We appreciate the opportunity to provide supplemental evidence regarding the proposed Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Bill. We have each studied physical punishment of children for two decades and have published dozens of papers in peer-reviewed journals on the topic. We summarize here the strength of the science regarding physical punishment.

Physical punishment is ineffective.

- Children who are smacked are less obedient and worse behaved than children who are not smacked (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a).

- Four studies that purported to show smacking was effective as a back-up to time out have since been shown to be inaccurate because they did not take into account initial differences in compliance between the treatment and control groups (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a).

Physical punishment has been linked almost entirely with negative outcomes for children.

- A recent meta-analysis of research on smacking found that 99% of the statistically significant effect sizes found smacking to be linked with negative outcomes for children, such as increased behavior problems and increased mental health problems. Said another way, only 1% found smacking was linked with a beneficial outcome (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a).

- The negative outcomes, such as increased mental health problems and substance abuse, linked with smacking persist into adulthood (Afifi et al., 2017; Merrick et al., 2017).

- There is a large body of research linking smacking with negative outcomes for children. There are almost no studies showing smacking is effective or beneficial for children.

These negative outcomes for children are linked with smacking alone, not just with harsh methods that many of us would say were bordering on abusive.

- The meta-analysis we conducted (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a) excluded any methods that could be considered abusive (e.g., hitting a child with an object) and thus the negative outcomes we identified were linked with behaviors like smacking.

- We also conducted a separate meta-analysis of studies in which participants reported both smacking and harsher methods. The size of the statistical relationship between smacking and negative child outcomes was two-thirds the size of the association of harsh and potentially abusive methods and those same child outcomes. This finding is evidence that smacking alone is harmful, and it is suggestive that smacking is on a continuum of violence against children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016a).
Parents who use physical punishment have a higher likelihood of physically abusing their children.

- Euphemisms like “smacking” have allowed society to ignore the fact that parents are hitting their children (Gershoff, 2013).

- A study of several thousand families from across the U.S. found that parents who used physical punishment had an increased risk of becoming involved with child protective services in the future (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014).

- In a study of substantiated cases of physical abuse across Canada, parents reported that 75% of these cases started out as physical punishment (Durrant, Trocmé, Fallon, Milne, Black & Knoke, 2006).

There is a solid and growing body of literature that supports causal inferences about smacking and physical punishment.

- A recent review found that the literature on physical punishment meets accepted criteria for making causal conclusions in the fields of public health and social sciences (Gershoff, Goodman, Miller-Perrin, Holden, Jackson, & Kazdin, 2018).

- It is true that we cannot do experiments in which we randomly assign children to be hit or not. However, several researchers have used methods from economics (e.g., fixed effects, propensity score matching) that increase our ability to make causal inferences. These causally-informed designs show that children who are smacked increase in their levels of problem behavior over time (Gershoff, Sattler, & Ansari, 2018; Grogan-Kaylor, 2004; Ma, Grogan-Kaylor, & Lee, 2018; Okuzono, Fujiwara, Kato, and Kawachi, 2017).

- Although children with behavior problems do tend to elicit more physical punishment from their parents, studies that have accounted for children’s initial behavior have found that physical punishment predicts increases in children’s behavior problems over time (Berlin et al., 2009; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005; Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, & Berger, 2012).

- We also know from experimental evaluations of parenting interventions and early childhood education interventions that part of their effectiveness in improving children’s behavior is through decreases in parents’ use of smacking (Beauchaine, Webster-Stratton, & Reid, 2005; Breitenstein et al., 2012; Gershoff, Ansari, Purtell, & Sexton, 2016).

Physical punishment has been found to be ineffective and potentially harmful across contexts.

- Physical punishment is linked with negative outcomes for children regardless of the cultural background of the parents (Berlin et al., 2009; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016b), of how warm and sensitive the parents are generally (Berlin et al., 2009; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013), or of whether the family lives in a dangerous neighborhood (Ma, Grogan-Kaylor, & Lee, 2018; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Brody, Murry, & Conger, 2002).

- Physical punishment has also been linked with negative outcomes for children in countries around the world (Gershoff et al., 2010, Pace, Lee, & Grogan-Kaylor, 2019).

A growing number of professional organizations has concluded that physical punishment is harmful to children and should be avoided.
Each of the following organizations has released statements concluding that physical punishment is harmful to children, that parents should avoid using it, and that their members should educate parents regarding alternative methods of discipline:

- American Academy of Pediatrics (Sege et al., 2018)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2012)
- American Psychological Association (2019)
- Canadian Paediatric Society (2016)
- Canadian Psychological Association (2004)

In addition, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have called for educational and legislative interventions to reduce physical punishment as necessary steps to prevent child maltreatment (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016).

Summary

There is virtually no scientific evidence that physical punishment is an effective means of changing child behavior. Rather, there is consistent, widespread, and compelling evidence that children are worse-behaved after being smacked; physical punishment thus makes caregivers’ jobs harder, not easier. There is also strong and consistent evidence that physical punishment increases the risk that children will develop behavior problems and mental health problems that persist into adulthood. Hitting children in the name of discipline is not beneficial for parents or for children. In order to best protect children and promote their well-being, the science is clear: Physical punishment should be avoided and replaced with non-violent forms of discipline.

References


