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Spanking children: the controversies, findings, and new directions

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Abstract

The use of spanking as a discipline technique is quite prevalent, even though whether or not to spank children is controversial among lay and professional audiences alike. Considerable research on the topic has been analyzed in several reviews of the literature that often reach different and sometimes opposite conclusions. Opposing conclusions are not inherently problematic as research develops in an area. However, we propose that both methodological limitations of the research to date as well as the limited focus of the research questions have prevented a better understanding of the impact of parental spanking on child development. The purpose of this article is to convey the basis for limited progress to date and, more importantly, to reformulate the research agenda. The goal is to move toward a resolution of the most relevant questions to parents, professionals, and policymakers. We propose an expanded research agenda that addresses the goals of parental discipline, the direct and concomitant effects of spanking, the influences that foster and maintain the use of spanking, and the processes through which spanking operates.

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1. Introduction

Spanking children is of great interest to professional and lay audiences. Parents and teachers who have responsibility for the care of children, not to mention all those adults who

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once were children themselves, are likely to have a well formulated stance on whether children should be hit in the course of discipline, the extent to which children ought to be hit, and the circumstances in which such hitting is appropriate. The use of spanking as a discipline technique is quite prevalent. For example, in the United States, 74% of parents of children 17 years of age or younger use spanking as a discipline technique (Gallup Organization, 1995). This figure increases to 94% of parents of 3- and 4-year-olds who use any type of corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999). The public's attitudes about spanking, however, suggest growing ambivalence. In a recent survey, 61% of parents of young children and 62% of the adult population viewed spanking as an acceptable form of regular discipline (Yankelovich, 2000). This represents a decrease from the late 1960s when 94% held this view (Straus & Mather, 1996). The prevalent use and changing attitudes towards spanking underscore the importance and interest in the topic.

Interest in the issue of spanking children and corporal punishment is much deeper than mere opinions about practices that might be useful or acceptable. The practice of hitting children as part of discipline is deeply embedded in religious beliefs, cultural views, government, law, and social policy. In relation to religious beliefs, consider one example. Many individuals who might not otherwise quote scripture can readily cite "spare the rod and spoil the child" as a biblical rationale or justification for using corporal punishment. This commonly misquoted phrase is used to give authority to the practice of hitting children and indeed the wisdom of doing so.¹ In relation to government and law, parental hitting of children is legal in all states of the United States if that hitting does not cause physical harm.² Several other countries have banned corporal punishment as a means of child discipline at home and at school. The latest count includes Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Norway, and Sweden (Bitensky, 1998; EPOCH-USA, 2000). Banning corporal punishment has significant legal and policy implications insofar as the state may have legal authority to enforce and punish those who engage in spanking.

There is no clear consensus among researchers and practitioners in relation to the advisability of spanking. For example, among psychologists in clinical practice, 70% would never suggest that parents spank a child, 26% would rarely suggest that parents spank their child, and 4% would sometimes suggest that parents spank (Schenck, Lyman, & Bodin, 2000). Interestingly, in one survey, approximately one third of psychologists thought that the American Psychological Association (APA) should definitely have a policy opposing any corporal punishment, whereas another third thought that the APA should definitely not. Thus, the practice of spanking and advisability of taking a stance on this practice are a matter of controversy.

¹ The quote does not exactly convey that sparing the rod spoils the child. The King James Version of the *Bible*, Book of Proverbs (13: 24): "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes."

² Minnesota is an exception. Four statutory provisions in Minnesota state law, when taken together, imply that parental corporal punishment could be prosecuted as assault, though there have been no known cases of a parent being prosecuted for mild corporal punishment (Bitensky, 1998).

The issue of spanking is not limited to individual families and the professionals who work with them, but has come into the political and legal arena. We mentioned countries that have already outlawed spanking. In the United States, there is both a movement aimed at changing legislation to prohibit spanking, as well as a counter movement to reinforce parental rights to spank. For example, a proposal to create a “no spank zone” in Oakland, CA was voted on and rejected by that city council in 1999 (<http://www.corpun.com>). The same year some states such as Nevada and Oklahoma passed bills to remind parents of their right to spank children. Should spanking become criminalized, this would also have implications for family law, custody disputes, and termination of parental rights. With such far-reaching and momentous implications, there is an urgent need for empirical research to inform these debates.

There has been considerable research on the topic of spanking children that spans 40 years, with an acceleration of publications in the past decade. There have been many books (e.g., McCord, 1995; Straus, 1994a), empirical articles (e.g., Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Power & Chapieski, 1986; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997), and published debates (Baumrind, 1997; Consensus Statements, 1996; Mason & Gambrell, 1994). The research to date has been thoroughly and thoughtfully reviewed (see Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere, 2000). The reviews, however, often come to rather different and sometimes opposite conclusions.

The only consistent finding in the literature, carefully documented in a meta-analysis (Gershoff, 2002), is that spanking frequency is positively related to aggression, misconduct, and related constructs. However, it is neither surprising nor enlightening that more frequently spanked children are more misbehaved. The time line between punishment and aggression, that is, whether punishment is an antecedent to subsequent increases in aggressive behavior, is not firmly established. In many studies, it is just as plausible to state that aggressive behavior among children led to increased spanking.

Apart from the issue of the time line, it is quite possible that parent spanking of their children (presence, frequency, or severity of) is associated with a host of other child, parent, family, and contextual factors that might alone or in combination with spanking better account for the outcomes. Due to methodological limitations, no conclusions regarding causality can be drawn. Research in this area has matured in the past decade from studies that were primarily cross-sectional or retrospective to longitudinal prospective studies that control for some potentially confounding variables. However, despite the considerable advances, many key questions have been left unanswered and the area is trapped in a not so useful paradigm of trying to evaluate whether the consequences of spanking are “good” or “bad.”

Overall, there is great ambiguity in how to interpret the research findings to date. This is unfortunate in part because of the strong demand for child-rearing advice. The purpose of this article is to present the differing positions and to reformulate the research agenda. A goal is to stimulate research questions that will allow the field to progress towards a resolution of the most relevant questions to parents, professionals, and policymakers. We believe that the contradictions are not due to the reviews themselves, but to the research (i.e., the questions posed and the methodologies to address these questions). A discussion of conceptual, design, and assessment issues will provide us with the basis with which to propose concrete research priorities for this field. Finally, given the current absence of empirically sound answers to

questions about spanking, we address how mental health professionals might advise the public.

2. Controversial and polarized views of spanking

Corporal punishment of children can take many forms. Extreme forms are referred to as *physical abuse*, which has its own extensive literature on antecedents and short- and long-term consequences (e.g., Helfer, Kempe, & Krugman, 1999; Wolfe, 1999). Public opinion, professional advice, research findings, law, and social policy concur in recommending against physical abuse. The focus of this paper is on spanking. Spanking is defined here as hitting a child with an open hand on the buttocks or extremities with the intent to discipline without leaving a bruise or causing physical harm. This definition is in keeping with the definition often used to delineate spanking from more severe forms of corporal punishment (Baumrind, 2001; Consensus Statements, 1996).

We hasten to add that the definition of spanking itself is a source of controversy. Sometimes spanking is defined as any physical force that causes pain but no physical harm and that is directed for correcting or disciplining behavior (Gershoff, 2002; Straus, 1994a). This definition includes different types of parental behavior (hitting other body parts, hitting with objects) that are intended to cause pain and thus are primarily distinguished from abuse only by the consequences (i.e., no evidence of physical harm).

Some authors conceptualize spanking as an act of violence along a continuum of violence and, thus, do not find it meaningful to dichotomize non-abusive corporal punishment from child abuse (Graziano, Hamblen, & Plante, 1996; Straus, 1994b). There is no gold standard to determine that amount of punishment that is “just right.” Although the cut-point might well be arbitrary, there is an interest in distinguishing mild from extreme forms of corporal punishment to determine the effects of a range of physical punishment on children, not just abuse. As mentioned previously, the majority of parents in the United States have used spanking as a discipline technique. Consequently, it is meaningful to delineate mild forms of corporal punishment as a means of discipline. The focus of this paper is on spanking defined as noted previously and, therefore, spanking is distinguishable from harsher forms of abusive punishment.

Three positions characterize the spanking debate, two of which are articulated and espoused in the research literature and, a third, which though not articulated in scientific writing, is common in everyday life. These positions represent the anticorporal punishment, the conditional corporal punishment, and, finally, the unconditional pro corporal punishment views. These views are central to the research agenda because they influence in concrete ways how spanking is defined and evaluated, and the conclusions that may follow from the research.

2.1. *The anticorporal punishment position: “violence begets violence”*

The anticorporal punishment or “violence begets violence” position argues that the overall preponderance of empirical evidence supports the claim that all spanking, under all

conditions, has harmful consequences for short- and long-term child development (Straus, 1994a). The consequences include child aggression, behavior problems, criminal behavior, future spouse abuse, depression, suicidal ideation, and arousal to masochistic sex. These negative consequences this position maintains are not accepted by the general public, because they would “imply that almost all American parents are guilty of abuse, including those who write books of advice for parents and child psychology textbooks. So, it is no wonder that the existence of research showing the harmful effects of spanking is one of the best-kept secrets of American child psychology” (Straus, 1994b, p. 197).

The putative underlying mechanism in which spanking causes future negative outcomes is thought to be through the modeling of violence, based on social learning theory. This position is reflected in the following statement: “Spanking teaches the morality of hitting. But that lesson is only one part of the ‘hidden curriculum’ that accompanies each use of corporal punishment. Another key element of the hidden curriculum is that ‘those who love you are those who hit you’” (Straus, 1994b, p. 198). Similarly, other authors have noted that punishment that is painful teaches children that it is all right to give pain to others (McCord, 1996). Not only is spanking thought to be detrimental to the children who are spanked, but also spanking is thought to contribute to the general level of societal violence, which Straus (1996) refers to as the “cultural spillover” principle. “Although it is currently impossible to know the percentages, and to be sure that some new evil will not replace hitting children, the research reviewed suggests that, in addition to many other benefits, a society in which parents never spank will be a society with less violence and other crime” (p. 842). Finally, this position invokes a moral stance that the main issue is not an empirical question of effectiveness, but a moral question of inflicting pain on children and, thus, on moral grounds should be discouraged (Graziano et al., 1996).

2.2. *The conditional corporal punishment position: “no blanket injunction warranted”*

The conditional corporal punishment position notes that the effects of spanking are not necessarily negative or positive, but may be either or both depending on many other conditions. This position is best represented by a frequently cited comment, “A blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking by parents is not scientifically supportable” (Baumrind, 1996, p. 828). Researchers from this perspective argue that spanking may not have harmful consequences and under some conditions may even have beneficial effects. Larzelere (1994), for example, argues that the evidence is clear that mild or occasional spanking is beneficial for children between the ages of 2 and 6 under certain conditions, and that the effectiveness of important alternatives such as explanation and time-out is enhanced by being backed up with a mild spanking (Larzelere, 1994).

There is also the idea that the effect of spanking may be moderated by the meaning the child ascribes to the spanking, and this meaning may be influenced by other factors such as parenting context, age, sex, race, and family structure (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997). For example, it has been suggested that the meaning of specific parenting behaviors may vary between different cultural groups, and thus may have differential impact on children. Similarly, variations in the parenting context such as parental

warmth or lack thereof might magnify or minimize the effects of harsh physical discipline (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). There is only indirect evidence that perception of the child moderates the effect of punishment. For example, among Korean adolescents, in contrast to North American adolescents, perceptions of parental control are correlated positively with perceived parental warmth and low neglect (Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). Among American children in a biracial southern community in the United States, the association between perceived harshness of punishment and adverse psychological adjustment disappeared once perceptions of caretaker acceptance–rejection were accounted for (Rohner & Bourque, 1996).

Although there is no firm evidence that spanking specifically leads to benefits to the child, there has been discussion of why such effects might be evident. For example, Larzelere (1994) has suggested that many nonspanking parents may have well-behaved teenagers because they used mild spanking as a backup for other discipline techniques in the early years. Thus, mild spanking may have bolstered the effectiveness of nonspanking alternatives. Internalization and reinforcement of parental authority have also been mentioned. “Spanking may trade a brief period of intense distress for longer term guilt and anxiety associated with internalization. Spanking may be used to control the short-term behavior of the child and to reinforce the authority of the parent” (Baumrind, 1997, p. 177).

Finally, while the anticorporal punishment camp invokes morality, the conditional corporal punishment camp charges that “The antispanking rhetoric is more value-based than scientifically grounded” (Larzelere, 1996, p. 858) and that “The child-rearing practices of those who might be defined as the cultural other have been relegated to the realm of the immoral and the criminal, despite the fact that the current status of the empirical debate might be more accurately described as a diatribe” (Polite, 1996, p. 850). This position holds that providing parents with spanking guidelines (use with preadolescent children and children over age 2, with an open hand to the buttocks, leaving no mark, as a back-up for less aversive techniques and not as a primary or the only technique, in conjunction with reasoning, and within a loving family environment) will do more to curb child abuse than outlawing or discouraging spanking (Larzelere, 1994, 1996).

2.3. *The pro corporal punishment position: “spare the rod, spoil the child”*

A third position representing the “spare the rod, spoil the child” perspective is infrequently expressed in the research and academic writings. However, the view is readily found in the general population and in lay recommendations and advice to parents.³ This position assumes that spanking is not only beneficial, but to refrain from spanking is detrimental (Smith, 2000). As an illustration of this view, one author noted that, “A spanking is not going to hurt a child’s personality. If anything, it is going to help the child in the long run: spare the rod, spoil the child. I do not want children who have not been spanked to be our leaders of tomorrow” (Lee, 2000, p. 759).

³ The pro corporal punishment position has been articulated in letters in response to an article (MacMillan et al., 1999) published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, which reported an association between of spanking children and later mental disorders.

Spanking is thought to teach respect for authority and failure to do so leads to uncontrolled, disrespectful, acting out behavior. This position, as opposed to the anticorporal punishment position, implies that lack of sufficient discipline, and in this case corporal punishment, increases the level of societal discord and violence. “The number of children committing crimes in the United States is staggering. Where is the discipline that these children should be receiving at home? I was raised to understand that if I did something wrong, I would be punished for it—not coddled, and certainly not allowed to believe it is okay to have a bad attitude or to show a lack of respect. I spank my own children to reinforce the fact that wrongdoings will be punished, not tolerated” (Foss, 2000, p. 759). Acting upon such attitudes, a justice of the peace reportedly ordered a father to spank his foster child in the court room after the child had been cited for misbehavior at school (Rice, 2001). As rationale, the justice of the peace stated, “He doesn’t understand any other punishment but corporal punishment. . . . That was the way I was raised and you were raised, and we were much better kids than the current generation” (<http://www.corpun.com/usdm9902.htm>).

The “spare the rod spoil the child” view is a position to contend with in part because it is strongly and widely held. If research were to support that on balance deleterious effects resulted from spanking or that spanking is not necessary in light of viable alternatives, the findings might not be easily disseminated. Even among those who do not see spanking as the first line of discipline, it is often viewed as a last resort for discipline, as in the justice of the peace quote noted previously.

2.4. *Implications*

The varied and widely discrepant views about the benefits and limitations of spanking in child-rearing and child development are not inherently problematic. Indeed, scientific advances depend on different views and evidence that accumulates to elaborate, support, and make implausible various alternatives. There is a slightly different thrust of the varied positions we have highlighted in relation to spanking. The views emanate in part from principles (moral, religious) about how children ought or ought not to be treated. This has decreased slightly the relevance of the evidence as the basis for drawing conclusions. For example, the anticorporal punishment stance holds that hitting children is undesirable under any circumstances. Whether or not child compliance is improved as a result of spanking is irrelevant. This view cannot be easily dismissed as untenable or extreme. In fact, research has not studied a range of short- and long-term outcomes; evidence that spanking improves compliance, even if unequivocal, does not address that point. After all, a compelling reason against the use of spanking would be if any genuine benefits were far outweighed by the actual costs to adjustment and comportment. The evidence cannot put this latter concern to rest because of ambiguity about the benefits and costs of spanking.

The differing views about punishment have direct implications for how research on spanking is conducted, how spanking is measured, and who is studied. Consequently, the conclusions that are drawn from the empirical evidence on seemingly the same question can vary widely. For example, the underlying assumption of the anticorporal punishment position is that spanking falls along a continuum of violence. Spanking has been referred to as

subabusive violence (Graziano et al., 1996). This assumption has implications for how spanking is assessed, which outcome variables are selected, what the sample characteristics are, and what general question is posed by the research. In relation to assessment, spanking is conceived of as a continuous variable. In practice, this means that many measures of spanking are frequency ratings, and generally include different types of corporal punishment behaviors (e.g., hitting with a belt or object, punching, pinching, and shaking) at all severity levels. Because abusive behaviors are not excluded, the negative effects of severe corporal punishment may cloud the effects of mild corporal punishment such as spanking. That is, spanking effects reflect a continuum of practices that approach or include a severity level that constitutes abuse. Measures of the effects of spanking in studies emanating from the anticorporal punishment view often include behavior problems, violent behaviors, and criminality. Because violent and criminal behaviors are important outcomes from this perspective, research often relies on older child and adolescent samples. The guiding question posed by researchers of this position is: Is corporal punishment harmful for children? The independent variable (range of corporal punishments) and dependent variables (severe outcomes of older youths) may be more likely to demonstrate an affirmative answer.

Research that emanates from the conditional corporal punishment position is slightly different in focus. This view is that spanking is not violence, but one of a variety of discipline techniques. In research emanating from this position, measures of spanking tend to be dichotomous rather than continuous. This serves to restrict the definition so that more severe forms of corporal punishment are excluded and viewed as qualitatively different from mild and occasional spanking. With only more mild forms of hitting (an oxymoron to proponents of the anticorporal punishment view), conclusions from research might well differ from studies in which more severe practices are included. Research from the conditional perspective also focuses on less severe outcomes. Typically, child compliance in response to spanking is the main outcome measure. The samples studied include parents of children ages 2–6 years, an age where compliance, rather than violence and criminal behavior are of greater concern to parents. Often spanking is compared to other forms of punishment. The question most often posed by research in the conditional punishment position is: Is spanking effective for increasing compliance or more effective than other discipline techniques?

The different positions might appear to be solely of academic interest and easily by-passed by merely examining what the empirical evidence shows. Although we highlight the evidence, a central thesis of this article is that the evidence cannot be divorced from the positions from which the research has emanated. In addition, the limited progress and answers to critical questions pertain to the rather restricted foci of the research that the different positions have emphasized.

3. Overview of research findings and conclusions

The empirical literature on spanking has been reviewed on several occasions (Becker, 1964; Consensus Statements, 1996; Gershoff, 2002; Larzelere, 1996, 2000; Steinmetz, 1979;

Straus, 1994a). Two of the most recent reviews provide the latest statement of research and are exemplary in terms of scope, comprehensiveness, and scholarship. We highlight major conclusions and issues from these reviews that serve as a major point of departure for our purpose, namely, to articulate the research agenda.

In the first of the reviews, Larzelere (2000) evaluated 38 studies that assess the outcomes of spanking with preadolescent children (mean age under 13). The review focuses on those studies for which spanking is measured as an antecedent to the subsequent child outcome (e.g., longitudinal studies or sequential analyses). Corporal punishment as measured in these studies is restricted to non-abusive corporal punishment, eliminating studies whose measures are dominated by severity. The numbers of studies, which have predominantly beneficial, detrimental, and neutral or mixed outcomes, are presented to provide a box score analysis, i.e., how many studies show a finding in one direction rather than another.

In the second review, Gershoff (2002) provides a meta-analysis of 88 studies that examine the relationship between corporal punishment and several constructs some of which are measured in childhood and others in later adult life. These constructs include immediate compliance, moral internalization, aggression in childhood, aggression in adulthood, childhood delinquent and antisocial behavior, adult criminal or antisocial behavior, quality of parent–child relationship, mental health in childhood, mental health in adulthood, being a victim of physical abuse, and adult abusive behavior towards own child or spouse. Unlike the previous review, Gershoff analyzes studies of the use of corporal punishment with adolescents as well as preadolescent children.

3.1. *Points of convergence*

Although the reviews address overlapping but slightly different studies, they concur, to varying degrees, on these three conclusions:

- *Immediate compliance follows corporal punishment.* This conclusion refers to the finding that children who are spanked are likely to comply immediately and to desist immediately in the behavior that was punished. Larzelere (2000) found increased compliance in all 10 studies that measured compliance as an outcome. Gershoff (2002) found a large mean effect size ($ES = 1.13$) for immediate compliance. (Large effect size is based on Cohen's (1988) recommendation to consider 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 as small, medium, and large ESs, respectively.) However, three of the five studies found spanking *increased* immediate compliance, while the remaining two found that it *decreased* immediate compliance.

- *Age moderates the outcome of spanking.* While surveys show that spanking is carried out throughout childhood and adolescence, research suggests that the effects of spanking vary as a function of age. Larzelere (2000) concluded that beneficial effects (i.e., compliance) are greater among children ages 6 and under. Detrimental outcomes (e.g., more externalizing problems, mental health problems, and lower competencies) are more likely with older children. Similarly, Gershoff (2002) found that spanking is more strongly related to aggressive and antisocial behavior with increased age. The strongest effects were

for children aged 10–12 and not for the oldest children encompassed by her review (who were in the 13–16-year range). We note in passing that the age effect might be explained in all sorts of ways (e.g., children who are spanked and older may be more deviant and dysfunctional). At this point, there is some agreement on the correlation between detrimental outcomes and age of the child, but the factors explaining this relation are not known.

- *Frequent corporal punishment is associated with negative outcomes.* There is a relation between how frequently children are spanked and negative outcomes. Larzelere (2000) concludes that frequent spanking is related to a range of detrimental outcomes including increased externalizing and mental health problems and poorer competencies. He suggests that detrimental outcomes of physical punishment become significant when spanking frequency reaches one to three times a week. However, he asserts that the detrimental outcomes associated with frequent spanking are not unique to spanking, but also hold true for other discipline techniques such as verbal punishment, privilege removal, grounding, and allowance removal. Gershoff (2002), however, unequivocally concludes that frequent corporal punishment is associated with negative outcomes and child compliance as the only desirable outcome. As with the effects of age, the relation of frequency of punishment and deleterious outcomes is a descriptive statement with little evidence as to whether frequency per se is the critical variable.

3.2. Additional nonoverlapping conclusions

Each review reaches some conclusions that are not contained in the other review. For example, Larzelere (2000) addresses the cultural context by examining studies specifically focusing on African Americans and the comparison of spanking to other discipline tactics. Gershoff (2002) addresses the robustness of the findings against the “file drawer problem” and evaluates child sex as a possible moderator variable. These nonoverlapping conclusions are as follows:

- Low to moderate spanking was found to have benign and, in one study, beneficial outcomes in African Americans. Larzelere points to four longitudinal studies in which the outcomes of spanking were predominantly detrimental for European Americans, but neutral for African Americans, and one study for which there were lower rates of fighting 5 years later in African American children who were spanked. Ethnic differences, however, do not hold when corporal punishment is at an abusive level (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996). From our own evaluation, we found two studies in which corporal punishment was positively associated with negative outcomes such as insecure attachment and child acting-out behavior for African Americans (Barnett, Kidwell, & Leung, 1998; McCabe, Clark, & Barnett, 1999).

- Harmful effects of punishment do not seem to differ when spanking, verbal punishment, loss of privileges, and grounding are compared.

- The effect of corporal punishment may be different for girls than for boys. The higher percentage of girls in a study sample included in Gershoff’s meta-analyses, the less corporal punishment was associated with aggression and antisocial behavior.

3.3. Points of disagreement

The major points on which both of these reviews disagree are briefly summarized in [Table 1](#). Both reviews disagree on the basic question as to whether the outcomes of spanking are predominantly detrimental or beneficial. Larzelere concludes that for younger children (aged 2–6) spanking is predominately beneficial (i.e., it reduces noncompliance and fighting). Gershoff finds moderate effect sizes for 10 detrimental outcomes. The effect sizes ranged from -0.09 to 0.69 . Using [Cohen's \(1988\)](#) criteria, mentioned previously, there were medium effect sizes for two of the outcomes (quality of parent–child relationship and adult aggression) and one medium-to-large effect size (being a victim of physical abuse). The only positive outcome was immediate compliance and this generated a large effect size (1.13).

Both reviews find some detrimental outcomes but disagree as to the consistency of those findings. While Larzelere found the 38 studies to be divided almost equally into predom-

Table 1

Points of disagreement between the two most recent and comprehensive reviews of the corporal punishment literature

Conclusion	Larzelere (2000)	Gershoff (2002)
Is spanking primarily detrimental or beneficial?	Beneficial (i.e., reduces noncompliance and fighting) in 2–6-year-olds when used as a back-up for milder disciplinary tactics.	Detrimental. Spanking was associated with several undesirable outcomes (see text) with generally moderate effect sizes and only one positive outcome, immediate compliance.
How consistent are the undesirable outcomes?	The 38 studies were equally divided into predominantly beneficial, detrimental, and neutral or mixed outcomes.	Overwhelmingly consistent. 94% of individual effect sizes represent undesirable outcomes related to spanking.
Does the methodology of the study make a difference in terms of the findings?	Yes. Methodology (assessment strategy, short- or long-term outcome, study design) influenced whether outcomes were generally beneficial or detrimental.	No. Conservative post-hoc tests showed no significant associations between study characteristics and the strength of the association between CP and aggression.
Can causality be determined from these studies?	Yes. The greater the causal conclusiveness of the study (due to methodological design) the more likely to have detected beneficial outcomes. No causally relevant study found detrimental outcomes if abusive parents were eliminated, if spanking was measured as a back-up for milder disciplinary tactics, or with a clinical sample.	No. With the exception of immediate compliance, no definitive causal conclusions can be made.

inantly beneficial, detrimental, and neutral or mixed outcomes, Gershoff found the overwhelming majority (94%) of individual effect sizes to represent undesirable constructs related to corporal punishment.

The two reviews disagree as to the impact of different methodologies on the research findings. Larzelere concludes that the methodology employed (such as assessment strategy, short- or long-term outcome, study design) influences whether outcomes were generally detrimental or beneficial. Gershoff finds that while regression analyses suggest a moderator effect for type of study and operational definition of corporal punishment, more conservative post-hoc comparisons do not support that the study methodology moderates the results.

Finally, the reviews differ in the extent to which they propose that causal relations can be drawn between spanking and subsequent child outcomes. In light of the research designs of the studies he reviews, Larzelere tentatively concludes that there is greater evidence for a causal relation between spanking and subsequent beneficial effects. He concludes that there is no evidence of a causal relationship between spanking and detrimental outcomes if studies with abusive parents are eliminated from the review or if spanking was used as a back up for milder disciplinary tactics, or among clinical samples. Additionally, Larzelere's review suggests that better design methodologies support the view that spanking is associated with beneficial outcomes, whereas less well-designed studies lead to detrimental outcomes. Design quality tends to be linked to the questions posed. Questions posed by those studies, which find "beneficial" outcomes, tend to focus on immediate compliance, rather than long-term consequences to adjustment and mental health. These findings are interpreted to be "causally relevant" even though they do not directly show a causal relation. In contrast, Gershoff assumes that, with the exception of immediate compliance, no definitive causal conclusions can be made.

3.4. *General comments*

It is not surprising that the two excellent and most current reviews reach somewhat different conclusions. Due to different inclusion criteria, they do not analyze the same studies. More specifically, the reviews include 18 overlapping studies. The Larzelere review considers 20 studies that the Gershoff review does not include; the Gershoff review considers 70 studies that the Larzelere review does not include. Many of the studies do not correspond between the reviews because of the inclusion criteria for spanking. In the Gershoff review, while studies, which include techniques that knowingly cause severe physical injury, were said to be excluded from the meta-analyses, close examination of the studies in this review suggests a less restrictive definition of spanking than those in the Larzelere review. For example, the measures of corporal punishment in a study (Holmes & Robins, 1988) used in the meta-analysis included being frequently punched, hit with a belt, stick or similar object, and beatings. The less restrictive definition of corporal punishment employed is noted in that 34 of the studies included in this review were not included in the Larzelere review because of the severity of the physical punishment measure or the overly broad measure of punishment. Differences in the set of studies used and the selection are noteworthy. Perhaps, even more

surprising is that for such an important topic with studies that can be traced back to the 1930s, only a total of 108 studies in the English language were identified as pertinent for addressing the effects of spanking.

Despite the points of disagreement, some similar conclusions are reached. While both reviews would agree that overly frequent spanking is detrimental, we do not know how much is “overly” frequent or severe. And while both reviews concur that spanking increases immediate compliance, there is a differential value given to this outcome which really colors the tone or position of these reviews with respect to their summary (take home) message about spanking. The two reviews represent a significant step forward in consolidating current research. Also, the overlapping but also discrepant selection criteria and different sets of studies raise issues indirectly. Based on the conclusions and their ambiguity, we propose an expanded research agenda to shed more light on the effects of spanking.

4. Directions for research

The conclusions reached from current research are quite limited, tentative, and inconsistent. This might well be a function of the varied effects of spanking or that spanking in moderation is not an influence with potent, clear, and reliable effects. The effects of spanking might be weak (as a main effect) and may be moderated by (interact with) characteristics of the child, parent, family, and contexts in which punishment is delivered (e.g., culture and country). Either of these could readily explain the inconsistencies. An alternative explanation of the inconsistent effects that we believe cannot be ruled out is that special characteristics of the research conducted to date account for the ambiguities and opposing conclusions. These characteristics refer to the methodology of the studies as well as the focus or substantive questions of the studies. We elaborate each of these with the goal of providing needed directions for research.

4.1. Methodological issues and limitations

Methodological issues and limitations can be identified in any area of research. We focus here only on those issues that could easily explain the inconsistencies across studies and the somewhat discrepant conclusions that are reached by reviewers.

4.1.1. Conceptual and operational definitions

A central limitation of research on spanking is the lack of consensus as to conceptual and operational definitions of corporal punishment and spanking. Corporal punishment, physical punishment, spanking, harsh punishment, and punitive parenting have been used interchangeably in conceptualizing spanking. Parents have a rather broad view of what spanking is and this has filtered into the research. Furthermore, many studies that are reviewed to support conclusions regarding spanking do not purport to study spanking, per se, but rather physical punishment. We refer to this as a conceptual issue because prior to operationalizing spanking, many researchers begin with different conceptions of the focus.

Once one moves from the concept to measurement, quite discrepant definitions are readily apparent. Moreover, these different operational definitions could readily account for discrepant findings. For example, spanking or customary corporal punishment are defined in some studies to include practices that others would exclude as abusive. Hitting a child with a belt, strap, or switch is included in one study (McCabe et al., 1999); another study distinguished the spanking group from the abuse group by whether the hitting was with an open hand or object (versus closed fist or use of stronger force) and whether performed in a controlled manner (versus impulsive or uncontrolled) (Strassberg et al., 1994). Other studies further limit to open-handed hitting of the buttocks or extremities only (Larzelere & Merenda, 1994). The belt/strap versus open hand distinction is worth noting because definitions of physical abuse often include using material other than one's hand. The use of belts and straps perhaps are more likely to be abused, i.e., to escalate the severity of the punishment. Thus, studies of spanking include punishment of varying levels of severity and types. Severity of spanking influences the relation of spanking to untoward outcomes. Understandably, if studies vary in the severity of spanking, they are very likely to generate conclusions that vary.

In many studies, parents are asked about spanking and no concrete definition is provided (e.g., Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; MacMillan et al., 1999; Straus et al., 1997). Essentially, these questionnaires or surveys used to solicit information on spanking rely on definitions that the parents use. It is quite likely that among parents, there is great variability in what constitutes spanking. Indeed, Straus et al. (1997) refer to unpublished data that explore what parents mean by spanking, and suggest that parents do not restrict their definition to mean hitting the buttocks, but to all corporal punishment within an acceptable range of severity. Leaving the definition of spanking to parents invites ambiguity in any results derived from comparisons of parents (or the children of parents) who spank versus those who do not spank. If there were great variability, inconsistent effects could be explained by the rather diverse practices of the people who spank. This variability could also account for weak effects (diluted effect sizes) for any given study.

The previous comments assume variation in parent definitions of spanking and that any group of "spanking parents" will be diverse. There is a related issue. It is possible that some parents define spanking differently from others in systematic ways. For example, it might be that parents who are abusive or whose practices approach abuse define their behavior as "spanking," whereas researchers would consistently label their behavior as abusive. Those who abuse their child(ren) (by statutory definitions) are unlikely to see it that way, but rather as punishment within an "acceptable" range. Also, if parents are allowed to invoke their own definitions, as is often the case for questionnaires and surveys of parental spanking, the definitions may vary systematically across samples as a function of geography, social class, ethnicity, or some other moderating variable. Here too inconsistent results might well be expected.

Operational definitions of corporal punishment are often contaminated by other constructs. For example, "harsh discipline" is a term used in the literature on corporal punishment (included in reviews that focus on "spanking") (e.g., Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). One study describes "harsh discipline" as a composite

measure of mothers' reports of corporal punishment in the previous week and observer ratings of whether the mother had hit, scolded, or denigrated her child (Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Thus, verbal aggression and hostility are included in this measure, eliminating the possibility of determining the unique contribution of physical aggression. Often authoritarianism or parental control is also part of the measurement of corporal or harsh punishment. One composite measure included a five-point score from nonrestrictive, mostly positive guidance to severe, strict, often physical (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). It is often assumed that corporal punishment usually co-occurs with authoritarianism. While more authoritarian parents may use corporal punishment than other parents, corporal punishment is also used by parents with other parenting styles (Baumrind, 2001). Thus, it is important to separate these constructs in order to understand the unique contribution of spanking. In short, the ways in which spanking is defined across studies is critical in determining the effects of spanking. The inconsistent conclusions could readily be explained by considerable variation in how spanking is operationalized.

4.1.2. Assessment methods

The ways in which spanking are assessed deserve comment insofar as they too can contribute to inconsistent findings. The most commonly used measures are based on self-report. Parents are asked to recall how often they engage in various discipline practices over a particular period. For example, one survey (Gallup Organization, 1995) asked parents to recall the frequency of various practices over the past 12 months. Problems of recall and the accuracy of retrospective assessment are worth mentioning. Perhaps, more noteworthy is that self-report and retrospective assessment is often used in ways that may foster relations between spanking and some "outcome." That is, parents are asked to recall their spanking practices and the child's level of deviance. The resulting information, such as the correlation between spanking and child deviance, must be viewed with caution because of the common biases and methods that characterize the measurement of both constructs.

One would prefer direct measures of spanking other than self-report and retrospective report. Occasionally observations (Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) and diary report (Chapman & Zahn-Waxler, 1982; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, & Pike, 1996) are used. For example, Smith and Brooks-Gunn (1997) combined a self-report measure with an observer rating of whether a mother had spanked, hit, or scolded her child during a 2-h home visit. Larzelere et al. trained mothers to use a structured discipline diary in which they recorded each occurrence of their child's fighting or disobedience and the subsequent discipline technique they used to respond to it from a list of 21 techniques. Mothers were given an in-home training, which consisted of reviewing the definitions of the listed discipline techniques and practice coding written and videotaped vignettes. Chapman and Zahn-Waxler (1982) employed a less structured diary format in which mothers recorded all emotional incidents with their children and a literal account of the sequence of events that followed. These mothers also received training and periodic reviews of their reports. Direct observational and diary methods are potentially quite informative. However, the low frequency of spanking makes use of these methods difficult.

4.1.3. *Time sequence*

Among the central questions in this literature is whether spanking has any untoward consequences or side effects. We have already mentioned the use of retrospective assessment in many studies in which both the independent variable (spanking) and dependent variables (effects and side effects) are assessed simultaneously. Obviously, the time line between variables cannot be established in this way.

To convey this point, it is useful to distinguish between correlate (the relation of two variables at a given point in time), risk factor (the relation of two variables in which one is shown to precede a later outcome), and cause or causal risk factor (Kraemer et al., 1997). Whether spanking causes side effects requires first establishing a time line. Many studies of punishment have been cross-sectional and at best establish a correlation between punishment and child deviance (e.g., McCabe et al., 1999). The inference that spanking leads to child deviance and misbehavior is not warranted. A review paper is hardly needed to state that correlation does not have any necessary implications for causation and indeed others have noted this point in relation to the spanking literature (Baumrind, 1996; Gershoff, 2002). Some longitudinal studies (e.g., Michels, Pianta, & Reeve, 1993; Strassberg et al., 1994) go much further to establish a time line. However, the causal relation is not resolved by these studies.

The next step in showing a time line (after correlation but before causation) is to show that one event occurred before the outcome of interest. As a familiar example, one must show that cigarette smoking preceded lung cancer to establish that the former is a risk factor for the latter. It is essential to ensure that lung cancer was not evident at the time when smoking was assessed. In longitudinal studies, spanking at time 1 occasionally is shown to predict child deviance at time 2. This does not necessarily establish the time line unless one can show that elevated deviance in the child was not evident at time 1. This is a more subtle point. A few recent longitudinal spanking studies do control for child deviance at time 1 (e.g., Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Straus et al., 1997), however, the measures of deviance at time 1 have been weak, such as a one-item measure. Longitudinal studies are necessary to establish a time line, but they are not sufficient unless assessments convey that a proposed outcome (e.g., deviant behavior) is not evident at time 1. Both deviance and spanking at time 1 could predict deviance at time 2.

4.1.4. *Confounding variables*

Establishing the time line between spanking at time 1 and deviance at time 2 may or may not establish the specific causal role of spanking on deviance. It is possible that spanking is a proxy variable (Kraemer, Stice, Kazdin, Offord, & Kupfer, 2001). That is, the relation between spanking and some outcome could be due to some other variable with which spanking is correlated, i.e., spanking is a proxy for some other variable. As an illustration, consider the possible role of parental stress in relation to outcomes attributed to spanking. Parents who spank or who spank more frequently or with greater severity may be experiencing greater stress than those who spank less or not at all. Several life circumstances are known to contribute to parental stress such as low income, single parenthood, and young parenthood. Moreover, stress and these circumstances in fact are related both to

the frequency of spanking (Gallup Organization, 1995; Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) and to negative child outcomes (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). Also, we know that parental stress is associated with more problematic (inept, harsh) discipline practices and child deviance (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Patterson, 1988). Conceivably, parental stress could account for some or all of the association between spanking and negative outcomes.

Other variables could be proposed in the same vein. For example, use of corporal punishment in the home is also associated with parent rejection of the child and family conflict (McCauley, Pavlidis, & Kendall, 2001). Here too, we are not claiming that spanking effects are in fact explained by another variable. We are only noting that several plausible influences that could explain the relation between spanking and untoward child outcomes have not been addressed in research. Spanking could be a proxy for parenting stress, marital discord, parental hostility, psychopathology, parenting deficits, or inconsistencies in responding to child behavior. These influences individually or in combination could account for some of the effect. If one controlled for all of these, does spanking make a difference?

More recent studies of spanking have begun to control for variables that could plausibly account for or contribute to the relation between child and parent outcomes. Among variables that have been controlled are socioeconomic status (SES) (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Straus et al., 1997), family structure (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997), and positive parenting or parental warmth (Baumrind, 2001; Straus et al., 1997). For example, Deater-Deckard et al. (1996) controlled statistically for SES, family structure as well as child gender and ethnicity by entering these variables as the first step of a hierarchical linear regression. They found that physical discipline made a small incremental contribution to the prediction of externalizing behavior. Specifically, physical discipline explained 2% of the variance in externalizing behavior problems above and beyond the 27% that was explained by living with a single mother, being male and from a lower SES household. An additional 1% was explained by an interaction between race and physical punishment.

Similarly, Baumrind (2001) evaluated spanking and cognitive competence, communal competence and internalizing and externalizing problems. The analyses controlled statistically for positive parenting, maladjusted parenting, parental education, and previous child maladjustment (and after having eliminated abusive parents from the analyses). Once these variables were controlled, the associations between spanking and negative outcomes disappeared. Not all of the results are consistent on this matter. Straus et al. (1997) showed that corporal punishment continued to be related to antisocial behavior 2 years later even after controlling statistically for parental warmth, cognitive stimulation, SES, race, child gender, and prior misbehavior.

Spanking is associated with many child, parent, family, and contextual characteristics that might lead to or be associated with outcomes related to child adjustment and deviance. To establish the specific role of spanking, other characteristics with which spanking is associated need to be evaluated as well. Although an indefinite or indeed infinite number of variables might be proposed to account for the relation, there is no need to undertake such a daunting task. One need only to consider variables that are in fact associated with spanking and that may contribute to the outcome of interest. For example, difficult child temperament, parent stress, parent psychopathology, and poverty are associated with child deviance in prospective

longitudinal studies. To establish that spanking contributes to child deviance, these other constructs ought to be considered. It is not the case that child temperament, parent stress, or other variables are more important than or logically prior to spanking. Rather, in the interests of parsimony, we need evidence that another construct (spanking) is needed and provides an increment of information about child deviance in relation to constructs, which already have such evidence in their behalf.

5. Expanding the research agenda

The methodological issues highlighted previously could account in part for the limited conclusions that can be reached about spanking and its effects. At the same time, we propose that the limited yield is also the result of the substantive focus of research. By focus, we refer to the questions that guide research. Clearly, the guiding question is the one for which there is the greatest interest, namely, whether spanking helps or harms. This question is deceptively simple and one that we believe must be cast within a larger research agenda. Table 2 presents key areas that ought to guide research and that expand the current focus of studies. We highlight each of the areas to convey how this is different from currently available research.

Table 2
Key questions to guide research

Goals of parent discipline

1. What are the goals of parent discipline?
2. What are the ways (in addition to spanking) in which these goals can be achieved?

Effects of spanking

1. What are the effects of spanking, including the . . .
 - (a) Direct effects on the behaviors that precipitate spanking
 - (b) Concomitant effects on affect, behavior, and cognition
 - (c) Short- and long-term effects?
2. Are there unique advantages or disadvantages to spanking?
3. What is the relation (i.e., function and slope) of severity and frequency of corporal punishment and any direct and concomitant consequences?
4. Are there key moderators of the effects of spanking (e.g., child, parent, family, context, and culture)?

Influences that foster and maintain the use of spanking

1. What are the factors (child, parent, family, and contexts) that promote spanking?
2. What are the factors that maintain spanking?
3. What are the factors that separate (correlate with and predict) spanking rather than physical abuse?

Understanding key processes

1. Are there processes of development (e.g., attachment, development of relationships, and peer relations) that are influenced by spanking (or that influence spanking effects)?
 2. What biological processes are influenced by spanking (e.g., immediate stress reaction and brain functioning)?
 3. Are there animal models and animal research paradigms that might inform punishment practices?
-

5.1. Goals of parent discipline

Parents have concrete goals in their use of corporal punishment and the obvious first question pertains to the options for achieving these goals. Presumably in disciplining children, the goals are to decrease some behaviors (e.g., tantrums and talking back) and to develop other behaviors (problem solving, playing cooperatively, and completing homework). There is considerable research showing that with very few exceptions punishment is relatively weak in its ability to develop positive, prosocial behavior and to eliminate undesirable behaviors. The conclusions from applied human research are bolstered by animal laboratory research on punishment and response suppression (Azrin & Holz, 1966; Hutchinson, 1977)⁴.

We have learned that positive reinforcement is defined by increasing behaviors and hence at first blush is not a way to decrease, suppress, or eliminate some undesirable behavior. Actually, both are true, i.e., positive reinforcement increases behavior but also can serve to eliminate behavior. Many undesirable behaviors can be completely suppressed by positive reinforcement of alternative and incompatible behaviors (Kazdin, 2001; O'Brien & Repp, 1990; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1991). Alternatively, positive reinforcement for low rates of deviant behavior or extended periods without the deviant behavior too has been effective. For example, in the home, parents can praise or provide token reinforcement in a systematic way (e.g., contingently and immediately) for nontantrum behavior, for cooperative play, and for compliance. This can and often has eliminated the undesirable behavior. Research has shown that reinforcement can be used to suppress or eliminate behavior with children and adolescents in different settings and contexts (at home, at school, in the community, and in various institutional settings). Thus, many of the goals to which spanking is routinely applied (child compliance, rule violation, and fighting in the home) can be achieved through positive reinforcement procedures that are rather well researched.

A top priority for research on spanking would seem to be a comparison of spanking with alternative procedures that already have considerable evidence in their behalf. Positive reinforcement would be a prime candidate for comparison because of the demonstrations already available in the context of the home and parenting. We were unable to identify any such comparisons in the literature, both from our own search and from resources encompassed by recent reviews of spanking research. Indeed, spanking is rarely compared to nonspanking alternatives of any kind and when it is, spanking is generally compared to other punishment alternatives. As one exception, reasoning with children (telling them the reasons why they ought not to have misbehaved and explaining the consequences of misbehavior) was compared with spanking (and noncorporal punishment) and evaluated in terms of child misbehavior at home. Corporal punishment consisted of slapping the child's hand or spanking the buttocks. The results indicated that reasoning, in combination with punishment, was associated with a longer mean delay until subsequent misbehavior than for either reasoning or punishment alone (Larzelere et al., 1996). A break down of noncorporal punishment

⁴ There is an important exception to mention, but that is not germane to the focus of this article. In both animal and human research, the application of contingent shock has led to rapid and sustained suppression or elimination of behavior (Azrin & Holz, 1966; Hutchinson, 1977).

(withdrawal of privileges and time out) versus corporal punishment (spanking and hand slapping) found no difference between the two alone or when combined with reasoning. Each type of punishment was enhanced when combined with reasoning. These findings are interesting insofar as parents often view reasoning with children as an alternative to or supplement of corporal punishment. However, comparisons with well-established alternatives are lacking. It is comparisons with these techniques that warrant much greater attention.

Clarification of the goals of punishment would help broaden the question for research. Namely, given the concrete objectives of child discipline, what are the intervention options? Spanking is one of the available punishment techniques but punishment techniques are not the only class of interventions that might be tested. Research on punishment, without the use of spanking in particular, has suggested that punishment is not very effective as a way of eliminating behavior, that reinforcement is fairly effective in doing this, and that positive reinforcement with very mild punishment (e.g., brief time out and small token fine) is slightly more effective than reinforcement alone. Overall, we believe that the goals of spanking ought to be formulated more clearly in research to allow an evaluation of how well spanking accomplishes these goals. This formulation of the questions would also help connect the spanking literature to a broader literature on positive reinforcement in the home, at school, and other settings where spanking is sometimes used.

5.2. Direct and concomitant effects of spanking

The effect of spanking can be appropriately evaluated in relation to the specific objectives for which it is used. Thus, studies typically have examined the extent to which spanking leads to a reduction of the behavior to which it is applied. We label these here as direct effects to denote the focus of research is on whether and to what extent spanking accomplishes the explicit goal to which it is directed. Studies also evaluate whether there are concomitant effects. These include any effect other than the focus of spanking and might encompass the development of prosocial behaviors, other misbehavior than the one to which spanking was directed, misbehavior of any kind in different settings, and emotional reactions (e.g., crying and anger), to mention some of the possibilities. In the literature on spanking, some authors are concerned about whether hitting the child under any circumstances “sends a message” to the child that violence is a reasonable way of interacting with others. This has not been tested, but would refer to a concomitant effect that might be of interest.

There is a clear need to evaluate a broad range of effects beyond the target focus of spanking. Outside of the context of research on spanking, there is considerable research with children, adolescents, and adults showing that punishment can have many untoward side effects (Kazdin, 2001). Common among the effects are emotional reactions (crying), aggressive reactions in relation to the punishing agent (e.g., hitting back), increased aggression in other contexts (e.g., at school), and escape and avoidance from the person who delivers the punishment and the settings in which the punishment is provided. These effects are particularly likely with corporal punishment, but they can occur with low levels of noncorporal punishment as well. That is, it does not take abuse to begin to evoke the negative side effects of punishment. Indeed, even mild punishment that would not be effective in

suppressing behavior (e.g., reprimands, nagging) can lead to side effects (e.g., escape or avoidance). Few studies examine side effects of spanking. One study reported that 86% of parents noted that their children were moderately to extremely upset when physically punished. The child reactions included resentment, anger, sadness, and “hurt” feelings (Graziano et al., 1996). Interestingly, a high proportion of parents (85%) reported moderate to high anger, remorse, and agitation when physically punishing their children.

The effects of spanking on child behavior need to be elaborated beyond the immediate compliance of the child, as noted in Table 2. These effects can be evaluated in light of the prior discussion of the goals of parent discipline. Are there special benefits or costs of spanking in relation to other procedures including nonaversive methods of changing behavior? Evaluation of spanking depends heavily on elaborating the range of effects and how these effects compare to alternatives that are equally or more effective in changing child behavior.

The concomitant effects of punishment extend beyond the behaviors of the child. One such effect of concern is the possibility that the frequency or severity of spanking might escalate. The effects of punishment are often immediate. Thus, child compliance or cessation of some undesirable behavior is likely to occur as soon as spanking is administered. The overall rate of the undesirable behavior may not be influenced at all over time, even when suppression is immediate. The immediate change in the child means that spanking on the part of the parent is immediately reinforced by the resulting submission and compliance of the child. This very strong contingency no doubt contributes to the continued use of techniques that are often not effective in changing the overall rate of performance beyond the immediate moment of response suppression.

If there is stress, higher than usual parent frustration, or more severe than usual deviant behavior on the part of the child, spanking in any given instance may increase in severity. Slight increases in spanking on the part of the parent also will be reinforced by the same contingency that maintains spanking to begin with. A potential danger is that spanking may inadvertently escalate and move closer toward physical abuse where the deleterious concomitant effects are better established.

Research has not yet begun to address the range of possible concomitant effects of punishment and the effects of these in relation to alternatives that might be used to achieve the goals of discipline. The concomitant effects are not minor and might well decide the advisability of using spanking. For example, assume that positive reinforcement for compliance and spanking for noncompliance were compared in changing child behavior; further assume that these were equally effective. Differences in concomitant effects would be very important. Indeed, in the context of medical treatment and disease, the treatment of choice (e.g., which of two medications) may be based on the profile of untoward side effects. The direct effects on the disease may be equal.

5.3. Influences that foster and maintain the use of spanking

There has been little research on the factors that promote the use of spanking and then maintain spanking once initiated. Many of these factors have been well studied in the context

of physical abuse. Spanking behavior may be precipitated by a variety of factors that might be unrelated to the child's (mis)behavior such as substance use, parental anger, stress, or psychopathology. Such factors are likely to play a role in the frequency and severity of spanking, and child outcome. For example, [Straus and Mouradian \(1998\)](#) compared impulsive versus controlled spanking. The associations between corporal punishment and child antisocial behavior were stronger when mothers reported having spanked impulsively rather than in a controlled manner. Factors other than those that foster spanking might play a role in maintaining the use of spanking. We have already mentioned that the immediate compliance of the child is likely to reinforce parental spanking regardless of whether there is an actual reduction in the base rate of the child misbehavior. Also, a parental sense of retribution or the alleviation of anger and frustration might also maintain spanking behavior. More could be understood about parental emotional responses and cognitive attributions following spanking and other types of discipline behavior.

Understanding the development and use of spanking within the home and the factors that keep spanking in check would be very helpful. By “keeping spanking in check” we merely refer to the distinction between use and abuse. Currently, the evidence does not support the view that moderate and occasional spanking is harmful. This would be very useful to understand. Use and abuse is a distinction that has great utility (e.g., as in relation to alcohol and drug use and abuse). Abuse often is invoked when the actions involve impairment, increase risk to the individual or to others with regard to some other untoward outcome.

It would be of value to understand the use–abuse distinction in relation to corporal punishment. As we noted previously, some would view any corporal punishment as abusive. We are not endorsing spanking by calling for greater understanding of the continuum of physical punishment. The factors that can lead from spanking to abuse and that differentiate abusers and occasional “spankers” would be very helpful for understanding the processes involved and for informing the public.

5.4. Understanding processes

In discussing the effects of punishment, it is useful to consider more than merely any outcomes in compliance and prosocial and deviant behavior. There are many processes of development that might be influenced by corporal punishment including attachment, stress of the child, parent–child relations, self-esteem, and others. It would be useful to consider spanking in relation to development to identify how it may help or hinder specific domains known from child development research to be important. The pertinence of spanking to other processes early in development is hinted at occasionally. For example, in disadvantaged African Americans, parents of insecurely attached preschool children were more likely to use corporal punishment (spanking and hitting) and less likely to use verbal reminders when their children misbehaved, compared to parents of securely attached children ([Barnett et al., 1998](#)). This study raises the matter that spanking may play a broader role in development than mere response suppression. On the other hand, it may not if spanking is a proxy for other variables.

A related issue pertains to the ways in which punishment affects brain development. Child abuse and neglect can exert biochemical, functional, and structural changes in the brain

(Glaser, 2000). These are not minor changes but can include such changes as cerebral volume and increased or decreased reactivity to various neurotransmitters. Psychological concomitants associated with some of these changes (e.g., stress reactivity and working memory) are influenced as well. The findings pertain to extremes of child maltreatment; we do not wish to imply that spanking has any similar consequences or effects. At the same time, corporal punishment of the child, even in mild forms, warrants study in relation to elementary processes such as stress reaction. It would be important to show that none of the deleterious consequences of child abuse are evident with the more mild uses of spanking.

The study of the processes that spanking or corporal punishment may affect could profit immensely from animal models and animal research paradigms of punishment. We are not suggesting that spanking of laboratory rats duplicates the parent confronting a tantrum in response to a repeated request to put on a jacket before going out in the cold. It is rather easy to discount analogues of processes that might inform the phenomenon of interest. Spanking (mild corporal punishment) could easily be simulated in animal laboratory research. It would be useful to understand the processes involved in relation to the effects of spanking. Among the questions would be how spanking affects learning and memory, presumably key processes and functions involved in response to spanking, and whether stress is or is not elevated after spanking.

A key concern is that one cannot experimentally manipulate spanking and hence one is doomed to the ambiguity that “correlational” research entails. Clearly, families cannot be assigned randomly to spanking and nonspanking conditions as a general strategy. At the same time, strong inferences and causal knowledge can be obtained from a portfolio of studies, beginning with the cross-sectional and longitudinal studies characteristic of spanking research. Animal research can play a role in elaborating critical processes.

As an example, many years ago lead levels among children were shown to be associated with hyperactivity, deficits in neuropsychological functioning (e.g., verbal and spatial ability), distractibility, lower IQ, and overall reduced school functioning, and these effects continued to be evident several years later (Needleman, Schell, Bellinger, Leviton, & Aldred, 1990). Several variables with which lead ingestion might be associated (e.g., living conditions, preexisting mental and physical health problems) were ruled out as factors that could explain the relation. Even with replications, demonstration of dose–response relations, and control for a host of variables with which lead ingestion could be confounded, the designs do not permit a causal relation. Apart from several studies of humans, animal research elaborated critical processes involved. Experimentally induced exposure to low lead levels in rats and monkeys was shown to influence brain activity and structure (e.g., neurotransmitter activity, complexity in dendrite formation, and inhibition of the formation of synapses). The ways in which the brain was affected in laboratory animals were quite consistent with the expected functional outcomes of how learning and performance are inhibited in animals and humans (Needleman, 1988). We mention this example to make two points. First, nonexperimental studies *can* go very far in establishing the time line, and the relationship among key antecedents and outcomes and for ruling out rival explanations that might explain the relation. Second, one can move from nonexperimental to experimental studies to demonstrate or come closer to causal relations. The

integration of animal laboratory research and human research in relation to spanking would be a useful advance.

In relation to spanking, longitudinal prospective studies are clearly needed. There are already some studies to praise as excellent examples (Baumrind, 2001; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). Even so, more might be done to rule out potential confounding variables and to establish that spanking is the critical practice to explain the results. Tests of mediational models, path and structural equation models, and dose–response relations are among the many strategies that can be used. As in the lead example, we also believe that animal models and laboratory animal research are quite relevant in relation to spanking.

6. Closing comments

One may object to spanking children on moral grounds, the immorality of causing pain to others, or the hypocrisy of a society that does not condone an adult hitting another adult whether spouse or stranger, a child hitting an adult or a child hitting another child, but does condone the hitting of a child by his or her parents. While valid as a moral objection, it should remain clear that it is a moral objection, not an empirical one. Regardless of one's moral stance, as researchers in the social sciences we need to be informed by empirical evidence.

Any discipline practice that is used with the majority of children should be fully investigated and understood. Unfortunately, the answers to the most pressing question regarding spanking (is it helpful or harmful?) cannot yet be answered satisfactorily. We have provided an expanded research agenda, which we believe will help foster a greater understanding of how spanking impacts child development. A relevant area for parents, child-care providers, psychologists, and policymakers, we hope our proposal will stimulate research that will move the field further ahead.

With such continued uncertainty and inconsistency in the literature, what should the stance of psychologists be toward public requests for guidance on the issue of spanking while the empirical evidence is collected? Immediate compliance has been found to follow acts of corporal punishment, and thus has been espoused by some to represent the “beneficial” effects of spanking. However, immediate compliance as an outcome is very limited. It should not, on its own, be a criterion for whether or not to spank. A person can be beaten into submission in order to achieve compliance, but no one would advocate beating because the adverse consequences far outweigh any potential benefit. Furthermore, the goal of immediate compliance, while attractive to parents, should really be a secondary goal to the more long-term goal of the socialization and development of prosocial behavior.

While some would argue that spanking is justifiable under certain circumstances (i.e., as a controlled strategy in the context of discipline) but not in others (e.g., as a response to parental anger or stress or as a result of alcohol use or uncontrolled impulsivity), we argue that regardless of the numerous factors (some of which might be unrelated to child behavior) that might provoke the use of spanking in a given instance, even the most abusive parent believes he or she is spanking as a response to some child behavior that requires discipline.

Thus, while different contexts or motivations for spanking might have differential consequences for child outcome, in terms of making recommendations to the public and parents, condoning or sanctioning spanking based on the parent's reasons or motivation for spanking is not helpful.

While severe or frequent spanking has untoward consequences for child development, little evidence as yet points to strongly adverse consequences of mild or occasional spanking. More palatable alternatives, on the other hand, *are* well established for shaping child behavior. Mild noncorporal punishment such as time out and loss of privileges in the context of contingent positive reinforcement (use of praise and rewards) can accomplish the goals for which spanking is usually employed without the negative outcomes. In absence of strong compelling evidence for the harmful consequences of spanking, rather than focus on getting parents to stop spanking, more widespread efforts to teach parents positive parent management strategies will go farther in promoting optimal child development.

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