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Noam shpancer

Otterbein University, nshpancer@otterbein.edu

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The Spanking Debate Is Over

The empirical, theoretical, and moral arguments against spanking are compelling.

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Many years ago, during one of the first college classes I've ever taught, I asked my students to raise their hands if they were spanked as children.

I was quite new to America at the time, and knew little about the lives of American families. On the Israeli kibbutz where I grew up, spanking children was practically unheard of. My own parents had never so much as raised their voices at me (except for that one time when I called my mother "whore," not knowing the meaning of the word but realizing it was forbidden. She slapped me, and then proceeded to [apologize](#) tearfully).

What's more, growing up in Israel in the 60s and 70s, we got our ideas about America from music and movies and the young volunteers who showed up after the Six Days War to help the then-fashionable Israeli cause. The America we imagined was therefore a liberal haven of wealth, freedom, and opportunity, where people got high, made love, and could pursue their [dreams](#) unbounded. Little wonder I wanted to go there.

Little wonder too, then, that I was stunned to see virtually all hands in my classroom go up. This was one of the first times I realized that my wishful ideas about what America was had little to do with what America actually was.

I have taken that same "spanking poll" ever since then in every developmental class I've taught. The results, by my eyeball test, have not changed much. And official data back up this conclusion: Most American parents hit their little children. And most believe that they are doing something both effective and right.

But they are wrong.

The scientific case against spanking is one of those rare occasions in which, over a span of 50 years or so, a scientific controversy actually gets resolved, as various programs of increasingly rigorous research converge upon a consensus conclusion.

True, the issue has not been 100 percent mapped out. Waiting for social science to map any issue out 100 percent is like waiting for the perfect spouse. You'll wait forever, pointlessly. Spanking, like any socio-behavioral phenomenon, is bound to have somewhat differing implications depending on multiple variables such as culture, timing, dose, [gender](#), what definition of spanking is used, etc. Local skirmishes about this will continue.

Another hindrance to an air-tight resolution concerns the fact that, due to ethical constraints (you can't randomly assign parents to spanking and non spanking groups or assign children randomly to parents), true experimentation in this area is all but impossible. In the absence of experimental evidence, causal relations are difficult to establish with certainty. Finding, as we have, that spanking strongly and consistently predicts negative developmental outcome does not in itself settle the question of whether spanking has caused the outcome.

The spanking literature, however, has addressed itself to this problem in several ways. First, in the absence of true experimentation, an argument for causality can still be supported indirectly if three conditions are met: first, there's a link between behavior A and outcome B. Second, behavior A appears before outcome B in the timeline (which can be documented using longitudinal studies following the same kids over time). Third, other explanations for the A-B link are ruled out (for example stress, which may cause parents to spank and children to deteriorate).

Spanking research has by now produced robust evidence for all three propositions. Spanking is correlated strongly and quite exclusively with multiple negative outcomes for children. The negative outcomes often appear only after the spanking has begun, and the effects of spanking remain significant and sizable even after controlling for the influence of other variables such as parental age, child age, [sex](#), race, family structure, poverty, emotional support, cognitive stimulation, etc.

Another way to address the causality conundrum is by testing alternative hypotheses. Within the spanking literature, two such alternative explanations have been proposed. One of those, the "child effects" hypothesis from way back in the 60s, argues that problematic child behaviors elicit, rather than result from, parental spanking. In other words, difficult children cause parents to spank. If spanking is found to be associated with child [aggression](#) (it is), perhaps it was the child's aggression that elicited the spanking in the first place.

Studies examining this hypothesis (in part by controlling for levels of aggression before the onset of spanking) found that while child effects did exist, the effects of spanking (parent effects) were still more predictive of later misbehavior than child characteristics. In other words, difficult children (by which we mean, children who are difficult for their parents to manage) are more likely to elicit spanking. But a history of spanking makes for worse, not better, child outcome for those difficult children.

The "child effects" hypothesis is further weakened by its failure to explain the link between spanking and other types of negative outcomes, such as anxiety. Parents most often spank children for aggressive or dangerous behavior, not for being [anxious](#), quiet, or timid. Research has indicated that anxious children elicit less, not more, power [assertive](#) behaviors from parents. How, then, could the "child effects" hypothesis explain the link between increased spanking and increased anxiety?

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Another more recent alternative explanation, the genetic argument, holds that the same [genes](#) that make the parent volatile and likely to spank also make their children aggressive and headed for trouble. Again here, while the genetic hypothesis has found support, twin studies of parents have shown that the twin who decided not to spank his kids had better adjusted children. In addition, [parenting](#) training studies (in which random assignment to treatment and control groups is possible) have shown that when parents who spank are taught alternatives, their children's developmental outcomes improve. In other words, spanking hurts children over and above the children's genetic vulnerabilities.

On the other hand, additional evidence against spanking has emerged from the [child abuse](#) and maltreatment literature, in which spanking and

physical abuse are often found to exist on a similar continuum: both occur in the explicit context of disciplining children, of parents trying to "teach the kid a lesson" by inflicting pain, and the line between them is easily crossed and quite arbitrary, delineated mostly by the amount of visible damage caused.

Indeed, research has identified mild spanking as a risk factor for more severe spanking, as well as a dose–response pattern for spanking whereby negative effects are more likely to appear as spanking becomes more frequent and severe. Abusive parents also spank their children at much higher rates than non-abusive parents.

Overall, the empirical case against spanking is strong, and made stronger by the absence of any empirical case in support of spanking. There is not one well designed study I have seen that links spanking to long-term positive outcome.

This convergence of empirical results on the negative effects of spanking should not surprise those versed in developmental theory. One would be hard pressed to find any theoretical framework addressing itself to [child development](#) from which positive predictions about the effects of spanking can be drawn. Developmental theory by and large would predict that spanking effects, to the extent they are found, will indeed be negative.

For example [Social Learning Theory](#), embodied by Bandura's iconic Bobo Doll experiments, predicts that children learn by imitating role models. Children who see aggression practiced by their role models will imitate the behavior. Indeed, it is an ironic aspect of the prevalence of spanking that the practice, employed most often to reduce child aggression, per the evidence actually increases it.

From a [Psychoanalytic](#) Theory perspective, being spanked is bound to elicit feelings of resentment, hostility, [fear](#), and [shame](#) in children. Such feelings may be suppressed due to fears of retaliation or rejection on part of the parent, but are bound to emerge later in the form of [neurosis](#) or chaotic emotional expression.

According to John Bowlby's well researched [Attachment](#) Theory, children form an "internal working model" of the world and other people through

the constant give and take of daily parent-child interactions. This working model sets the child's expectations about world, self, and others, and is used to guide behavior in new situations and into the future. A child who is routinely spanked when she is in need of comforting and support may internalize a view of the parent as rejecting and herself as unworthy of love, which in time may lead to eroded [intimacy](#) with the parent as well as [depression](#) and low [self esteem](#). (Research has indeed documented consistent link between a history of spanking and less close parent-child relations, as well as higher risk for emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety).

The currently ascendant Ecobiodevelopmental Theory argues that severe childhood stressors (known as Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs) affect children's genetic predispositions, brain processes, and neuro-functioning in ways that lead to long-term health and emotional problems in adulthood. Indeed a vast literature exists to show how the cognitive functioning and health profiles of maltreated children differ from that of their non-maltreated peers well into adulthood. To the extent that spanking is [stressful](#) for children, this framework will predict that it may facilitate the development of later problems.

And, you've guessed it, research has shown that spanking does in fact increase children's stress levels, as well as their risk for a host of future psychological problems. These findings have prompted some researchers to propose that spanking be added to the accepted list of ACEs known to predict adult adjustment and health problems, and that we begin to consider spanking a public health concern.

One may propose that BF Skinner's [Behaviorist](#) Theory, which predicts that [punishment](#) will reduce the behavior it follows, could supply a theoretical grounding for spanking. Yet parents—busy, distracted, and humane as they are—are unlikely to fulfill the conditions under which punishment is effective according to behaviorist theory, namely that the adverse consequence be delivered immediately and consistently following every instance of the problem behavior.

Using behaviorist theory to justify spanking also betrays a misreading of Skinner himself, who had noted (in his book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*): "A person who has been punished is not thereby simply less inclined to behave in a given way; at best, he learns how to avoid

punishment.” And, “punished behavior is likely to reappear after the punitive contingencies are withdrawn.”

Moreover, the crucial question we must ask when educating children is not, “How do we suppress their bad behavior?” Rather, it is, “How do we teach them to forego bad behavior in favor of behaving well?”

Punishment is notoriously ineffective as a tool for teaching new behaviors. And even when it works, it doesn’t work as well as reinforcement. What children are more likely to learn from the experience of being spanked is that physical might makes right; that violence is an acceptable means of imposing one’s will on others. The data indeed show that children who are spanked do not internalize a notion that their behavior was wrong. They do, however, become more likely to endorse aggression and physical means as acceptable forms of resolving conflicts.

And still, even in the absence of empirical and theoretical justifications, a majority of Americans continue to approve of spanking their children and practice it. Infants as young as 10-months-old are being hit, routinely, for the purpose of causing them pain, by their normative and well meaning parents. Given this, one is justified in wondering: If spanking doesn’t work, then how come it’s so popular?

Some of it probably has to do with the American cultural ethos. With spanking as with guns, football, the military, and comic book super heroes: America, born in war, has an ongoing romance with violence. The trenchant Christian dogma viewing children as wild sinful creatures whose will must be broken into obedience through instilling fear is likely another culprit. However, several psychological reasons can also be offered for the practice’s continued popularity.

First, in the parent-child equation, the parents have the power. The powerful in a given situation seldom see their behavior in that situation as the problem. It’s not easy for those whose solution is to inflict pain to see pain as a problem. The axe forgets, goes the proverb, only the tree remembers.

Second, spanking often looks like it’s working. Indeed, according to research, parents who rely on spanking do it mostly because they believe it works, not due to impulse or momentary frustration. In part,

spanking appears to work because it often does, in the short term, halt the behavior it follows. Alas, three problems with that:

1. Short-term solutions often become long term problems. [Heroin](#), for example, works really well in the short term, as does junk food. Short-term solutions are not what we should aim for in parenting children, particularly if they beget long-term problems.
2. Much of the seeming effectiveness of spanking is due to regression to the mean, a known statistical phenomenon whereby extreme behavior tends to return toward baseline in short order. Children are most often spanked for extreme "out of line" behaviors, from which they would regress back to normal even without the spanking.
3. Parents think spanking works because one consequence of spanking is to train the spanked to elude the spanker. It may seem like your child has curbed her naughty behavior after the spanking, but more likely she has learned (from you) how to hide or lie about it better.

Spanking lasts also because it is a quick and readily available tool for most any parent. Spanking is the equivalent of taking a pill to quickly numb your knee pain rather than engage the long tedious process of figuring out what the pain is trying to tell you about the way you're mistreating your knees.

Finally, we all tend to keep to our tribal traditions, and we are resistant to change—for good reasons. Tribal alliances protect us, and change begets instability. Thus, it is rare for parents who were not spanked as children to begin to spank their children. Spanking, like other behaviors and customs, is readily transmitted from one generation to the next absent a strong counter-current. Research has shown that, particularly when we are under duress, we tend to fall back on our primary responses—those that are well learned, those we grew up with. Parenting is stressful, so parents will often fall back on primary responses, those learned early, from their role models for parenting—their own parents.

And so spanking persists, even though it can neither be defended on the basis of the available empirical data nor on the basis of sound psychological theorizing. Could an additional line of argument help strengthen the case against it, perhaps helping to finally turn the cultural tide toward more effective, fair, and humane ways of parenting?

Why, funny you should ask! Because beyond science, the question of spanking children inherently also engages a moral debate.

From a moral perspective, even if we find evidence that a certain practice has material, personal, or social benefits we may still opt to abandon the practice because it violates what we understand to be basic human rights (and vice versa). A slave labor force may be economically efficient, and a slave owner may treat some slaves with kindness, and may protect his slaves from some forms of harm and from the hardships entailed in living free; yet these facts do not undermine the moral case against slavery. And it is the moral case upon which our current anti-slavery consciousness, laws, habits, and norms are based.

Here again, a coherent moral case for spanking is awfully difficult to make. Proponents of spanking usually argue from tradition (“this is how I was brought up”), which is shaky ground from which to mount a serious moral argument. Another defense of the practice fields the famous “spare the rod spoil the child” argument, which is often framed as biblical. Yet the bible’s discussion of physically punishing children as a way of caring for them is brief and open to multiple interpretations—briefer and more ambiguous, in fact, than the bible’s lengthy discussion on how to care for, ahem, slaves. Enough said.

On the other hand, the moral case against spanking is robust and intuitive. Even a casual look into the idea of spanking as principled behavior reveals untenable contradictions. For one, in the United States it is against the law to hit multiple categories of people, including prisoners, criminals, the aged, spouses, bureaucrats. Even Wall Street investment bankers are protected. The right to protection from physical assault, in other words, is extended to the whole range of humanity, all the way to the murky edges—yet somehow not to children, who happen to be the most innocent and vulnerable, and whom we are charged with loving and protecting.

Further difficulties emerge when we look at the actual practice of spanking. For example, spanking rarely continues into the child’s [adolescence](#). The main reason for that is not that the method had somehow lost its inherent mojo. Pain is as punishing a consequence to the 16-year-old as it is to the 6-year-old. And a 16-year-old is still a child requiring parental supervision. Rather, most parents stop hitting their

adolescent child because he's big and strong enough to hit back or to run away, or is mature enough to be reasoned with. In essence then, the underlying reason parents spank their kids is because they can; because young kids are physically weak and lacking in emotional and cognitive maturity. Yet we somehow manage to refrain from spanking other physically weak and emotionally/cognitively immature persons. Were that allowed, you'd be regularly slapping your drunken uncle or your doddering aunt dealing with [dementia](#).

In sum, the informed debate over spanking has been resolved. The practice is a relic of the past and best left there. Granted, old ways die hard. Yet the fact remains that when parents finally give up spanking, they will not be giving up a sound educational practice but a violent habit that is ineffective, risky, and immoral.

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