

The Long-Term Effects of Spanking

By ALICE PARK Monday, May. 03, 2010



Disciplining young children is what parents are supposed to do — most moms and dads have no trouble agreeing with that. But should the punishment include spanking?

As many parents can attest, few disciplinary measures stop a child from misbehaving as quickly as a swift smack or two on the bottom.

But in a new study published in *Pediatrics*, researchers at Tulane University provide the strongest evidence yet that children's short-term response to spanking may make them act out more in the long run. Of the nearly 2,500

youngsters in the study, those who were spanked more frequently at age 3 were much more likely to be aggressive by age 5.

The study, led by community-health-sciences professor Catherine Taylor, was the first to control for a host of issues affecting the mother, such as depression, alcohol and drug use, spousal abuse and even whether she considered abortion while pregnant with the child. After controlling for all these factors — each of which can contribute to a child's aggression — spanking remained a strong predictor of violent behavior. "The odds of a child being more aggressive at age 5 increased by 50% if he had been spanked more than twice in the month before the study began," says Taylor.

The association remained even after her team accounted for varying levels of natural aggression in children, suggesting, she says, that "it's not just that children who are more aggressive are more likely to be spanked."

Among mothers surveyed in 20 cities when their children were both 3 and 5 years old, nearly half (45.6%) reported not spanking their 3-year-olds in the previous month, 27.9% reported spanking once or twice that month, and 26.5% reported spanking more than twice. As 5-year-olds, the children who had been spanked were more likely than the nonspanked to be defiant, demand immediate satisfaction of their wants and needs, become frustrated easily, have temper tantrums and lash out physically against other people or animals.

The reason for this may be that spanking sets up a loop of bad behavior. Corporal punishment instills fear rather than understanding. Even if children stop tantrums when spanked, that doesn't mean they get why they shouldn't have been acting up in the first

place. What's more, spanking sets a bad example, teaching children that aggressive behavior is a solution to their parents' problems.

"There is now some nice hard data that can back up clinicians when they share their caution with parents against using corporal punishment," says Dr. Jayne Singer, clinical director of the child and parent program at Children's Hospital Boston, who was not involved with the Tulane study.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) does not endorse spanking under any circumstance. It's a form of punishment that becomes less effective with repeated use, according to the AAP; it also makes discipline more difficult as the child outgrows it.

Instead of spanking, the AAP recommends time-outs, which typically involve denying the child any interaction, positive or negative, for a specified period of time. These quiet moments force children to calm down and think about their emotions rather than acting on them reflexively. After all, the goal of punishment is to get children to understand not just that they did something wrong but also what motivated them to do it.