Why Physical Punishment of Children Should be Outlawed

in the United States: A Policy Memorandum

by

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For some background:
- Alecia's self-stated research question: How does a greater understanding of physical punishment against children aid in the enactment of legislation to prohibit its use?
- Alecia's self-stated purpose: this paper will serve as a policy memorandum that will be submitted to U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand to be used in Congress to champion a law outlawing physical punishment of children in the United States

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will discuss the physical punishment of children, a controversial discipline technique which requires the use of physical force. Some find this technique problematic, as it violates the basic right of a child to protection from violence (United Nations, 1989), and the use of physical punishment is associated with several negative child behavioral outcomes and experiences (Gershoff, 2002, Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). While there is a wealth of evidence to support the detrimental effects of physical punishment (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2010; Gershoff, 2013; Knox, 2010), some scholars argue that physical punishment can be effective if it is non-abusive, and administered strategically (Larzelere, 2000).

This review presents an in-depth narrative on physical punishment, by highlighting its prevalence, associated outcomes, and explaining why many condemn this form of discipline. Additionally, a counter-narrative to inform why there is still support for physical punishment is offered, so the conflicting perspectives on this discipline method can be reconciled. To present the narratives, this review is divided into three main sections, which are further divided into several subsections. The first section gives a description, background, and overview of physical punishment. The overview provides a distinction between physical punishment and child abuse, explores contextual factors, gives a global snapshot of physical punishment, identifies factors that influence the use of physical punishment, and shares children's response to physical punishment. The second section explains why scholars have concluded that physical punishment is not recommended. Some of the reasons discussed are human rights arguments, negative consequences of physical punishment, empirical findings on the dangers of physical punishment,

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Commented [A3]: In this sentence, notice how the author organizes her sources into "camps" of scholars who share similar opinion. For this lit review, the scholars either view physical punishment as negative and detrimental or they suggest there can be reasons for physical punishment.

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and an explanation of the link between physical punishment and child abuse. The last section delves into the counter-narrative, and presents support for physical punishment. Both religious-based support and social-scientific research-based support are shared.

Description, Background, and Overview of Physical Punishment

Physical Punishment vs. Physical Abuse

According to Straus (1994), physical punishment is defined as "the 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, as cited in Freeman & Saunders, 2014, p. 684). In this review, the terms "physical punishment" and "corporal punishment" will be used interchangeably. The term physical punishment is commonly used by parents in the United States, whereas U.S. government entities and other countries use the verbiage corporal punishment to denote the same practice. Parents frequently use euphemisms like spanking, smacking, whipping, or paddling to describe discipline that utilizes hitting (Gershoff, 2010).

Physical abuse on the other hand, is described as a form of child maltreatment where there is non-accidental physical injury to a child which results from actions like beating, stabbing, or hitting with a hand or object. A key distinction made according to U.S. policies is that physical discipline does not meet the threshold of abuse, as long as it is reasonable and does not result in bodily injury (Peterson, Joseph, & Feit, 2014). But Gershoff, Lee, and Durrant (2017) noted that several entities have held that the dichotomy between the two is a "false one that legitimates violence against children" (p. 9). In fact, Afifi et al. (2017) held that both physical punishment and physical abuse use physical force and the infliction of pain, and are associated with similar mental health outcomes.

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Background of Physical Punishment

Researchers have long studied the roots and occurrence of corporal punishment, and have sought ways to restore humanity and dignity to a child through effective intervention strategies (Freeman & Saunders 2014, Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff, Lee, & Durrant, 2017; Knox, 2010). Gershoff (2010) explained that there is a longstanding history of corporal punishment in the United States. She further emphasized that "corporal punishment of children occurred in a context in which such punishment was also acceptable as a means of punishing adults for infractions, often in the form of public floggings" (p. 32). But Knox (2010) explained in her article, "A Review of Corporal Punishment in the United States," that currently, it is no longer legal in the U.S. to beat women, prisoners, or criminals, yet it is still legal for parents to physically punish their children, as it falls within the belief in a parent's right to discipline.

Knox also observed that there is still an entrenched societal view that parents own their children, and a view of children as property, which further promote parents' sense of justification when they physically punish their children (Knox, 2010). Furthering this argument, Gershoff (2010) noted that there is a generational transfer of corporal punishment stemming from its long tradition in the United States, and perpetuating the practice of hitting children is the influence of religion in shaping beliefs and attitudes about discipline. Some religions like Christianity promote physical discipline over other forms (Gershoff, 2010).

Global Snapshot of Physical Punishment

Physical punishment is a global phenomenon. Freeman and Saunders (2014) highlighted the prevalence and attitudes about physical punishment in various countries. Survey reports revealed this method of discipline in the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago, Canada, Bangladesh and Paraguay, among other nations. These scholars observed a high prevalence and extreme use

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Commented [A9]: Organization: It makes logical sense for the readers to understand the general background of physical punishment (what constitutes physical punishment, the history of legislation) before the more specific arguments around it.

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of physical force in areas of Africa. Among a sample of women studied, 99% of 500 Kenyan women shared that they have endured physical violence through methods like beatings with objects, punchings, stabbings and kicking.

According to the Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment of Children, 54 countries have currently banned corporal punishment in all settings, and governments in 56 additional countries have made a commitment to banning physical punishment in its entirety, including the home (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, n.d.). Gershoff (2017) noted that Sweden was the first country to institute a total ban on physical punishment, and that these bans are now present in various regions like Europe, Africa, and Central/South America.

But what remains concerning is that the United States has failed to ratify the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (1989), and ban physical punishment in its entirety (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2013; Knox, 2010). Recent data from the United Nations reveals that the U.S. is only UN member country that has not ratified the convention (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2018). This fact supports the persistence of physical punishment in the U.S.—According to Gershoff (2010), 85% of middle and high schoolers, have experienced physical punishment at some point.

Factors That Influence the Use of Physical Punishment

In addition to the social sanctions for using physical force on children (Knox, 2010), Gershoff (2002) proposed other factors that influence its use. In her 2002 study, one parental factor she identified was age. She noted that younger parents have a higher tendency to use physical punishment, which may be linked to a lack of experience with child-rearing. Studies showed that young mothers utilized physical punishment to address non-offensive behaviors like child learning (Gershoff, 2002). Parent gender was another factor associated with the use of

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Commented [A13]: **Transition:** Here, the author ends on a point about children in the U.S. that moves nicely into the next section's first paragraph, which is about children as well.

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physical punishment, with higher usage in mothers according to Gershoff. This trend may correlate with the amount of time a child spends with its mother, as women are often caretakers. According to Gershoff (2002), psychological wellbeing of the parent has been linked to parents' use of physical punishment and their positive attitudes towards it. She noted that depression in parents has promoted their use of physical punishment as a discipline measure. Another factor identified by Gershoff (2002) was family characteristics; she explained that attributes like family instability, abusive households, and single-parenting tend to foster the use of physical punishment.

Gershoff (2002) further underscored the impact of broader factors like social support, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic status (SES). Of SES and physical punishment, she wrote that research has confirmed negative associations, meaning that as SES decreases, the use of physical punishment increases. An explanation she proposed for the relationship between these two variables is a result of parental socialization of certain values. Some parents may be equipping their children to be obedient and subservient, which are characteristics required for low-status jobs that the child may likely encounter, hence their use of physical punishment to achieve immediate compliance.

Children's Response to Physical Punishment

By providing feedback from children from different countries, Freeman and Saunders (2014) revealed first-hand children's perspectives on physical punishment. Of some children that have experienced this form of discipline, one Ethiopian child noted that it is necessary to use a whip when children are disobedient, and that it is within parents' rights to punish their children. An Australian child shared that when they grow up, they plan to smack their children at varied levels of intensity if there's an infraction. An explanation for this tendency of hitting children is

that physical punishment is a learned behavior from parents, with an intergenerational transfer (Freedom & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2010). Other children that were interviewed voiced their concern over the use of physical punishment. A ten-year old Scottish child believed that other methods exist to solve behavioral problems, while a nine-year old American child expressed that spanking was unproductive and was a display of the power adults have over their children (Freeman & Saunders, 2014).

Parents' Motivation for the Use Physical Punishment

Gershoff (2010) explained that parents' main motivations for using physical punishment are behavior modification and its power to get children to comply immediately, and in the long term. Some parents believe that hitting children works because it terminates the problematic behavior and it reestablishes the control factor (Freeman & Saunders, 2014, p. 688). But by analyzing results from several social experiments incorporating spanking, Gershoff (2010) concluded that physical punishment is not better than non-violent alternative forms of discipline to achieve short-term compliance, nor was physical punishment shown to be effective in achieving long-term compliance. Gershoff (2010), relying on her earlier 2002 meta-analysis of 15 specific studies, explained that 87% of those studies found that there was a strong correlation between physical punishment and reduced long-term compliance. In her 2002 article on the associated child behaviors and experiences of physical punishment, Gershoff articulated that physical punishment does not usually occur in isolation, so it is difficult to measure compliance exclusively from this discipline form. She emphasized that physical punishment tends to occur in tandem with other methods like verbal threats, time-outs, or removal of privileges (Gershoff, 2002).

Additional insight on parents' use of physical punishment was gained from Gershoff's 2002 piece. She noted that parents' use of physical punishment frequently responds to their children's aggression, or child behaviors that threaten their own safety as well as others. However, she finds it ironic that parents use aggression (in the form of physical punishment) to correct aggression in their children. Another observation she made was that physical punishment was more likely to be used by parents to address repeated behaviors or infractions by children (Gershoff, 2002).

Why Physical Punishment is Not Recommended

Physical Punishment Violates Children's Human Rights

As physical punishment persists on a national and global scale, researchers, human rights groups, and international bodies are adamant that intentionally inflicting pain by hitting children is a form of violence, which violates the basic human rights of a child (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff et al., 2017; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2017; Knox 2010). Freeman and Saunders (2014) articulated that violence is a common trend in asymmetric relationships as seen in master and slave, and heterosexual relationships, and that physical force has been used in these contexts. They noted that children have lacked rights for a long time.

The Convention on the Rights of a Child of 1989 has played a pivotal role around children's rights according to Freeman and Saunders (2014). This convention declares that the child has a right to freedom of expression, and the right to be treated with dignity and respect (United Nations, 1989). Violent acts against children are also condemned by the United Nations. This can be seen in Article 19 in the Convention on the Rights of a Child that states "children should be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence" (United Nations, 1989,

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Article 19). The Convention on the Rights of a Child was further interpreted by the Committee on the Rights of a Child as leaving no room "for any level of legalized violence against children" (Committee on the Rights of a Child, 2006, Paragraph 4). While women and other adults are now legally protected from physical violence, researchers found it ironic that children, the most vulnerable members of the society, are not afforded this kind of human rights protection, hence their continued fight for change (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2010; Knox, 2010).

Negative Consequences of Physical Punishment

In making their case against physical punishment, scholars have discussed its harmful effects, where it is unequivocally described as doing more harm than good. Some of the harmful effects include mental health issues, revictimization as an adult, as well as increased aggression and delinquency in children (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2010; Knox, 2010; Lake et al., 2016). Physical punishment also sends the wrong message to children, and is consistently viewed as a poor disciplinary measure (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2013). Freeman and Saunders (2014) observed that hitting children teaches them that violence is a suitable tool for resolving differences, whereas communicating with the child teaches the child different skills. Along this line, Gershoff (2010) held that the force used in physical punishment is an external source to elicit compliance. This affects children's ability to develop an internalized reason for desirable behavior. As such, they have no reason to behave when the external force is absent. Gershoff further emphasized that spanking teaches that "violence is sometimes a part of loving relationships" and that violence is a necessary act for those with power to achieve their desired outcomes (Gershoff, 2013, p. 185).

Additionally, Gershoff (2010) held that the physical force utilized in physical punishment causes a child to experience pain. Essentially, it is the pain that is being used as the punishment

and deterrent, noted Gershoff (2010). Usage of pain in this light can result in injury, since
parents are often more physically powerful than children. In her 2002 article, Gershoff explained
that the use of pain as a stimulus can erode the parent-child relationship, as the natural response
is to escape a painful stimulus, which leads to avoidance of parents who are essentially
dispensers of such stimuli (Gershoff, 2002).

Empirical Support for the Dangers of Physical Punishment

There is empirical evidence to support the potential harm of physical punishment.
Gershoff (2002) performed meta-analyses of 88 studies with over 36,000 participants conducted
over 62 years to investigate the relationship between physical punishment and several child
behaviors and experiences. Her findings confirmed a strong association between physical
punishment and increased adult criminal and antisocial behavior, worse child mental health,
decreased quality of parent/child relationships, greater child delinquency and aggression, and
increased risk of physical abuse.

To build on these meta-analyses, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) conducted a new
set of meta-analyses, with an additional 13 years of literature. Their research used 75 studies
(obtained from peer reviewed articles) with 160, 927 participants. One of their main research
questions addressed by the new meta-analyses is whether spanking would be associated with
detrimental outcomes absent the use of studies with harsh or severe methods. The findings of
their research confirmed that spanking was "significantly associated" with 13 of the17
detrimental outcomes studied (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016, p. 5). Some of the childhood
detrimental outcomes were: "low moral internalization, aggression, antisocial behavior…mental
health problems, negative parent–child relationships" and "impaired cognitive ability." In

adulthood, spanking was strongly linked to "adult antisocial behavior, adult mental health problems," and "positive attitudes about spanking" (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016, p. 5).

Physical Punishment as a Risk Factor for Child Abuse

Although physical punishment and physical abuse may be viewed as distinct actions in certain countries or jurisdictions, research has suggested that there is an identifiable connection between the two, since what eventually turns into abuse started out as a corrective action. A 2001 review of physical abuse cases revealed that 69% of these cases resulted from disciplining attempts (Freeman & Saunders, 2014). Freeman and Saunders further explained that many cases of physical punishment especially in young children and infants go unreported, as they are unlikely to share their experience, so it is difficult to get exact estimates. They concluded that there is a blurred line between physical punishment and child abuse, which can easily be crossed without a signal to alert parents (Freeman & Saunders, 2014).

In describing physical methods of disciplining, Knox (2010) noted that as spanking (one method) progresses, the actions of the adult intensify with harder hitting, which can cause physical injury to the child resulting in abuse. Child abuse, a public health issue, has been shown to have poor outcomes on a child's mental health, cognitive development, and physical health, with effects lasting into adulthood (Fortson et al., 2016; Lake & Jamieson, 2016). Data from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) revealed that physical abuse was the second most common form of abuse (accounting for 18% of cases) after neglect in 2016 (HHS, 2018), which further highlights the gravity and implications of the link between physical punishment and child abuse.

Gershoff (2010) further held that more frequent use of physical punishment greatly increases the risk of physical abuse. Thus, she made the argument that there is undisputed

evidence that physical punishment and physical abuse are indistinct gradations of the same act. In her article, she noted that there is also a legal recognition of the connection between physical punishment and physical abuse in some parts of the United States. To support her stance, she cited a Nevada statute, which states "Excessive corporal punishment may constitute abuse or neglect. Excessive corporal punishment may result in physical or mental injury constituting abuse or neglect of a child under the provisions of this chapter" (Gershoff, 2010, p. 43).

Support for Physical Punishment

Religious Support for Physical Punishment

Despite the body of evidence holding that physical punishment is associated with negative outcomes, and is a risk factor for abuse (Freeman & Saunders, 2014; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2010; Gershoff, 2013; Knox, 2010), researchers have observed that some religious groups are ardent supporters of this method of discipline (Chaney, Skipper & Harvey, 2015; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). Chaney et al. (2015) further informed that "over 80% of Americans self-identify with a religious [organization]," (p. 859) thus making religion an important construct in discussions on physical punishment.

To underscore the impact of religious factors on physical punishment, Ellison et al. (1993) studied conservative Protestants' approval of this form of discipline. They found that this group's disproportionate support for corporal punishment is rooted in the observance of biblical literalism, the view of humans as having a sinful nature, and an acceptance that sin should be rewarded with punishment. The role of the bible within this group has powerful implications, as Ellison et al. (1993) explained that conservative Protestants view the bible as the ultimate authoritative text that offers guidance for parenting, family organization, and human affairs

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(1993, p. 132). In fact, biblical principles are treated by conservative Protestant writers as having greater precedence on child rearing than social research according to Ellison et al. (1993).

Ellison et al. (1993) analyzed data from the 1988 General Social Survey (GSS) in their study, and using the data, they developed a model that tested religious factors and support for corporal punishment. Their findings confirmed that conservative Protestants are two times as likely as other similarly situated individuals to support literal interpretation of the bible. This biblical literalism within conservative Protestants has a profound impact on their use of physical punishment. Their belief that all humans are born with sin supports their idea that all children are predisposed to selfish behavior, and are likely to be rebellious towards authority. Consequently, conservative Protestants hold that children should be shaped towards God's will: respectful to parents, conforming, and obedient. Thus, they find confirmation in scripture that the rod is necessary to achieve this (Ellison et al., 1993).

The family structure of conservative Protestants also has implications on their child-rearing practice. According to Ellison et al. (1993), this religious group observes a hierarchical structure in families, headed by God, with defined "superordinate and subordinate roles" (1993, p. 132). Some leading biblical doctrine emphasized by this group are scriptures commanding children to honor their parents, and parents' command to pass on "religious values to their children" (Ellison et al., 1993, p. 133). This hierarchical structure conflicts with the child-rearing principle of secular experts that promote democracy within the family unit according to Ellison et al. (1993). The force of religion further extends to how God is presented to children. According to Ellison et al. (1993), conservative Protestants also use corporal punishment as a means of communicating a positive "spiritual lesson to children" (p. 134). In so doing, God is

represented as a dual frame through parents: nurturing and loving towards their children, and on the other hand, a force that exacts punishment for sin.

Chaney et al. (2015), other researchers that studied the impact of religion on corporal punishment, specifically examined black megachurches and attitudes toward this discipline form. The focal point of their article was the arrest of megachurch pastor, Dr. Creflo Dollar, for the alleged use of physical force and the physical abuse of his daughter back in 2012, which elicited intense public scrutiny and varied reactions. The researchers qualitatively analyzed over 3000 CNN online comments related to the incident, and one of the themes uncovered was "'Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child'" (p. 866). Proponents of this theme alluded to the scripture, and viewed physical punishment in a positive light.

Chaney et al.'s analysis of the online comments revealed that 11% of the respondents viewed corporal punishment favorably, and believed that it is beneficial to children. One of the supporters of the "spare the rod, spoil the child" doctrine remarked: "'Children are mouthy creatures, regardless of the parents' status in life. You better whip them before the police get to them and they might not be so loving" (Chaney et al., 2015, p. 866). A Creflo online supporter stated: "'Beat her Creflo. Everybody gets spanking's *(sic)*'" (Chaney et al., 2015, p. 866).

The perspectives of these commenters highlight an important conflict around child-disciplining that exists today, as some still have strong acceptance for the use of physical punishment. While religion serves to guide moral behavior and human wellbeing, Chaney et al. (2015) held that religious beliefs can contribute to the tendency of abusive actions. The authors articulated that support for abusive physical force against children can be found in scriptures like "'Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die'"

(Proverbs 23:13, King James Version) (Chaney et al., 2015, p. 860). When such scriptures are taken literally, this promotes the use of physical punishment.

Social-Scientific Research-Based Support for Physical Punishment

While most of the evidence presented earlier in this review have highlighted the dangers of physical punishment, not all researchers agree that physical punishment is harmful and ineffective as posited by Gershoff (2013). Larzelere (2000) explored the outcomes of non-abusive and customary physical punishment in his study, and had different conclusions. An interesting point he raised is that discussions on corporal punishment should consider child characteristics, how corporal punishment is used (whether it is severe or reasonable), and the subcultural context of its use. He argued that critics of corporal punishment fail to consider these nuances, and that the associated negative outcomes of physical punishment are primarily due to harsh and severe physical punishment.

For his research, Larzelere (2000) analyzed 38 studies on corporal punishment and studied the outcomes. One of the key criteria for his studies is that it utilized children whose average age when spanked was under 13 years. Some of the studies analyzed revealed that physical punishment was linked to beneficial outcomes like reduced fighting and enhanced parental affection. Of child characteristics, Larzelere (2000) found that child age affects the outcome of physical punishment, as his research uncovered that this form of discipline was more effective in children age 6 or under.

In terms of how physical punishment is administered, Larzelere (2000) held that "Child outcomes tended to be beneficial when physical punishment was used non-abusively, not too frequently, primarily as a back-up to milder discipline techniques, and flexibly" (p. 209). He observed that all 9 of the studies that used spanking as a backup for a milder technique had

beneficial outcomes. Essentially, Larzelere (2000) believed that strategy is key in the use of physical punishment. He posited that resorting to spanking quickly as the sole disciplining measure can lead to an increase in its frequency, which can cause detrimental outcomes. On the other hand, Larzelere noted that strategic use of spanking as a back-up to gentler measures, is more effective in the 2-6 age group (Larzelere, 2000).

Looking at the cultural context of physical punishment, Larzelere (2000) found that this factor has a significant bearing on child outcomes. He observed that two of his uncontrolled longitudinal studies found detrimental effects for European Americans, but neutral effects for African Americans. One of the studies also revealed beneficial outcomes in conservative Protestants where there was spanking for a short period of time. These results led Larzelere to conclude that the "ethnic and religious subcultural differences in the outcomes of spanking probably depend on how spanking is used and its normative acceptance for those subcultures" (2000, p. 210).

Larzelere (2000) also commented on the oft "unconditional [anti-spanking] viewpoint" which holds that spanking is wholly linked to negative outcomes, without considering factors like age, culture, or how spanking is administered. To challenge this perspective, Larzelere (2000) cautioned that the issue of spanking is complex, and anti-spanking advocates may be unintentionally forcing a set of values on a complex phenomenon. For example, he explained that non-physical disciplinary measures may work better for more verbal or wealthier parents as opposed to low socio-economic status parents.

In highlighting what he considered some of the characteristics of effective spanking, Larzelere (2000) presented spanking in an entirely different light, through somewhat gentler lens than other researchers. Some of the characteristics he mentioned of effective spanking were that

it is not too severe, done with parental control, administered during the early stages of childhood, used with reasoning, done privately, and used flexibly.

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