

# Comparing Child Outcomes of Physical Punishment and Alternative Disciplinary Tactics: A Meta-Analysis (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005)<sup>1</sup>

Major Conclusions and Comparisons With Other Meta-Analyses through 2016  
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## Executive Summary

In 2005, Drs. Robert Larzelere (Oklahoma State Univ.) and Brett Kuhn (Univ. of Nebraska Medical Center) published the first scientific review of studies of physical discipline that compared the child outcomes of its use directly with outcomes of alternative disciplinary tactics used by parents.<sup>1</sup> Reviewing fifty years of research on child discipline, they identified 26 relevant studies on child outcomes of physical punishment. Their conclusion: Child outcomes of physical discipline depend on *how* it is applied. The outcomes of physical discipline compared unfavorably with alternative disciplinary tactics only when it was the *primary* disciplinary method or was too severe (such as beating up a child or striking the face or head). The outcomes of “customary”<sup>4</sup> physical discipline were neither better nor worse than for any alternative tactic, except for one study favoring physical discipline for reducing drug abuse. They also identified an optimal type of physical discipline, called conditional spanking, which led to better child outcomes than 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary tactics and produced outcomes equivalent to those of the remaining three tactics.<sup>5</sup> Conditional spanking is nonabusive, used when a child responds defiantly to milder disciplinary tactics such as time out (based on research on 2- to 6-year-olds). “Nonabusive” is defined as about 2 open-hand swats to the buttocks when a parent is not angrily out of control. Conditional spanking teaches a child to cooperate with the milder disciplinary tactic, thereby making spanking less necessary in the future.

These conclusions have not been invalidated by Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor’s (2016) more recent meta-analysis, because it still bases all their evidence against spanking on simple correlations, ignores studies of conditional spanking except for Roberts’s four studies, and does not compare the outcomes of spanking with outcomes of alternative disciplinary responses that parents could use instead. In fact, their only investigation of alternative tactics failed to find any effective tactics out of 11 they investigated because their type of correlational evidence is biased against all corrective disciplinary actions (Gershoff et al., 2010; Larzelere & Cox, 2013).

## Why the Conclusions of The Larzelere & Kuhn (2005) Review Supersede Gershoff’s Two Reviews

In addition to being the first scientific review that directly compared child outcomes of physical discipline with alternative discipline tactics, the Larzelere-Kuhn review also overcame two common problems in prior reviews of physical discipline. First, previous summaries of scientific studies did not distinguish between the outcomes of overly severe discipline and nonabusive physical discipline, but grouped them together. The 2016

meta-analysis does a better job, but still fails to limit their studies to their stated focus on spanking the buttocks with an open hand (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016, first page).

Second, previous reviews have failed to solve the chicken-and-the-egg problem as to whether severe misbehavior causes physical discipline or vice versa. The strongest scientific evidence against customary physical punishment in previous reviews was that spanking is associated with later behavior problems, such as aggression.<sup>6</sup> But so is every type of corrective discipline.<sup>7,8</sup> If spanking should be banned based on its association with subsequent aggression, then hospitals should be banned because their patients die at a higher rate than people residing elsewhere. Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) still base all their evidence against spanking on simple correlations, even from studies with stronger causal evidence.

The Larzelere-Kuhn review dealt with the chicken-and-the-egg problem by comparing child outcomes of physical punishment with those of alternative disciplinary tactics. This is a fair comparison, because it compares alternative disciplinary interventions for behavior problems, rather than comparing the child outcomes of one disciplinary intervention with outcomes in children needing no corrective discipline. In the same way, death rates in hospitals should be compared with alternative placements for the terminally ill, not with death rates for those requiring no medical intervention. Since all types of corrective discipline are associated with subsequent aggression, it cannot be uniquely attributed to spanking, except in the case of overly severe and predominant use of physical punishment.

### **Ferguson (2013) Meta-Analysis**

In 2013, Ferguson used a different strategy to estimate the causal effect of spanking and corporal punishment more broadly defined by limiting his meta-analysis to longitudinal studies. Further, he distinguished between studies that took pre-existing differences into account vs. those that used only longitudinal correlations. He concluded, “the impact of spanking and corporal punishment on the negative outcomes evaluated here (externalizing, internalizing behaviors, and low cognitive performance) are minimal.” After taking pre-existing differences into account, for example, the partial correlation of spanking with subsequent externalizing problems was .07, smaller than the .10 that is considered a small effect. That implies that 44% of children’s externalizing problems would be *reduced* by above-average spanking, even if this is the correct causal effect (Larzelere, Gunnoe, Roberts, & Ferguson, 2017). It is more likely that some factors that the studies did not take into account can account for the remaining trivial effect. It only takes a small confound to explain away a small effect. As one example, Lansford et al., (2012) dropped cases with the most frequent spanking and the effect size approximated zero. Ferguson did not find recent studies of conditional or back-up spanking, which was more effective than most alternatives in Larzelere and Kuhn’s (2005) meta-analysis. In addition to distinguishing between physical punishment and spanking, he included longitudinal studies of negative verbal discipline and arbitrary discipline, both of which had similar small adverse effect sizes. In contrast, positive discipline was not significantly related to his outcomes in either direction. The most recent meta-analysis by

Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor included only 4 of the 9 statistically controlled longitudinal studies that Ferguson (2013) used for spanking and externalizing problems. The other five were presumably dropped either because they did not include correlations or they used a data set that was already used in another study included in Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor's (2016) meta-analysis, such as the frequently studied National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

## Implications

Therefore current research indicates that customary physical discipline is not associated with any more adverse outcomes in children than is any other type of corrective discipline. Furthermore, a two-swat nonabusive spanking is one of the two most effective disciplinary tactics when 2- to 6-year-olds respond defiantly to milder disciplinary tactics, such as time out. This implies that prohibiting spanking would be counterproductive. Consistent with this, Swedish criminal records indicate that physical child abuse and criminal assaults by minors against minors both increased about 6-fold during the 15 years after Sweden banned all spanking in 1979, and rapes of child victims under 15 years of age increased even more rapidly.<sup>9</sup> All three criminal assaults have continued to increase substantially from 1994 to 2010, which might be due to the erosion of cultural support for other negative disciplinary consequences in addition to physical discipline.<sup>9</sup>

This research summary does not imply that parents should use physical discipline in any manner they choose. The objective of proposed spanking bans is to reduce the rate of abuse and overly severe use of physical discipline. The better that parents can maintain a positive relationship with their child, promote appropriate behavior, and respond to misbehavior with mild, effective disciplinary tactics, the less their need to use spanking or other aversive tactics. Spanking should only be used when children respond defiantly to milder disciplinary tactics, such as time out, or to stop harmful misbehavior (e.g., running out into a street). It should never be used in an infant's first 12 months of life and rarely if at all before 18 months of age. Parents should make sure their children know that any corrective discipline, including spanking, is motivated by love and concern for them. They must also be certain they will not use physical discipline too severely. Finally, physical discipline should always be used in such a way that reduces the need to use it in the future. Conditional spanking accomplishes this by enforcing cooperation with milder disciplinary tactics such as time out. Every child is different, so not all disciplinary tactics will work as well with every child – or for every situation with the same child. Parents need to skillfully use a range of disciplinary options to help their children achieve their full potential, rather than to have effective options eliminated unnecessarily.

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<http://www.springerlink.com/content/k0x4468k255187qg/>

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<sup>4</sup>Customary physical discipline is defined as typical use, usually measured by how frequently it is used, without specifying or emphasizing how severely it was used.

<sup>5</sup>Alternative tactics with equivalent outcomes included a brief forced room isolation (“barrier” or room time out: 3 studies), verbal prohibition (1 study), and a combination of reasoning and nonphysical punishment (1 study). The following alternative tactics had significantly worse outcomes than conditional spanking for either noncompliance (N) or antisocial aggression (A) or both: Reasoning (N & A), Threats or verbal power assertion (N), Privilege removal (N), Time out or isolation (A), Ignoring (N), Love withdrawal (A), Restraint or physical power assertion (N), Child-determined end to time out (N), Scolding (A), and Diverting (A).

<sup>6</sup>Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*, 539-579. This review was compared and contrasted with an earlier Larzelere (2000) review by the president-elect of the American Psychological Association: Benjet, C., & Kazdin, A. E. (2003). Spanking children: The controversies, findings, and new directions. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *23*, 197-224.

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<sup>7</sup> Larzelere, R. E., Ferrer, E., Kuhn, B. R., & Danelia, K. (2010). Differences in causal estimates from longitudinal analyses of residualized vs. simple gain scores: Contrasting controls for selection and regression artifacts. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *34*, 180-189. Larzelere, R. E., Cox, R., & Smith, G. L. (2010). Do nonphysical punishments reduce antisocial behavior more than spanking? A comparison using the strongest previous causal evidence against spanking. *BMC Pediatrics*. *10* (10) Online publication. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2431/10/10>

<sup>8</sup>Straus’s (2001) “landmark” studies provided stronger evidence against customary physical discipline because they adjusted statistically for pre-existing differences in child outcomes. However, Larzelere et al. (2010)<sup>7</sup> showed that the statistical adjustment was only partially successful, so that every corrective discipline by parents was still associated with detrimental outcomes even after that adjustment. *Ritalin* and taking children to visit a psychotherapist also appeared detrimental when analyzed statistically in that manner. Straus, M. A. (2001). *Beating the devil out of them: Corporal punishment in American families and its effects on children* (2nd ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

<sup>9</sup> Larzelere, R. E. (2004). *Sweden's smacking ban: More harm than good*. Frinton on Sea, Essex, UK: Families First. [http://www.christian.org.uk/pdfpublications/sweden\\_smacking.pdf](http://www.christian.org.uk/pdfpublications/sweden_smacking.pdf)  
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