

Spanking Linked to Increase in Children's Behavior Problems

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Children who have been spanked by their parents by age 5 show an increase in behavior problems at age 6 and age 8 relative to children who have never been spanked, according to new [findings](#) in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The [study](#), which uses a statistical technique to approximate random assignment, indicates that this increase in behavior problems cannot be attributed to various characteristics of the child, the parents, or the home environment – rather, it seems to be the specific result of spanking.

“Our findings suggest that spanking is not an effective technique and actually makes children’s behavior worse not better,” says psychological scientist Elizabeth T. Gershoff (University of Texas at Austin), lead author on the study.

Historically, trying to determine whether parents’ use of spanking actually causes children to develop behavior problems has been difficult, because researchers cannot ethically conduct experiments that

randomly assign parents to spank or not.

“Parents spank for many reasons, such as their educational or cultural background or how difficult their children’s behavior is. These same reasons, which we call selection factors, can also predict children’s behavior problems, making it difficult to determine whether spanking is in fact the cause of behavior problems,” Gershoff explained. “We realized that the statistical method of propensity score matching could help us get as close to an experiment as possible.”

Gershoff and coauthors Kierra M. P. Sattler (University of Texas at Austin) and Arya Ansari (University of Virginia) examined data from 12,112 children who participated in the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. When the children were 5 years old, their parents reported how many times they had spanked their child in the past week (if any). The researchers classified any child whose parent provided a number other than zero as having been spanked.

The researchers then matched children who had been spanked with those who hadn’t according to 38 child- and family-related characteristics, including: the child’s age, gender, overall health, and behavior problems at age 5; the parent’s education, age, and marital status; the family socioeconomic status and household size; and factors related to parenting quality and conflict in the home.

Pairing the children in this way yielded two groups of children whose main difference was whether their parents had spanked them, effectively accounting for other factors that could plausibly influence the behavior of both parent and child. This approach allowed the researchers to approximate the random assignment of participants to groups, a hallmark of experimental design.

To gauge children’s behavior problems over time, Gershoff, Sattler, and Ansari examined teachers’ ratings when the children were 5, 6, and 8 years old. Children’s teachers reported the frequency with which the children argued, fought, got angry, acted impulsively, and disturbed ongoing activities.

The results were clear: Children who had been spanked at age 5 showed greater increases in behavior problems by age 6 and also by age 8 when compared with children who had never been spanked.

Gershoff and colleagues conducted a similar analysis with only those children who had been spanked by their parents, comparing children who had been spanked in the week before the study (which suggests frequent spanking) and those who had not. Children spanked in the past week at age 5 also experienced greater increases in problem behavior at age 6 and 8 compared with children not spanked as frequently.

“The fact that knowing whether a child had ever been spanked was enough to predict their levels of behavior problems years later was a bit surprising,” says Gershoff. “It suggests that spanking at any frequency is potentially harmful to children.”

“Although dozens of studies have linked early spanking with later child behavior problems, this is the first to do so with a statistical method that approximates an experiment,” she concluded.

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