is that they consider it a justified, efficient, and effective response to a child’s misbehavior. According to the social interactionist theory of coercive action (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), aggressive behaviors are the result of rational choices by the aggressor to achieve their goals. The aggression is not gratuitous but is instrumental and intentional—it has a purpose and is a means to an end. According to this theory, parents’ use of physical punishment is a form of instrumental aggression used to stop a child from engaging in a particular behavior at that moment and hopefully into the future. There is some evidence that parents who spank regularly believe that spanking is instrumentally effective at achieving their goals. For example, parents who spank frequently (i.e., at least once per week) are more likely than parents who never or rarely spank to believe that spanking will make their child behave appropriately both right away and in the long term (Holden et al., 1999).

However, the acceptance of parents hitting children is at odds with societal norms about hitting other family members. Intimate partner violence against women, for example, is largely viewed as unacceptable in the United States. In a survey of a large, diverse sample in California ($n = 3,679$), nearly all participants (96%) believed that intimate partner violence was wrong, and about three quarters (80%) believed it should be illegal, regardless of any victim behavior that may have precipitated the violence (Taylor & Sorenson, 2004). Similarly, in a large sample ($n = 5,238$) of U.S. adults, only 1% of women and 2% of men agreed that it was acceptable for a man to hit his wife or girlfriend “to discipline/keep her in line,” and only 4% of women and 5% of men agreed that it was acceptable for a woman to hit her husband or boyfriend to “discipline/keep him in line” (Simon et al., 2001). Adults in the United States tend not to make exceptions for intimate partner violence that is instrumental or aimed at changing a person’s behavior.

Hitting other family members, including elders and pets, is also generally considered unacceptable in the United States. A survey in Alabama found that 90% of the sample felt that hitting an older relative either with a hand, stick, or belt was elder abuse, and 94% agreed that there should be some form of punishment (e.g., fine, jail time) for these behaviors (Morgan et al., 2006). As for pets, a survey of Texas adults revealed that over three quarters were concerned about cruelty to animals and over half of the adults surveyed (54%)

thought that someone who slapped a pet should be punished with a fine, probation, or jail time; this percentage went up to 77% for someone who hit animals with sticks or other objects (Vollum et al., 2004).

These studies suggest that the same behaviors viewed as acceptable when used against children, such as hitting with a hand or object, are judged as unacceptable when used on other family members, including pets. Indeed, there are no euphemisms akin to “spanking” to describe hitting partners, the elderly, or animals. Rather, such behavior is typically referred to with terms that connote assault, including intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and animal abuse or cruelty. If parents do not view spanking as assault or violence, it would be easier for them to justify hitting children while still disapproving of violence against other family members (i.e., the presence of cognitive dissonance).

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to understand American parents’ views of spanking on its own and in relation to other forms of family violence to inform future interventions to reduce parents’ support for and use of spanking. Hypothesis 1 was that parents would view spanking as different than, and less severe than, hitting. We tested this hypothesis in several ways, namely, by asking current parents to define “spanking” in their own words; by asking them to provide synonyms for “spanking”; by asking whether “spanking” and a set of other physical punishment terms are the same as, or more or less severe than, “hitting”; and finally by asking if they agreed with a definition of spanking that included the word “hitting.” Hypothesis 2 was that parents would view children as more acceptable targets of hitting than other family members who are protected from assault by law; specifically, we expected that hitting children would be more acceptable than hitting wives, elderly parents, and family dogs. For all quantitative models that were statistically significant, we conducted post hoc exploratory analyses to determine if any parent demographic variables that have been identified as predictors of parents’ use of spanking (Holden, 2020) would predict parents’ beliefs about spanking in our study. Hypothesis 3 was that completing a survey about hitting children, including considering scenarios of family violence as noted in our second hypothesis, might lead some parents to think differently about spanking. This exploratory line of inquiry grew out of a pilot survey in which participants spontaneously noted that the questions about aggression against other family members had caused them to have less favorable attitudes about spanking.

Method

Participants

Participants were eligible if they (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) lived in the United States, and (c) had a child between the ages of 0 and 8 years. In order to be inclusive of parents who have joint legal custody of their children, we did not require that parents be currently living with the child. A total of 300 parents participated in our study through Prolific. The sample mean age was 33 years (range 21–53 years). Slightly more than half were women (56%), and the majority were married (83%). The majority reported their race as White (85%), 7% reported Black race, and 8% reported another race; in

addition, 11% of the sample reported Hispanic ethnicity. The sample cannot be considered representative of the United States because these percentages do not match those in the U.S. population (76% White, 14% Black or African American, 10% of another race, and 19% of Hispanic ethnicity: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Parents had on average less than two children ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.73$), and the majority had a bachelor's degree or higher (58%). The two most commonly reported annual income categories were \$50,000 to \$70,000 (25%) and \$90,000 or more (26%). Participants came from 43 U.S. states. According to region categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), 18% of our participants were from the Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island), 38% were from the South (Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, District of Columbia, West Virginia), 23% were from the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin), and 20% were from the West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming).

Procedure

Data were collected via an online survey administered through Prolific (<https://www.prolific.com/>), a survey research website that allows access to a large pool of participants for web-based data collection (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Eligible participants were provided with a brief description of the survey via the Prolific website. Participants provided informed consent and completed the survey through Qualtrics. Upon successful completion, participants received \$6.50 in compensation through Prolific. Participants on average took 25 min to complete the survey. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the institution of the first author.

Measures

Definition of Spanking

Participants' definitions of spanking were assessed using an open-ended question:

Sometimes children behave pretty well and sometimes they don't. Parents may use spanking when their child misbehaves. How do you define spanking? In the text box below, please write 3–4 words or phrases that would help us understand what "spanking" means to you.

Participants could write up to a short paragraph in response.

Synonyms of Spanking

Participants were asked to self-generate synonyms for spanking with the following prompt and question: "People often use different words to talk about the same type of behavior. Below are three blank spaces. What are some other words parents in your family or community use instead of 'spanking'?" Participants could provide up to three words or phrases as synonyms for spanking.

Similarity to Hitting

Participants were asked to review a list of words that had been identified in prior research as synonyms for spanking (Brown et al.,

2018; Davis, 1996; Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011). Instructions asked participants, "Below are a list of words that some people think mean the same thing as hitting. Please indicate whether you think the following words mean the same thing as a parent hitting a child." Participants were provided with a list of words (i.e., spanking, whooping, beating, swatting, smacking, popping, punching, tapping, and slapping) and asked to choose which of the three options best fit that word: "It's less severe than hitting," "It's the same as hitting," or "It's more severe than hitting."

Acceptability of Hitting Within Families

The survey asked parents the extent to which they agree or disagree (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) with four statements describing assaults within families: (a) "It is acceptable for a parent to hit their child for misbehaving"; (b) "It is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife if she doesn't do something he asks her to"; (c) "It is acceptable for a man to hit his dog for digging up his yard"; and (d) "It is acceptable for an adult to hit his/her elderly parent with Alzheimer's who soils his pants." While the nature of the family relationship of the assailant to the victim and the rationale for the assault varied across the scenarios, four key factors were held constant: the situation involved an adult assailant (i.e., parent, husband, man, or adult) hitting (the word "hit" was used in all scenarios) a family member (i.e., child, wife, dog, or elderly parent with Alzheimer's) in response to unfavorable behavior (i.e., misbehaving, she doesn't do something he asks her to, digging up his yard, or soils his pants). Each of these questions was followed by a question inviting participants to write out why hitting was acceptable in each scenario.

Whether Hitting Is a Reasonable Definition of Spanking

Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed with a definition of spanking that is commonly used in research: "Here is a definition of spanking that is commonly used in research: Spanking is hitting a child on their buttocks with an open hand." Participants rated their agreement that this is a reasonable definition of spanking on a 5-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*.

Whether Beliefs About Spanking Changed

Participants were asked, "Has completing this survey made you think differently about spanking?" Response options were "Yes" or "No." Those who chose "Yes" were asked: "Could you tell us why the survey has changed your thinking about spanking?" They were then presented with a box in which to write their response.

Demographic Characteristics

We gathered data on eight parent demographic variables that have been identified as predictors of parents' use of spanking (Holden, 2020), including three continuous variables (age, education level, and annual income) and five categorical variables including Hispanic ethnicity (binary), race (Black, White, Other), gender (binary), marital status (binary), and U.S. region of residence (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West). Reference categories for the regression analyses are italicized.

Data Analysis Plan

Power and Sample Size Selection

To determine an effect size for our power analysis, we consulted the Brown et al. (2018) study which examined the acceptability of five physical punishment terms and reported an $F(4, 2,704) = 341.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .335$, with 673 participants. This is quite a large effect size according to J. Cohen's (1988) guideline that effect sizes of .25 for R^2 or η^2 are large. We resolved to be conservative and thus calculated the necessary sample size for power = .95 and with one quarter the effect size ($\eta^2 = .084$) using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to be $n = 160$ for our main effect models. We determined we would need a sample size of 241 for regression models controlling for parent demographic characteristics with an alpha with a Bonferroni correction at $p = .005$ and power at .95. However, based on our pilot work using Prolific, we found that we needed a larger sample to ensure sufficient demographic diversity. We thus decided to target a sample of 300.

Data Quality Checks

Three attention checks were distributed throughout the survey to promote data quality: a CAPTCHA and two questions that required an answer (e.g., "What is 9-5 = ?"). Once data collection had ceased and data cleaning had begun, we discovered that 14 participants did not meet our inclusion criteria and thus were dropped from the study sample. Specifically, eight did not pass attention checks, two were not residing in the United States, three reported birth years that were impossible, and one provided the child's name in response to a question asking for the child's age. The final analytic sample was $N = 286$, which remained larger than the 241 generated by the power analysis above.

Quantitative Analyses

We used frequencies, standardized means, an analysis of variance, and regressions with Bonferroni corrections to address our quantitative research questions.

Qualitative Analyses

In order to describe parents' responses to our open-ended questions, we conducted qualitative content analysis, which is a method of systematically analyzing text or other content and categorizing it according to categories that are linked to research questions (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). We used an inductive approach to identify codes and themes within the responses. For each question, two researchers independently reviewed participants' responses and generated potential codes. These preliminary codes were used to create a codebook of recurring themes and terms. The two researchers then independently coded all qualitative data using the codebook, allowing responses to have multiple codes if appropriate. Kappa statistics were calculated to determine the level of agreement between coders on both the presence and absence of codes for each participant response. After the agreement was calculated, the coders met to review all codes where there had been a disagreement and come to consensus on the presence or absence of each code.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Parents Would View Spanking as Different Than, and Less Severe Than, Hitting

Defining Spanking as Hitting

We were interested in how many parents would spontaneously use the word "hitting" or similar terms that imply aggression or violence in their definitions of "spanking." One third of parents (33.2%) used the word "hitting" in their responses. Examples include "Spanking is hitting your child with an open hand on their bottom. Hard enough that it hurts or is uncomfortable," and "I would define spanking as intentionally restraining your child and hitting their behind." "Slapping," "smacking," and "swatting" were each used by more than 10% of the participants to define spanking. Notably, 4.2% of parents used the word "striking" in their definitions; examples include "Spanking is taking a child aside after they misbehave and striking them with a hand or object," and "Spanking to me means striking a child on their bottom with enough force to cause some mild pain." All 10 of the verbs used by at least two parents to define spanking are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Terms Used by Parents to Define Spanking and Perceived as Synonyms of Spanking Within Their Community

Term	Number of parent who used	Percent of parent who used
Used to define "spanking"		
Hit	95	33.2%
Slap	46	16.1%
Smack	33	11.5%
Swat	31	10.8%
Tap	15	5.2%
Strike	12	4.2%
Pat	8	2.8%
Pop	5	1.7%
Whip	3	1.0%
Whack	2	0.7%
Perceived as community synonyms for "spanking"		
Hit	92	32.2%
Smack	84	29.4%
Whoop	69	24.1%
Swat	59	20.6%
Beat	58	20.3%
Slap	42	14.7%
Whip	37	12.9%
Punishment	33	11.5%
Paddle	30	10.5%
Pop	28	9.8%
Discipline	24	8.4%
Pow pow	13	4.5%
Whack	12	4.2%
Corporal punishment	9	3.1%
Correct	9	3.1%
Tap	8	2.8%
Belt	6	2.1%
Switch	6	2.1%
Bust	5	1.7%
Lick	5	1.7%

Note. $N = 286$. Some parents used more than one term in their definitions or provided more than one synonym.

Synonyms of Spanking

When asked for three synonyms for spanking used by parents in their families or communities, parents generated even more terms than they had in their definitions of spanking. The 20 most common synonyms are presented in Table 1, with “hitting” being the most suggested synonym (by 32.2% of participants). Eight terms that had also been used in their definitions of spanking were offered again as synonyms: hitting, smacking, swatting, slapping, whipping, popping, whacking, and tapping. Some new terms included in the list of synonyms have a more violent connotation, including whooping, beating, belting, switching, busting, and licking. Parents also indicated that generic terms like “punishment” (11.5%), “discipline” (8.4%), “corporal punishment” (3.1%), and “correcting” (3.1%) were common synonyms.

Whether Physical Punishment Terms Are Considered the Same as “Hitting”

Parents’ ratings of whether nine physical punishment terms were the same as hitting are displayed in Figure 1. We standardized the ratings so that 0 = same as hitting, -1 = less severe than hitting, and $+1$ = more severe than hitting; standardized means are displayed along with their 95% confidence intervals. Five terms were seen as less severe than hitting: tapping, swatting, spanking, popping, and smacking.

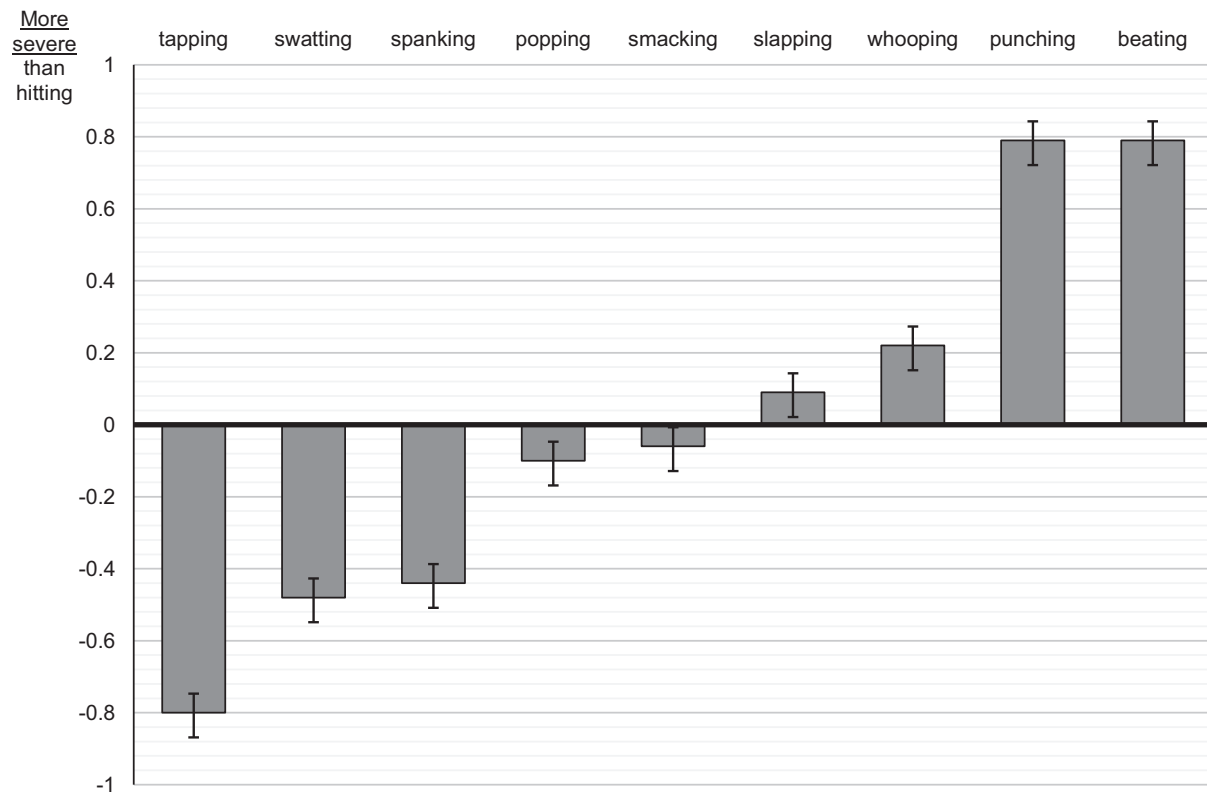
smacking. Four terms were rated as more severe than hitting: slapping, whooping, punching, and beating.

To determine if parents’ demographic characteristics were associated with their judgments about whether certain terms were the same as hitting, we regressed their ratings on 11 characteristics: parent age, gender (female = 1), marital status (married = 1), race (Black and Other race, with White as the comparison group), ethnicity (Hispanic = 1), education, income, and region of the United States (Northeast, Midwest, and West, with South as the comparison group). After Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, only the model for popping was statistically significant, $F(11, 273) = 3.175, p = .01$. Of the 11 demographic predictors, only two region variables were significant: Parents who live in the Northeast, $B = .371, SE = .111, t(283) = 3.339, p = .01$, and parents who live in the Midwest, $B = .370, SE = .105, t(283) = 3.529, p = .01$, were significantly more likely than parents in the South to view popping as more severe than hitting.

Acceptability of Defining Spanking as “Hitting”

Most parents ($n = 258$; 90.2%) agreed that a definition of spanking that includes the word “hitting” (i.e., “Spanking is hitting a child on their buttocks with an open hand”) was a “reasonable definition of spanking.” The set of 11 parent demographic variables

Figure 1
Parents’ Ratings of Whether Physical Punishment Terms Are More or Less Severe Than “Hitting”



Note. $N = 286$. Mean ratings are displayed as bars along with their 95% confidence intervals.

did not predict the extent to which parents agreed with this definition of spanking, $F(11, 273) = 0.998, p = .449$.

Hypothesis 2: Parents Would View Children as More Acceptable Targets of Hitting Than Other Family Members

Very few participants said that they “strongly agreed” that hitting any of the four family members was acceptable: elderly parent (0%), wife (1%), dog (1%), or child (4%). Therefore, we combined the *strongly agree* and *agree* response categories as well as the *strongly disagree* and *disagree* categories. An analysis of variance revealed significant differences in whether parents agreed it was acceptable to hit an elderly parent, a wife, a dog, or a child, $F(3, 1,173) = 59.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .139$. We then conducted Tukey pairwise comparisons for each possible combination with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons; the results are presented in Figure 2. Only one pairwise comparison was not significant: Parents were equally likely to disagree that it was acceptable for an adult to hit an elderly parent (100%) or for a husband to hit his wife (99%), $t(283) = -0.28, p = .992$. Parents’ ratings of acceptability were significantly different for the other comparisons, with parents rating the two examples of hitting adults as significantly less acceptable than hitting either a dog or a child. There were significantly fewer parents who agreed it was acceptable to hit a dog (17%) than there were parents who agreed it was acceptable to hit a child (30%), $t(272) = -4.52, p < .01$.

To determine if beliefs varied by key demographic characteristics, we ran separate logistic regressions predicting the acceptability of hitting children and dogs from the 11 parent demographic characteristics; we could not run regressions with hitting wives or elderly parents because only two participants agreed that hitting wives was acceptable and no one said that hitting an elderly parent was acceptable. After Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, the set of demographic characteristics did not predict whether parents rated hitting children as acceptable, $F(11, 255) = 1.404, p = .342$, or hitting dogs as acceptable, $F(11, 255) = 2.032, p = .052$.

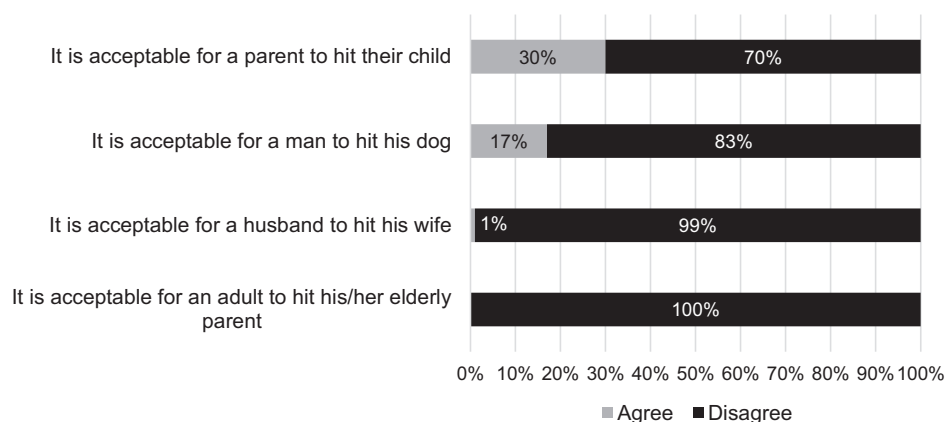
To better understand parents’ acceptance of hitting children, two raters coded parents’ responses to the open-ended question, “Why is it acceptable for a parent to hit their child for misbehaving?” A total of 273 parents rated the acceptability of hitting children; of these, 81 agreed or strongly agreed that it is acceptable (29.7%), and all but one provided a response to the open-ended question. The raters had a strong level of agreement in categorizing responses into six themes, $\kappa = .76$; any discrepancies were resolved via discussion.

Forty percent of responses were identified as including two or more themes, and thus, the following percentages are not mutually exclusive. More than a third of parents (36%) said hitting was acceptable as a last resort when other methods did not work; for example, “Sometimes just a stern talk doesn’t work so you may have to become a little more aggressive.” A third (33%) drew a distinction between types of hitting, saying that behaviors like spanking were acceptable but behaviors they considered abusive, such as beating, were not; one parent wrote:

A slap to the face, never. A punch, kick, or via the use of an object, never. A tap on the hand when doing or touching something dangerous can help teach them to avoid it, even more so if explained afterwards.

Roughly a quarter of parents (29%) said that it was acceptable to hit some children (e.g., “some kids do not listen”) or to hit in some situations; an example of such a comment was, “There isn’t always time to explain to a child why they need to stop what they are doing before they get hurt, and a small, controlled pain is better than a real injury.” A quarter of parents (24%) justified hitting children as an effective way to change children’s behaviors; for example, “It’s an effective way to prevent them from misbehaving again in the future.” Some parents wrote that hitting was successful at getting children’s attention (17%; e.g., “I don’t believe it’s okay in most cases but in rare circumstances I think a swat is the only thing that will get their attention”), and some asserted that parents have the right to hit their children (16%; e.g., “It’s their child, as long as it is reasonable and not abuse, it’s okay”).

Figure 2
Percent of Parents Who Agreed That Hitting Family Members Is Acceptable



Note. All comparisons between scenarios were significantly different via Tukey tests with Bonferroni corrections at $p < .01$, except the comparison of “husband to hit his wife” with “for an adult to hit his/her elderly parent,” which was not significant. *Ns* vary by comparison from 273 to 286.

Hypothesis 3: Completing a Survey About Hitting Children Might Lead Some Parents to Think Differently About Spanking

Nearly a third of the sample ($n = 89$; 31%) agreed that completing the survey made them think differently about spanking. None of the 11 parent demographic variables in a logistic regression with corrections for multiple comparisons was a significant predictor of parents' responses to this question.

All 89 respondents who agreed that completing the survey changed their beliefs about spanking provided responses to an open-ended follow-up question. Two raters closely agreed on the coding of these responses into five themes ($\kappa = .87$), with most of their responses (89%) coded into these themes. Slightly more than a third (36%) said that completing the survey led them to feel regret about having spanked their children, such as, "It makes me regret having ever spanked my children. Even though I cannot recall the last time I have spanked them, I regret that I have." A quarter (26%) specified that it was the scenarios comparing the acceptability of hitting other family members that led them to reconsider spanking; for example, "Made me realize that spanking is no different from a man hitting his wife for disobeying, or a dog who can't control their feelings, or an elderly person who can't control their bodies. I feel very guilty." A fifth of parents (21%) reported that the survey caused them to recognize that spanking is harmful to children; one parent wrote, "Doing this survey has me feeling that spanking is wrong and can/will have a negative effect in the long run for my children. I need to find other means of discipline." Fewer parents referred to the vulnerability of children in their answers (8%; e.g., "Because the reasons we spank them is because of human nature. They don't always know better, they are small and innocent and can't fight back") or said that the survey just reinforced their existing belief that spanking is harmful to children (8%; e.g., "It has made me think about all the ways spanking can have lasting repercussions on a child and has reinforced my current belief that it is not effective").

Discussion

Parents' beliefs about discipline come from their familial experiences and understanding of how best to change children's behavior, as well as broader systemic sociocultural norms (Holden, 2020; Taylor, Hamvas, & Rice, 2011). Because parents' beliefs about spanking predict their use of it (Vittrup et al., 2006), it is important to understand these beliefs. The present study revealed several inconsistencies in how American parents think about spanking.

Spanking Is, and Is not, Hitting

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, when we asked parents to spontaneously generate a definition of "spanking," more than one in three parents used the terms "hitting" or "striking" to describe the act. "Hitting" was also the most suggested synonym for spanking followed by other terms that connote hitting such as "smacking," "whooping," "swatting," and "beating." Nearly all the parents in our study (90.2%) also agreed that a definition of spanking as "hitting a child on their buttocks with an open hand" was a reasonable definition of spanking.

Yet despite being comfortable with hitting as a term to define or be a synonym for spanking, when asked to make an explicit comparison between the two words, parents rated spanking as less severe than "hitting." Further contradictions were observed with the eight additional terms we asked parents to compare with hitting. Although all of the terms had been offered spontaneously by parents as synonyms for spanking earlier in the survey, parents rated tapping, swatting, spanking, popping, and smacking as significantly less severe than "hitting" and slapping, whooping, punching, and beating as significantly more severe than "hitting." Similar to Brown et al. (2018), our findings demonstrate that American parents rank physical punishment terms but are conflicted in the extent to which they acknowledge that these behaviors involve hitting children.

Hypothesis 1 was thus partially supported. How can we reconcile the findings that parents believe that spanking is both hitting and less severe than hitting? Parents who hold these contradictory beliefs are likely experiencing cognitive dissonance with some resulting psychological discomfort, which they may attempt to resolve by changing one of their initial beliefs or the importance they place on one of the beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). It appears the parents in our study utilized the strategy of changing one of their initial beliefs: Even though they had supplied "hitting" as a synonym and definition of spanking early in the survey, when pressed to compare spanking with hitting later in the survey, parents asserted that spanking was "less severe" than hitting. By changing this belief, parents were able to preserve their confidence that spanking is not harmful. These findings also suggest that parents may see "hitting" as an umbrella term under which there is a continuum of behaviors with varying levels of severity, impacts, and acceptability. Exactly how they are making those judgments remains unclear and requires future research.

Spare the Dog, Hit the Child

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, parents viewed hitting children as more acceptable than hitting spouses, elderly parents, or family dogs. Hitting a dog and hitting a child were each viewed as more acceptable than hitting an adult, whether it be a spouse or an elderly parent. It may be that parents see children and dogs as similarly limited in their cognitive ability to respond to verbal correction and thus similarly in need of physical correction. However, the elderly parent was cognitively impaired with Alzheimer's disease but was not seen as an acceptable target of hitting. It thus appears that parents single out children and dogs for physical correction.

Why do parents believe that hitting children is more acceptable than other forms of family violence, even against the family pet? Parents' open-ended responses to the question following their rating of the acceptability of hitting focused on the utility of hitting, either in certain situations or with certain children. This is consistent with past research findings that parents who spank believe it will be effective at securing children's compliance, even though they also admit to feeling more guilt when they spank than when they use reasoning or time out (Holden et al., 1999; Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011). Educating parents about research showing that spanking is counterproductive and ineffective at producing child compliance has been found to be useful in changing beliefs about spanking's effectiveness (Holden et al., 2014).

Another reason that parents view hitting children as more acceptable than hitting other family members may be that American

society views children as less deserving of protection from violence than adults and as needing and benefiting from violence. “Spanking” is a euphemism that allows parents to deny that they are using violence to control their children’s behaviors (Gershoff, 2013), and the use of euphemistic terms may legitimize and trivialize the suffering children experience (Davis, 1996). The notion that children either need or are not harmed by violence is consistent with observations that children occupy an oppressed status in society (Barth & Olsen, 2020), with the legality of hitting children for punishment in the United States as one clear manifestation of the oppression of children (Lee, 2023). Children are thus afforded unequal protection from violence under the current U.S. law.

Reflecting on Spanking Can Change Beliefs About It

Hypothesis 3 was supported: 31% of the participants reported that answering the survey questions changed their beliefs about spanking and in some cases caused them to feel regret about spanking their children. Although our online survey was intended for primary research and was not designed as an intervention, reflecting on their beliefs about spanking may have caused these parents seem to be resolving the cognitive dissonance between knowing that hitting is harmful and admitting that they have hit their own children. The resolution of this cognitive dissonance might eventually resolve stress they had been experiencing from holding contradictory beliefs.

A quarter of those who reported changing their beliefs about spanking after completing the survey reported that the comparisons of spanking with other forms of family violence led them to view spanking in a less favorable light. These parents seem to have reappraised their beliefs about spanking by bringing them more in line with their beliefs about hitting other family members. The questions about hitting elderly parents, spouses, and family dogs may have highlighted the exceptions participants were making for children. It may be that these parents have resolved their cognitive dissonance by revising their beliefs about hitting children to fit within their general disapproval of violence against family members.

Limitations

Although geographically diverse with parents from 43 U.S. states, our online convenience sample was not demographically diverse. It was largely White, married, and middle income. Our findings are only generalizable to U.S. parents with similar demographic characteristics. Additionally, our study was cross-sectional and did not employ an experimental design to randomize scenario characteristics and thus does not support causal claims. We also yoked the type of family member and with the type of “offending” behavior to ensure the behavior would be considered reasonable though troublesome for each, thus, potentially confounding these two variables.

Future Research Directions

Future research is needed to replicate our findings with a larger, more culturally diverse, and nationally representative sample within the United States. Future studies should employ a randomized vignette design to better assert causality of the child victim effects and to avoid potential situational confounding. It will also be important to consider how certain characteristics of hitting, such as

how hard a child is hit or where on the body a child is hit, might affect parents’ acceptance of it. Finally, as noted, our third research question was exploratory in nature, and a more rigorous design such as a randomized pre- and posttest study is needed.

Prevention Implications

Our finding that parents hold contradictory beliefs about the nature of spanking and that there is more tolerance for violence against children than against adults may constitute important levers for intervention to reduce parents’ hitting of children at multiple prevention levels (L. Cohen & Swift, 1999). At the individual level, addressing the cognitive dissonance some parents may experience from both believing that spanking is hitting but also that spanking is acceptable could help to reduce support for spanking. Based on our exploratory work, it may be that in some cases, asking parents probing questions about the nature of spanking and hitting children can begin to help parents recognize their dissonant beliefs and potentially resolve them in favor of not hitting children. This strategy could be paired with existing proven approaches to reduce parents’ support for spanking such as motivational interviewing (Holden & Holland, 2020) or parent education and training (Gershoff & Lee, 2020). Intervening to reduce parents’ acceptance of and use of hitting children will have cascading positive effects on their children given the range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral harms linked to physical punishment (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The parents in our survey held contradictory beliefs: Although they agreed spanking is hitting, they simultaneously viewed spanking as less severe than hitting and presumably less harmful. Further, despite near ubiquitous agreement that hitting adults is unacceptable, parents believed that hitting smaller, more vulnerable humans—children—was more acceptable than hitting adults or dogs. Educational interventions are needed to bring children’s rights to live free of assault in line with those of adults and to make clear the harms of spanking and other forms of physical punishment. Instead, positive behavioral interventions, discipline, and guidance should be encouraged to promote healthy child development.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2019). *Resolution on physical discipline of children by parents*. <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/physical-discipline.pdf>
- Bailey, N. (1727). *The universal etymological English Dictionary* (Vol. 2). T. Cox.
- Barth, R. P., & Olsen, A. N. (2020). Are children oppressed? The timely importance of answering this question. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 110, Article 104780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104780>
- Brown, A. S., Holden, G. W., & Ashraf, R. (2018). Spank, slap, or hit? How labels alter perceptions of child discipline. *Psychology of Violence*, 8(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000080>
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Cohen, L., & Swift, S. (1999). The spectrum of prevention: Developing a comprehensive approach to injury prevention. *Injury Prevention*, 5(3), 203–207. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ip.5.3.203>

- Davis, P. W. (1996). Threats of corporal punishment as verbal aggression: A naturalistic study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20(4), 289–304. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134\(96\)00010-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(96)00010-5)
- End Corporal Punishment. (2023). *Progress*. <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/countdown/>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Wormuth, B. K., Vanderminde, J., & Hamby, S. (2019). Corporal punishment: Current rates from a national survey. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(7), 1991–1997. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01426-4>
- Fréchette, S., & Romano, E. (2017). How do parents label their physical disciplinary practices? A focus on the definition of corporal punishment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 71, 92–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.02.003>
- Gershoff, E. T. (2013). Spanking and child development: We know enough now to stop hitting our children. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7(3), 133–137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12038>
- Gershoff, E. T., & Bitensky, S. H. (2007). The case against corporal punishment of children: Converging evidence from social science research and international human rights law and implications for US public policy. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 13(4), 231–272. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8971.13.4.231>
- Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: New meta-analyses and old controversies. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>
- Gershoff, E. T., & Lee, S. J. (Eds.). (2020). *Ending the physical punishment of children: A guide for clinicians and practitioners*. American Psychological Association Press. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000162-000>
- Gima, J. (2014). *Hamilton v. Lethem*: The parental right to discipline one's child trumps a child's right to grow up free from harm. *University of Hawai'i Law Review*, 36, 347–369. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6321d5419fac744f77d26e3t/6434144c9566856adba97010/1681134689159/36-U.-Haw.-L.-Rev.%28Issue+1-Winter+2014%29.pdf>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.), *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 3–24). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001>
- Heilmann, A., Mehay, A., Watt, R. G., Kelly, Y., Durrant, J. E., van Turnhout, J., & Gershoff, E. T. (2021). Physical punishment and child outcomes: A narrative review of prospective studies. *Lancet*, 398(10297), 355–364. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00582-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00582-1)
- Holden, G. W. (2020). Why do parents hit their children? From cultural to unconscious determinants. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 73(1), 10–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00797308.2020.1690858>
- Holden, G. W., Brown, A. S., Baldwin, A. S., & Croft Caderao, K. (2014). Research findings can change attitudes about corporal punishment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(5), 902–908. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.10.013>
- Holden, G. W., & Holland, G. W. O. (2020). Motivational interviewing. In E. T. Gershoff & S. J. Lee (Eds.), *Ending the physical punishment of children: A guide for clinicians and practitioners* (pp. 41–46). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000162-005>
- Holden, G. W., Miller, P. C., & Harris, S. D. (1999). The instrumental side of corporal punishment: Parents' reported practices and outcome expectancies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61(4), 908–919. <https://doi.org/10.2307/354012>
- Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2023). *Qualitative content analysis: Methods, practice, and software* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lee, S. J. (2023). Social workers should stand against all forms of violence against children. *Social Work*, 68(3), 241–249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swad022>
- Legal Information Institute. (2023). *Assault*. Wex Legal Dictionary and Encyclopedia. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/assault>
- Morgan, E., Johnson, I., & Sigler, R. (2006). Public definitions and endorsement of the criminalization of elder abuse. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34(3), 275–283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2006.03.004>
- NORC at the University of Chicago. (2023). *GSS data explorer: Agree or disagree that sometimes necessary to spank a child*. <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/variables/646/vshow>
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2023a). *Slap, n.1*. Oxford University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2023b). *Spank, v.1*. Oxford University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary. (2023c). *Smack, v.2*. Oxford University Press.
- Palan, S., & Schitter, C. (2018). Prolific.ac—A subject pool for online experiments. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Finance*, 17, 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbef.2017.12.004>
- Sege, R. D., Siegel, B. S., Flaherty, E. G., Gavril, A. R., Idzerda, S. M., Laskey, A. T., Legano, L. A., Leventhal, J. M., Lukefahr, J. L., Yogman, M. W., Baum, R., Gambon, T. B., Lavin, A., Mattson, G., Montiel-Esparza, R., Wissow, L. S., the Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, & the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2018). Effective discipline to raise healthy children. *Pediatrics*, 142(6), Article e20183112. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3112>
- Simon, T. R., Anderson, M., Thompson, M. P., Crosby, A. E., Shelley, G., & Sacks, J. J. (2001). Attitudinal acceptance of intimate partner violence among U.S. adults. *Violence and Victims*, 16(2), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.16.2.115>
- Taylor, C. A., Hamvas, L., & Paris, R. (2011). Perceived instrumentality and normativeness of corporal punishment use among Black mothers. *Family Relations*, 60(1), 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2010.00633.x>
- Taylor, C. A., Hamvas, L., Rice, J., Newman, D. L., & DeJong, W. (2011). Perceived social norms, expectations, and attitudes toward corporal punishment among an urban community sample of parents. *Journal of Urban Health*, 88(2), 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-011-9548-7>
- Taylor, C. A., & Sorenson, S. B. (2004). Injunctive social norms of adults regarding teen dating violence. *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, 34(6), 468–479. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(03\)00342-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(03)00342-2)
- Tedeschi, J. T., & Felson, R. B. (1994). *Violence, aggression, and coercive actions*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10160-000>
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (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). <http://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc7772.html>
- United States Census Bureau. (2021). *Geographic levels*. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/economic-census/guidance-geographies/levels.html#par_textimage_34
- United States Census Bureau. (2023). *Quick facts: United States*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045222>
- Vittrup, B., Holden, G. W., & Buck, J. (2006). Attitudes predict the use of physical punishment: A prospective study of the emergence of disciplinary practices. *Pediatrics*, 117(6), 2055–2064. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2005-2204>
- Vollum, S., Buffington-Vollum, J., & Longmire, D. R. (2004). Moral disengagement and attitudes about violence toward animals. *Society & Animals*, 12(3), 209–235. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568530042880668>
- World Health Organization. (2021, November). *Corporal punishment and health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/corporal-punishment-and-health>

Received February 5, 2023

Revision received May 22, 2024

Accepted May 24, 2024 ■