



Physical Punishment as Child Abuse

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Introduction

Raising children is no small feat. A child's entire future can rest in the hands of their parents. It is the job of a parent or guardian to protect a child from any and all dangers as childhood experiences and traumas can have disastrous effects on their life as an adult. In Canada, primary care givers must deal with cultural, economic, and generational differences that add daily stressors to their lives as parents. Nevertheless, most Canadians would say child abuse is not a controversial topic and that it should be outlawed in all places. However, this is not always the case. Spanking and other forms of physical punishments spark intense arguments both for and against it. As Canadians grow, evolve, and become more progressive, our laws and regulations need continual updating. This includes child protection laws on physical punishment as forms of discipline.

Children, like the elderly and women are all vulnerable parts of our society. People try to take advantage of them because they are viewed as weaker and easy to manipulate both physically and mentally. There are numerous threats to a child's wellbeing including a lesser thought of one; their lives at home and the physical punishment that can occur there. There are countries where physical punishment is more common than others. Canada is a mosaic of cultures, because of this many different parenting styles are practiced. This in addition to varying socioeconomic statuses and generational differences contribute to the varying opinions of physical punishment as an acceptable form on discipline.

In terms of global opinions of physical punishment on children, the United Nations Committee on the rights of the child have irrefutably decided that physical punishment is a form of violence that violates children's rights to protection, dignity, and physical security (Heilman et. al., 2021). With that being said, it should be easy to regulate and protect the rights of children. However, most of the world's children live in nations where physical punishment is allowed and often the preferred method of discipline (Heilman et. al., 2021). This reveals that parents around the world are not being properly educated on the direct consequences of physical punishment. This paper will review studies on attitudes, effects, and education on physical punishment and how we can improve the lives of children in Canada and around the world.

Physical punishments similar to spanking negatively affects the emotional development of children (up to 14 years of age). By increasing knowledge on the negative consequences of corporal punishment and providing parents with alternative forms of discipline, we can considerably decrease this type of child abuse from the world.

Literature Review

Beliefs on CP / PP

Literature reveals that physical punishment as disciplinary action has negative consequences to a child's development and overall wellbeing. In this case, the consequences exceed the potential benefits. Beliefs on whether or not physical punishment is abuse are mixed. The first part of this literary review will gain a better understanding of what parents in Canada, United States, and other lower income countries believe about the use and effectiveness of physical punishment as discipline on children.

In a Canadian study by Afifi and colleagues revealed that 18.5 % of parents approved of spanking agreeing that it is a standard practice of parenting (2022). Furthermore, almost half (46%) of the adolescents in the study recounted receiving spankings as a child (Afifi et al., 2022). This reveals that even though a large percentage of parents disagree with the practice of spanking, it still occurs at a significantly higher rate. The study also discloses that parents who have completed an undergraduate degree had higher rates of disagreeing with spanking than those who had only completed high school or less (Afifi et al., 2022). This reveals that education is a large contributor to beliefs on physical punishment which we will expand further on later in the article. If knowledge on the harm physical punishment can cause is spread, this form of child abuse can decrease drastically. Educational prevention strategies focused on reducing the encouraging philosophies about spanking hold significant promise for the future of child protection efforts. (Afifi et al., 2022)

In an integrative literary review on American parents' attitudes and beliefs about corporal punishment, findings concluded that external factors influenced American parents' attitudes on punishment. For instance, if physical punishment was used on the parents when they were children, then they were more likely to support the use of it now as parents themselves (Socolar and Stein and Chung et al., as cited in Chiocca, 2017). Additionally, parents often found themselves supporting the use of physical punishment if other nonphysical forms of discipline failed to correct initial behaviour (like warning glances for example) (Bradley 1998, as cited in Chiocca, 2017). Lastly, a study done by Joseph (2004) found that parents were more likely to endorse physical punishment if the parent thought the child was doing something unsafe (as cited in Chiocca, 2017). Most parents want to protect their children and do not realize the harm they are unintentionally inflicting. Overall, this literary review of studies on American parents' perspectives on physical punishment found that cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and lack of knowledge on child development factors played a significant role in the support of physical punishment (Chiocca, 2017). This further supports the statement that an increase in knowledge on child's development will result in a decrease of support for the use of physical punishment as discipline.

This last section will briefly review attitudes on physical punishment of children from low- and middle-income nations. The results of this study by Cappa and Khan concluded that in most nations, mothers and primary caregivers did not think physical punishment was needed, however, a large portion of children were still found to be subjected to physical punishment (2011). This discrepancy was reported across all countries with varying levels of education and socioeconomic statuses. This discrepancy was also noted above in the Canadian study previously addressed. The study also reveals that physical punishment is being used when caregivers do not believe it is

necessary (Cappa and Khan, 2011). This reveals that parents need to be educated on other ways to discipline to decrease the number of children being subjected to this form of abuse.

Consequences of CP / PP

Researchers have conducted various studies on physical punishment. An evaluation by Heilman and colleague's reviews of 69 longitudinal studies of physical punishments and child outcomes. The purpose of this study is to summarize the last twenty years of research on physical punishment in order to educate policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners (Heilman et. al., 2021). The introduction reveals that policy makers who deal with laws concerning physical punishment are frequently unaware of the strong research evidence against physical punishment and how legislation against it can protect children (Heilman et. al., 2021). It is important to note that this review only includes studies that specifically examined physical punishment, excluding studies that covered severe assaults on children (Heilman et. al., 2021). The findings of this review concluded that physical punishment was significantly associated with worse outcomes over time (Heilman et. al., 2021). Continuing, Heilmann and colleagues determined that externalizing behaviours is one of the most studied outcomes by reports on physical punishment (2021). It was typically measured using standardized questionnaires including Achenbach's Child Behaviour Checklist (Heilman et. al., 2021). Results of the studies disclosed that in 13 of the 19 independent samples, physical punishment was associated with externalizing behaviours (physical aggression or bullying as examples) overtime (Heilman et. al., 2021). Furthermore, 20 studies and 6 independent samples assessed aggressive behaviour and most of these studies were assumed during early childhood (Heilman et. al., 2021). In 5 of the independent samples, physical punishment projected increases in aggressive behaviours overtime (Heilman et. al., 2021). Only one study found no associations between the two. Overall, physical punishment consistently predicts child behaviour problems overtime. In addition, physical punishment is not associated with positive outcomes overtime. It is all risk and no gain.

Likewise, in a study on spanking, Jorge Cuartas concluded that current evidence supports certain claims that spanking can challenge children's social-emotional development (there capacity to solve conflicts and regulate their emotions and behaviours) (2022). Likewise, this study revealed more of the physiological effects of spanking like how spanking is linked to atypical brain functioning in the medial frontal gyrus (MFG), dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dPFC), bilateral frontal pole, and other regions of medial and lateral PFC (Cuartas, 2022). Not only does physical punishment have the ability to negatively affect a child's emotional capability but it has also been shown to alter brain functioning. This is the type of information parents should be receiving as it is being researched and verified.

Education and Knowledge on CP / PP

Now that both parental views and the negative effects of corporal / physical punishment as a form of discipline on children have been discussed, the next section of this literary review will

highlight the importance of education and knowledge in decreasing the use of physical punishment on children. For instance, Fleckman and colleagues reveal that even though pediatricians acknowledged the value in providing guidance to parents concerning child discipline, they felt averagely prepared to advise parents about how best to discipline their children and further perceived their colleagues to be slightly less prepared (a common conclusion in pediatrician self-assessments) (2021). These findings suggest a need to focus on additional training for all pediatricians on how to engage with parents most successfully regarding healthy child discipline (Fleckman et al., 2021). Temporary interventions planned to teach pediatricians to encourage parents regarding child discipline have shown huge potential in improving pediatricians' self-efficacy to advise parents, the promotion of alternative child discipline strategies with parents, and increased communication between pediatricians and parents regarding child discipline (Fleckman et al., 2021).

Similarly, a study by Dynes and colleagues suggests that a short course in educating future physicians about the impact of physical punishment on children is effective in changing pre-existing positive attitudes on corporal punishment (2020). Furthermore, results of this study showed a significant decrease in attitude toward spanking scores after just a short-term 2-hour lecture on spanking early in the course, and these results were upheld after the completion of the 9-month course (Dynes et al., 2020). So overall findings suggest that medical students' past experiences with spanking relate to their current attitudes toward spanking and with those with positive histories being more favorable (Dynes et al., 2020). Regardless of spanking history, a concise educational intervention can significantly change individual attitudes.

As previously mentioned, corporal or physical punishment is used by parents and caregivers even when view it unnecessary. Therefore, it is obvious that parents need to be educated on other more effective forms of discipline. A study by Criss and colleagues reveals that all participants reported that they learned helpful strategies for their children like quiet time, chore chart, and identifying escalation traps (2021). They also reported that the intervention helps them gain parenting strategies that helped improve their relationship with their children. Overall, most parents and guardians would utilize their new techniques before spanking (Criss et al., 2021). The findings in this study are consistent with the idea that by providing parents with knowledge on alternative methods to discipline, the use of physical punishment will decrease significantly.

Conclusion

Corporal or physical punishment receives less attention by policy makers, educators, teachers and parents because of the way it is normalized within societies around the globe. Opinions on forms of corporal punishment like spankings vary from those who greatly support it to those who extremely disagree with it. Parental views on physical punishment often come from external influences like their past personal experiences with it or a lack of knowledge on the severity of the consequences. Forms of corporal punishment can have long lasting negative effects on a child's development and adult life. Because of this, it is important that parents and policy makers are not just aware of the research the proves spanking is dangerous but also educated on other more effective ways to discipline their children.

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