Long-Term Mental Health Consequences of Early Corporal Punishment in a Representative Sample of Canadian Children

Sabrina Fréchette & Elisa Romano
University of Ottawa
ISTSS 2014, Miami, Florida
Theoretical Background

Corporal Punishment:

“Use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (Straus & Donelly, 2001, p.4).

Corporal punishment as a form of violence towards children.
Theoretical Background

Prevalence:

• A study in more than 30 low- and middle-income countries revealed that about 75% of children experience violent discipline in the home (UNICEF, 2010).

• U.S. Epidemiological studies revealed that about 67% of young children are spanked by their parents (Taylor et al., 2010), and that 85% of adolescents have been physically punished at some point (Bender et al., 2007).

• In Canada, data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) revealed that, in 2008, 23-26% of parents reported using corporal punishment (Fréchette & Romano, 2013).

• Highest prevalence during the preschool years (Straus & Stewart, 1999; Vittrup et al., 2006).
Theoretical Background

Developmental Outcomes

• Corporal punishment is a developmental risk factor associated with greater social and emotional problems in children and youth (Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Gershoff, 2002, 2013; Straus et al., 2014).

• Methodological variability and limitations make it difficult to draw firm conclusions:
  – Existing research fails to include the full array of potential moderating variables;
  – Most research focus on its association with externalizing behaviors rather than on its potential negative side effects.
Theoretical Background

Gershoff’s (2002) process-context model

Stable Individual and Relational Context
- e.g., child (sex, temperament), parent (psychological functioning, overall parenting style and beliefs), family (size, structure)

Interactional Context
- e.g., emotional state of the parent/child

Corporal Punishment
- Co-Occurring Disciplinary Strategies

Child Mediational Processes

Short and Long-Term Outcomes
- e.g., aggression, mental health, child-parent relationship, socialization

Social-Cultural Context
- e.g., SES, ethnicity, social support, geographic region
Research Objectives

• Examine the longitudinal association between early experiences of corporal punishment and (1) externalizing behaviors, (2) internalizing behaviors, and (3) prosocial behaviors of school-age children and adolescents.

• Controlling for initial levels of behavioral functioning and corporal punishment across time.

• Taking into account:
  – Co-occurring disciplinary strategies;
  – The stable individual and relational context;
  – The social-cultural context;
  – Their moderating effect.
Participants and Procedures

• Examined data from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) following children aged 2-3 years at cycles 1-2 (1994-95/1996-97) until the age of:
  – 8-9 years at cycles 4-5 (2000-01/2002-03), and

• One child per household was kept for the analyses.

• Outcomes at 8-9 years: N=3,203.
• Outcomes at 14-15 years: N=2,602.
Sample Demographics

• Child sex: 51% male

• Parent age: 32 years

• Parent sex: 91% female (biological mother)

• Parent SES: 71% higher than high school education; 61% working outside the home; 70% average to high household income

• 87% living with two biological parents
  – 11% single parents; 1% step parents; 1% other

• 89% European descent
  – 2% Black; 3% South and West Asian; 3% East Asian; 3% other

• 50% Roman Catholic
  – 12% no religion; 22% mainline Protestant; 3% conservative Protestant; 13% other
Measures

Outcomes (Adaptation of the CBCL)
- Externalizing behaviors (6 items)
- Internalizing behaviors (7 items)
- Prosocial behaviors (10 items)

Controls
- Behavioral functioning at time 1
- # of cycles corporal punishment was endorsed after time 1

Predictor (Parenting Scale of the NLSCY)
- Experience of corporal punishment (1 item)

How often do you use physical punishment when your child breaks the rules or does things he/she is not supposed to?
Measures

Moderators

• Co-occurring disciplinary strategies (Parenting Scale of the NLSCY)
  – Explain/teach (2 items)
  – Psychological aggression (2 items)
  – Non-physical punishment (1 item)

• Parenting style (Parenting Scale of the NLSCY)
  – Positive interaction (4 items)
  – Ineffectiveness (7 items)
  – Consistency (5 items)

• Stable individual and relational context
  – Child: sex, temperament (10 items – Infant Characteristics Questionnaire)
  – Parent: sex, age, psychological functioning (12 items – Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale)
  – Family: size, structure

• Social-cultural context
  – SES; ethnicity; religion; religiosity; geographic region
Experiences of Corporal Punishment

• In our sample, approximately 45% of children experienced corporal punishment at 2-3 years, as reported by their parent.

• Parents who reported corporal punishment, indicated rarely using this strategy to discipline their child (M=0,60; SD=0,75).
## Association Between Corporal Punishment (CP) and Mental Health Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Outcomes at 8-9y.</th>
<th></th>
<th>Outcomes at 14-15y.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing behaviors</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing behaviors</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial behaviors</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>-3.16**</td>
<td>1,11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Interactions: CP x Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outcomes at 8-9y.</th>
<th></th>
<th>Outcomes at 14-15y.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>Prosocial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological aggression 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological aggression 2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-physical punishment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain/teach 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>↓</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain/teach 2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>↑↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffectiveness</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child temperament</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent depression</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent education level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>↑↓</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration status</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Association Between Corporal Punishment and Externalizing Behaviors (14-15 y.)

- Low psych. aggression 2
- High psych. aggression 2

Externalizing Behaviors - 14-15 years

Corporal Punishment NO

Corporal Punishment YES
Association Between Corporal Punishment and Internalizing Behaviors (14-15 y.)

- Easy child temperament
- Difficult child temperament

Graph showing the association between corporal punishment and internalizing behaviors for children aged 14-15 years.
Association Between Corporal Punishment and Prosocial Behaviors (14-15 y.)

![Graph showing the association between corporal punishment and prosocial behaviors. The x-axis represents corporal punishment (NO vs. YES), and the y-axis represents prosocial behaviors. The graph indicates a decrease in prosocial behaviors with corporal punishment.]
Conclusion

• Support of Gershoff’s process-context model.
  – Early corporal punishment experiences appear to be associated with mental health outcomes over a long-term period.
  – The association between corporal punishment and behavioral functioning may change across child development.
  – The association between corporal punishment and later behavioral functioning is moderated by co-occurring disciplinary strategies, overall parenting style, and variables from different contextual layers.

• Identification of corporal punishment as a risk factor:
  – Small effect sizes;
  – Complexity of human behaviors;
  – Interplay of dynamic and more proximal factors in time.

• Importance of public education.
Thank you!
Merci!