Recent Publications Reveal that Previous Evidence Against Smacking was Biased

A new meta-analysis\(^1\) demonstrates how to reconcile the findings of Gershoff’s two meta-analyses\(^2,3\) with Ferguson’s meta-analysis.\(^4\) It concludes that Gershoff’s meta-analytic results occur only when researchers fail to account for pre-existing differences in the children. (Gershoff’s meta-analyses are the only published research summaries used to support smacking bans.) The new meta-analysis replicated Ferguson’s results that the adverse-looking effects of smacking become trivial after properly adjusting for pre-existing differences. The new meta-analysis went further, showing that these trivial effects appear to be beneficial after using another valid method for adjusting for pre-existing differences. In addition, it showed that this overall pattern of contradictory results is similar when predicting the past from the present. These results are expected for statistical biases, which unlike true causal influences, can operate backward in time as easily as forward in time.\(^5\) Therefore, the correlational evidence against smacking most likely occurs because children’s oppositional defiance leads their parents to discipline them more often, not only with smacking, but also with all disciplinary methods. That explains why the child outcomes of customary smacking are similar to the outcomes of all other disciplinary responses in direct comparisons.\(^6\)

Two other recent studies support the conclusions of this new meta-analysis. Berry and Willoughby\(^7\) showed that the previous method for adjusting for pre-existing differences was biased. Their corrected method showed that smacking leads to significant reductions in externalizing behavior problems (seen in the article’s supplemental material).

Simple correlations and the previous adjustment method make all actions to correct serious problems appear to be more harmful than they actually are. This explains why most corrective actions appear to be just as harmful as customary smacking, including privilege removal, grounding, sending children to their room, Ritalin, and getting psychotherapy for a child.\(^8\)

Since the average child outcomes of customary smacking are similar to the average child outcomes of all actions by parents or professionals to correct oppositional defiance in children, the goal should be to recommend the most effective way to implement each corrective action. The most effective way to implement smacking is conditional smacking, which enforces cooperation with milder disciplinary tactics. This is the way psychologists trained parents to manage oppositional defiance in young children until the 1990s. As one expert put it, “While we basically are opposed to physical punishment, we have found a mild spanking to be the most feasible backup for the child leaving the timeout chair”.\(^9\), p. 80 A brief room isolation is the only alternative shown to enforce timeout as effectively as smacking, on average.\(^10\) Each enforcement (smacking or the room isolation) works better for some children than the other one. Psychological treatments for oppositional defiance were twice as effective when smacking was used to enforce timeout compared to now.\(^11\) Part of the explanation may be that professional societies not only oppose smacking, but often oppose the brief room isolation also.\(^12\), p. 247