



Physical Punishment and Physical Abuse

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As many of us will remember, forty years ago most children were spanked at one time or another for their behavioural transgressions. A strap hung in most school principals' offices and, as children, we lived with the constant threat of its use should we step out of line. In fact, most of those who are reading this article were physically punished at some time in their lives - some more frequently than others, some more severely than others, but almost all have had the experience of being punished through the use of physical force.

The learning environment of many of today's children is different from the one we knew. Many schools have abolished the strap, although not all. Many parents have committed themselves to finding ways of teaching their children to follow the rules other than through physical pain, although others still believe in its necessity. Many more children are now growing up without having had the experience of being struck by their parents or teachers than was the case one generation ago.

Canadian society has begun to redefine physical punishment as an act of violence and its rejection is becoming increasingly normative. This social change may constitute one of the most important contributions that could be made to the primary prevention of child abuse.

In this article, I will summarize the research that demonstrates how the social approval of physical punishment contributes to the physical abuse of children. There are two primary mechanisms by which it perpetuates abuse: 1) as a belief system that increases the likelihood of abuse

in frustrating situations; and 2) as a reference point that raises thresholds of tolerance for violence in the next generation. Each of these mechanisms will be described in the following sections.

1. Approval of Physical Punishment as a Precipitant of Physical Abuse

When physical child abuse was first identified in the 1960's, it was believed to be the result of psychiatric disturbance. Today, we know that most parents who harm their children do not demonstrate psychopathology, but have chosen to use physical force as a means of controlling or correcting a child's behaviour. When we consider the incidence of child physical abuse in Canada - 15,553 substantiated investigations in 1998 alone (Trocmé, 2001) - we no longer can view it as an aberration. Rather, it is often the logical end-point of a predictable pattern of parent-child interaction that includes the use of physical punishment.

In 1981, Kadushin and Martin published a study of substantiated cases of nonsexual abuse by parents in the United States. They found that the abuse "almost invariably" (p. 249) occurred within the context of a disciplinary interaction.

"In most instances, parents had a deliberate, explicit disciplinary objective in mind in involving themselves in the interaction culminating in abuse. Their instrumental intent was to obtain a modification of the child's behavior which they perceived as needing changing" (pp. 250).

Gil (1970) conducted a national study of all cases of child physical abuse reported during a two-year period in the United States. He found that the most common type of abuse (63% of cases) involved "incidents developing out of disciplinary action taken by caretakers" (pp. 126).

Findings of the recent Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS: Trocmé et al, 2001) revealed that 69% of substantiated cases of child physical abuse "occurred as a result of inappropriate punishment (e.g., hitting with hand or object) that led to physical harm, or put the child at substantial risk of harm" (pp. 30-31). In contrast, only 1% of substantiated physical abuse cases were attributable to Shaken Baby Syndrome, a social problem that has been the subject of extensive public education campaigns.

How does intended discipline become an injurious act? This transformation takes place through a process that is all-too-familiar to most parents. Typically, individuals become parents with minimal levels of education about child development, little knowledge of normative behaviour at various developmental stages, and inappropriate expectations regarding children's capacities for self-control. When a child demonstrates a desire for autonomy (e.g., "No!"), a drive for exploration and experimentation (e.g., touching Grandma's vase), and difficulty in exerting self-control (e.g., tantrums), such a parent is likely to become frustrated and angry, attributing the child's behaviour to defiance or malicious intent (Bugental, Mantyla, & Lewis, 1989; Dix & Grusec, 1985). If that parent believes that physical punishment is an appropriate



disciplinary response (Holden et al., 1993; Moore & Straus, 1987), spanking is a likely outcome.

The child, now physically hurt and distressed, will stop performing the behaviour, thereby reinforcing the parent for using physical punishment (Walters, 1991). However, the child's mastery motivation and limited understanding of the world are likely to result in another act objectionable to the parent. The parent, now believing that physical punishment was effective in the past, spansks again. And, again, the child's behaviour ceases, further reinforcing the parent's belief about the effectiveness of the punishment.

As the spanking increases in frequency, the child's behaviour worsens. Numerous studies (Gershoff, 2001, in press) have demonstrated that the frequency of spanking is positively related to deviant child behaviour, such as aggression (27 studies) and antisocial behaviour (12 studies) (e.g., Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1999; Travillion & Snyder, 1993). Therefore, as the parent becomes increasingly reliant on physical punishment, the child becomes increasingly aggressive and defiant. The parent, in turn, becomes increasingly angry (Reid, Patterson, & Lorber, 1981) and, believing that physical punishment is effective and appropriate, increases the intensity of the punishment until injury is sustained by the child (Burgess & Draper, 1989).

Ross Vasta (1982) reviewed the literatures on instrumental aggression and child abuse and developed an empirically based model of abuse. He argues that while parents may have an instrumental goal (learned through previous patterns of reinforcement, not intended to be harmful, expected to produce positive results) when they decide to use physical punishment, their heightened arousal levels (due to their frustration, anger, stress, irritability) "independently act on the intended degree of physical punishment to produce responses involving a dangerous or injurious

level of force. What begins as an act of physical discipline, thus, becomes an act of interpersonal violence" (p. 135).

The social acceptance of physical punishment plays an important role in this escalation process. Moore and Straus (1987) demonstrated that the more strongly parents approve of corporal punishment, the more likely they are to use it and the more harshly they administer it; parents who approve of physical punishment have a child abuse rate 4 times higher than that of parents who do not approve of it (Moore & Straus, 1987). Indeed, the likelihood of maternal use of violent discipline increases with a belief in the "necessity, normalcy and goodness of physical punishment" (Lenton, 1990, pp. 173). Therefore, societal messages that convey the appropriateness of physical punishment increase the likelihood of its use and, thereby, set the stage for physical abuse.

2. Physical Punishment and Thresholds for Tolerance of Violence

One of the difficulties we may have in confronting the issue of physical punishment is the absence of a clear distinction between punishment and abuse. Some would argue that no such distinction can be made; any use of physical force against a child is abusive by definition. Others would argue that labeling a tap on a toddler's hand an abusive act inflames the debate and trivializes injurious abuse. I would argue that our positions on this question are largely informed by our own personal experience, which has established our thresholds for tolerance of violence.

The strongest predictor of one's level of approval of physical punishment is the degree to which one was physically punished as a child even when age, gender, race, education, and income are controlled (Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, & Babonis, 1994). The rate of approval of common punishments (e.g., hitting with a belt, pulling hair) is 2 to 3 times greater

among those who have experienced such punishments than among those who have not. The rate of approval of severe physical punishments (e.g., being burned, having teeth knocked out) is 2.5 times greater for those who have experienced such punishments than among those who have not (Buntain-Ricklefs et al., 1994). Therefore, the acts of violence that we experienced as children may become our cutoff points for defining "discipline" versus "abuse."

This phenomenon was demonstrated dramatically in a 10-year study of 11,660 adults in the United States who were asked about the kinds of punishments they received as children, and whether they considered themselves to have been physically abused (Knutson & Selner, 1994). Of those participants who reported having received severe physical punishment (e.g., punching, kicking, choking), 74% did not label themselves as having been abused. Of those who had been hit with more than 5 different types of objects, 49% did not label themselves as having been abused. Of those who had received more than 2 different types of disciplinary injuries, 44% did not label themselves as having been abused. And of those who had required 2 different types of medical services for their injuries, 38% did not label themselves as having been abused. Therefore, even seriously abusive behaviour can be defined as normative if it is part of one's personal experience.

We carry our definitions of discipline and violence into the parenting situation, where they influence the likelihood that abuse will occur. It has been demonstrated that abusive parents are more likely to have received physical punishment as children than are non-abusive parents (Straus & Smith, 1992) and mothers raised in abusive circumstances are three times more likely to use physical punishment than mothers who were not abused (Berger, 2001). Therefore, childhood experience of physical force as a means of discipline can raise one's threshold for tolerance of violence such





that behaviour viewed by one parent as seriously abusive may constitute "normative discipline" to another. By redefining physical punishment clearly as an act of violence, we may shift the reference points of individuals who are at risk of abusing their children by virtue of the thresholds that were established in their childhoods.

Re-Defining Physical Punishment

Over the past twenty years, an historical shift has begun to take place in the definition of physical punishment. While even one generation ago, it was considered to be an expected - even necessary - item in the parental toolkit, today it is becoming a socially undesirable act. In a recent Canadian study of mothers of preschoolers (Durrant, Rose-Krasnor, & Broberg, under review), a majority reported a belief that it is ineffective, unnecessary, and harmful.

In an increasing number of nations, this shift has been even more dramatic. Since 1979, ten nations have redefined physical punishment as an act of violence that is no longer permitted by law. These nations are: Iceland (2003), Israel (2000), Germany (2000), Croatia (1999), Latvia (1998), Cyprus (1994), Austria (1989), Norway (1987), Denmark (1986), Finland (1984), and Sweden (1979). These laws serve as important symbols that set a standard for non-violent childrearing and render moot the question of whether striking a child is an act of discipline or abuse. Their purpose is not to wield the mighty power of the State against a frustrated, well-intentioned parent. Rather, their purpose is to make it clear that parental use of violence of any kind against a child is not condoned by the State.

These legal reforms are of an historical and international significance on a par with those that redefined husbands' use of physical punishment with their wives as violence, rather than as a marital right. Today, that process of redefinition is so complete that any expression of support for the use of physical force between partners is a

shocking rarity. In nations like Sweden, the same process has occurred with respect to parental use of physical discipline with children. Whereas, in 1965, half of the Swedish population believed that physical punishment is necessary in childrearing, only 6% of Swedes born since that time support its use today (SIFO, 1981; SCB, 1996). The implications of such a societal shift for reducing child physical abuse may be revealed in the following statistic: between 1975 and 1996, only four children died in Sweden from the effects of physical abuse (see Durrant, 2000).

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in a number of large studies across time and samples that a majority of cases of child physical abuse occur within the context of a disciplinary incident. Societal acceptance, even if not support, of parental use of physical punishment contributes to this problem. Clear societal messages that reject the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution help to put into place inhibitory controls that are necessary in the face of frustration, and set a behavioural standard. In Canada, we have made this message clear with regard to partners, peers, and strangers. If a clear message rejecting the use of physical punishment of children prevented even 10% of physical child abuse cases, we would see 1,555 fewer incidents of child physical abuse each year (estimated on the basis of Trocmé et al's (2001) findings regarding the incidence of child physical abuse in Canada). Is this not reason enough to make the message clear?

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