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Childhood Corporal Punishment and Future Perpetration of Physical Dating Violence

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Abstract

Objective—To test whether experiencing childhood corporal punishment is linked to later perpetration of dating violence.

Study design—Young adults ($n = 758$; 61% female; mean age of 20), originally recruited for a longitudinal study as 9th and 10th grade Texas high school students, were asked about their childhood experiences with corporal punishment and physical abuse, as well as current experiences with dating violence. A path model was used to determine if childhood corporal punishment was related to recent perpetration of physical dating violence, while controlling for childhood physical abuse, age, sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Results—In all, 19% of participants ($N = 134$) reported physical dating violence perpetration and 68% reported experiencing corporal punishment as children ($N = 498$). Analysis showed a significant positive association between corporal punishment and physical perpetration of dating violence, $OR = 1.30$, 95% $CI = 1.07, 1.59$). Even after controlling for sex, ethnicity, age, parental education, and child physical abuse, childhood corporal punishment was significantly associated with physical DV perpetration ($aOR = 1.29$, 95% $CI = 1.02, 1.62$).

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Conclusions—The finding that childhood corporal punishment was associated with perpetration of young adult physical dating violence, even after controlling for several demographic variables and childhood physical abuse, adds to the growing literature demonstrating deleterious outcomes associated with corporal punishment.

Keywords

childhood corporal punishment; spanking; childhood physical abuse; dating violence

Approximately 10% to 30% of youth experience dating violence.^{1,2} A plethora of behavioral, medical, and clinical research demonstrates the negative sequelae of dating violence, including poor mental health,³ substance use,⁴ risky sexual behavior,⁵ physical injury,⁶ and future victimization and perpetration of violence.^{3,7} Given the prevalence and potentially negative consequences, dating violence is an important public health concern. Attaining a better understanding of antecedents of dating violence is critical for preventive strategies seeking to mitigate dating violence among youth.⁸

The causes, correlates, and consequences of dating violence are complex and heterogeneous, with evidence continuing to mount that a multitude of factors contribute to violence within intimate relationships.⁹ These factors cut across various domains including affective (e.g. emotion dysregulation, psychiatric disorder), cognitive (eg, attitudes towards women, beliefs about violence), demographic (e.g. age, race, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status), interpersonal (e.g. relationship satisfaction, problem solving skills), contextual (e.g. availability of weapon, drug/alcohol use), as well as distal factors (e.g. history of child abuse, exposure to family violence). One factor that merits additional attention is the association between a youth's history of experiencing corporal punishment and perpetration of dating violence.

In the empirical literature, corporal punishment is succinctly defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior”.¹⁰ Corporal punishment is commonly practiced by parents, with an estimated 38% and 5% of American youth experiencing mild and severe corporal punishment, respectively.^{11,12} The use of corporal punishment remains a long-standing controversy among parents, the public, and researchers alike¹³ as the effectiveness and appropriateness of corporal punishment are hotly debated. The preponderance of empirical evidence, however, clearly shows a link between corporal punishment and numerous detrimental outcomes, including childhood aggression,^{14,15} adolescent dating violence,^{16,17} and mental health problems in both childhood¹⁸ and adulthood.¹⁹

It is purported that corporal punishment is related to deleterious outcomes because it is confounded with more severe types of punishment, such as parent-to-child physical abuse. Indeed, research supports the clustering of victimization experiences²⁰ or “polyvictimization”,²¹ with approximately 22% of youth experiencing 4 or more victimizations in a single year. However, research also has shown that even after controlling for the presence of multiple types of child maltreatment, as well as other potential confounding factors such as maternal stress, depression, and substance use, increased use of

corporal punishment leads to increased childhood aggression.^{14,15} There is need, therefore, for more fine-tuned research that controls for more severe parent-to-child violence (e.g., child physical abuse) as distinct from corporal punishment as predictors of dating violence.

Considering the frequency of corporal punishment by U.S. parents, its links with detrimental outcomes for children, and the limited research examining its relation to risk for later violence in romantic relationships, we examined the association between corporal punishment and future physical perpetration of dating violence among an ethnically diverse population of young adults. We hypothesize that young adults who experienced corporal punishment as children are more likely to report recent perpetration of physical dating violence against an intimate partner, and that this association remains after controlling for potential confounds, including other victimization experiences.

METHODS

We use data from our ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent risky behaviors.⁴ The original data (Wave 1: Spring 2010) included 1042 participants (female: 56%) who were recruited from seven urban and suburban public high schools in southeast Texas (response rate: 62%), and were followed annually thereafter. To obtain a sample representative of the larger school, students were recruited from mandated classes (e.g., English). Participants received increasing amounts of compensation as the study progressed (\$10 – \$30). The current cross-sectional analyses include the 758 participants who completed Wave 6 (spring 2015); the first Wave in which corporal punishment items were included. Of these participants, 61% were female, with a mean age of 20.03 (SD = 0.76). Participants were Hispanic (32.6%), White (28.8%), African American (26.0%), and other (12.7%). Active parental consent and child assent were obtained, and consent was requested again when participants turned age 18. The first author's Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Measures

The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory—*The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory*²² uses a yes/no format to assess dating violence in the past year using the following items: (1) I kicked, hit or punched him/her, (2) I slapped him/her or pulled his/her hair, (3) I pushed shoved, or shook him/her, and (4) I threw something at him/her. Endorsement of one or more items was considered perpetration of physical dating violence.

Corporal punishment—With the premise, “think back to when you were a child,” participants were asked the following question on a 4-point scale ranging from never (0), sometimes (1), often (2), and always (3): “How often did your parents/guardians discipline you by slapping, spanking, or striking you with an object?”

Statistical Analyses

We employed a logistic regression with full information maximum likelihood method²⁴ for missing data using Mplus 7.0²⁵ because the outcome variable (ie, physical DV perpetration) was binary. Odds ratios are presented, with 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) around the

estimates. To control for the association between physical perpetration of dating violence and experiences with corporal punishment, the variables sex, ethnicity, parental education (1= less than high school, 2= finished high school, 3= some college, 4= finished college), yearly alcohol use (1= use and 0= no use) and physical child abuse (Cronbach $\alpha = .78$, Mean = 1.42, SD = 0.59) were included in the regression model. Physical child abuse was measured with the following five items from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire¹⁸ using a 5-point scale anchored by never true (1) and very often true (5): “I got hit so hard by someone in my family that I had to see a doctor or go to the hospital,” “People in my family hit me so hard that it left me with bruises or marks,” “I was punished with a belt, a board, a cord, or some other hard object,” “I believe that I was physically abused,” and “I got hit or beaten so badly that it was noticed by someone like a teacher, neighbor or doctor.” We created dummy-coded variables for sex (female = 1 and male = 0) and ethnicity (African American = 1 vs. others = 0, Hispanic = 1 vs. other = 0, and White = 1 vs. other = 0).

RESULTS

Frequency, mean, and standard deviation for relevant variables are presented in Table I. Nineteen percent of participants ($N = 134$) reported physical perpetration of dating violence and more than half (68%) reported experiencing corporal punishment as children ($N = 498$, $M = 1.07$, $SD = 0.96$). There were no significant association by sex ($\chi^2(3) = 3.52$, $p = .32$), ethnicity ($\chi^2(9) = 15.86$, $P = .07$), or parental education ($\chi^2(9) = 9.38$, $p = .40$) differences in terms of corporal punishment (Table 2). More African Americans endorsed experiencing corporal punishment “always,” relative to Hispanic participants, $\chi^2(1) = 3.96$, $p < .05$, but this difference did not emerge between African American and white participants, $\chi^2(1) = 1.51$, $p = .22$.

A significant positive association emerged for the association between corporal punishment and physical perpetration of dating violence, with an OR of 1.30 (95% CI = 1.07, 1.59). In the multivariate analysis, controlling for sex, ethnicity, age, parental education, yearly alcohol use, as well as child physical abuse, corporal punishment remained a significant and robust predictor of perpetration of dating violence (aOR = 1.29, 95% CI = 1.02, 1.62; Table 3). Notably, sex and parent education were also important predictors of perpetration of dating violence, even after accounting for all covariates.

DISCUSSION

Several important findings of our study merit discussion. First, more than half (68%) of participants in this sample reported experiencing corporal punishment as children. Second, in contrast to past research, no differences in corporal punishment were found when stratified by demographic characteristics. Third, consistent with extant literature, females were more likely to perpetrate teen dating violence than their male counterparts. Notably, this latter finding refers only to acts of violence, and not frequency or severity, which is important given research showing that females may suffer more long-term negative physical and psychosocial consequences of teen dating violence.³ Fourth, parent education (as a proxy for socioeconomic status; SES) was linked to teen dating violence – specifically, that participants with lower SES were more likely to perpetrate teen dating violence. Finally,

corporal punishment was associated with future physical perpetration of dating violence, even after controlling for demographic variables (i.e. sex, ethnicity, age, parental education), as well as a history of childhood physical abuse.

Prevalence estimates of corporal punishment indicate that, *worldwide* and cross-culturally, approximately 80% of children are physically punished.²⁶ Differences in corporal punishment by demographics, particularly culture and race, have been somewhat mixed, with some studies finding that African American parents report a higher prevalence of corporal punishment. African American compared with white and Hispanic parents have been shown to endorse corporal punishment's appropriateness and effectiveness.²⁷ However, more recent research has clarified that, although racial/ethnic differences in *frequency* and attitude may exist, the *consequences* of corporal punishment are uniformly harmful. That is, corporal punishment has been linked to an increase in externalizing problems and disruptive behaviors regardless of racial/ethnic background.²⁸

The finding that childhood corporal punishment was linked to perpetration of dating violence even after controlling for covariates underscores the importance of corporal punishment when considering partner violence etiology. Indeed, the origins and outcomes of dating violence are complex, as demonstrated by the vast heterogeneity of factors explaining violence within the context of an intimate relationship. Although there is no unifying theory of intimate partner violence, notable variables have been continuously and robustly linked to dating violence, including exposure to violent role models,^{29,30} attitudes towards violence,³¹ and poor problem solving skills.³² Substantial evidence demonstrates that combined with genetic predisposition and environmental stress, individuals may learn to behave aggressively through observational learning. Social modelling may be particularly toxic when the child admires the perpetrator, and perceives the individual as competent and of high social status.³³ Given that parents provide a salient model for how adolescents and young adults behave in intimate relationships,³⁴ corporal punishment may set the groundwork that physical force is an acceptable means of resolving conflict. It is also known that the use of corporal punishment with children,¹⁵ as well as more severe parent-to-child violence,³⁵ and adult intimate partner aggression frequently co-occur in families. Hence the modeling may occur in childhood due to direct experience of parental violence, witnessing interparental violence, or both.

Our study has certain limitations. First, corporal punishment was assessed retrospectively, with a single item, and was self-reported by participants. Thus, it is possible that participants may have, on the one hand, opted for more socially desirable responses, or on the other, inflated or misremembered actual events. Future research would benefit by including corroborating reports (e.g., by parents) and/or a more comprehensive measure of corporal punishment. Second, participants were all located in the southern U.S., which may limit generalizability to other regions of the country. This latter concern is tempered by the fact that prevalence of corporal punishment and dating violence in the current population was similar to nationally representative samples. Finally, even though we controlled important variables (e.g., alcohol use, physical child abuse), other factors (e.g., interparental violence) could influence findings.

The strengths of the present study include a large ethnically diverse sample, and the use of methodologically sound measures of dating violence. Further, variables known to relate to dating violence were controlled for, which highlights the importance of the unique impact of corporal punishment on perpetration of dating violence and addresses longstanding criticisms regarding a potentially confounding link between corporal punishment and poor outcomes. Taken together, the present study contributes to the growing literature demonstrating deleterious outcomes associated with corporal punishment, providing further evidence to a long established – yet stubbornly controversial – finding. The negative consequences of corporal punishment are unequivocal and outweigh any possible benefits. These findings are in concert with the policy of the American Academy of Pediatrics, which discourages the use of corporal punishment and instructs clinicians to advocate for more effective and child-friendly disciplinary strategies.³⁶

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Table 1

Frequency, Mean, and standard deviation (SD) for physical dating violence perpetration and corporal punishment (CP)

CP experience (n = 734)	M = 1.07 SD = 0.96
Never	236 (32.2%)
Sometimes	286 (39.0%)
Often	137 (18.7%)
Always	75 (10.2%)
Physical dating violence perpetration (n = 705)	134 (19.0%)

Note. Due to item missingness, the sample sizes for each variable may not match. Due to rounding up, total of percentage could be larger than 100.

Table 2

Corporal punishment by gender, parental education, and ethnicity

	Corporal Punishment (CP) (n, %)				
	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always	Any CP
Gender					
Male	92 (32.2%)	115 (40.2%)	57 (19.9%)	22 (7.7%)	194 (67.8%)
Female	144 (32.1%)	171 (38.2%)	80 (17.9%)	53 (11.8%)	304 (67.9%)
Ethnicity					
Hispanic	79 (33.3%)	97 (40.9%)	45 (19.0%)	16 (6.8%)	158 (66.7%)
White	76 (35.5%)	82(38.3%)	38 (17.8%)	18 (8.4%)	138 (64.5%)
African American	47 (24.9%)	72 (38.1%)	40 (21.1%)	30 (15.9%)	142 (75.1%)
Other	34 (36.2%)	35 (37.2%)	14 (14.9%)	11 (11.7%)	60 (63.8%)
Parental education					
< High school	43 (39.8%)	35 (32.4%)	19 (17.6%)	11 (10.2%)	65 (60.2%)
High school	41 (37.6%)	39 (35.8%)	16 (14.7%)	13 (11.9%)	68 (62.4%)
Some college	51 (27.0%)	79 (41.8%)	37 (19.6%)	22 (11.6%)	138 (73.0%)
Finished college	82 (31.3%)	106 (40.4%)	52 (19.9%)	22 (8.4%)	180 (68.7%)

Note. Highest parental education was created based on either one of participant parents' highest education. Due to item missingness, the sample sizes for gender, ethnicity, and highest parental education may not match.

Table 3

Multivariate analysis: Association between corporal punishment and physical dating violence perpetration

	Estimation	SE	aOR [95% CI]	t-value
Female (= 1 vs. male = 0)	0.59	0.23	1.81[1.15,2.87]	2.16*
Hispanic (= 1 vs. others = 0)	-.07	0.37	0.94[0.46,1.92]	-0.18
White (= 1 vs. others = 0)	-.57	0.38	0.57[0.27,1.21]	-1.47
African American (= 1 vs. others = 0)	0.22	0.36	1.24[0.61,2.54]	0.60
Parental education	-0.30	0.11	0.74[0.60,0.91]	-2.81**
Age	0.03	0.14	1.03[0.78,1.36]	0.18
Yearly alcohol use (=1 vs. no use =0)	0.50	0.30	1.66[0.92,2.99]	1.67
Physical child abuse	0.11	0.18	1.12[0.79,1.59]	0.63
Corporal punishment	0.25	0.12	1.29[1.02,1.62]	2.16*

Note.

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $< .01$