



# Society for Research in Child Development

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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Spanking Linked With Child Aggression and Anxiety, Regardless of Cultural Norm**

No matter what the cultural norm, children who are physically disciplined with spanking and other such approaches are more likely to be anxious and aggressive than children who are disciplined in other ways. This finding, published in the November/December journal *Child Development*, comes from surveys of parents and children in six different countries.

The study grew out of existing controversies over whether parents should spank their children or use other forms of physical discipline. While some experts argue that physical discipline should never be used because of evidence that it is related to more, rather than fewer, child behavior problems and might escalate into physical abuse, others argue that the effects of physical discipline might depend on characteristics of children and families and the circumstances in which physical discipline is used.

To find out if the latter theory was valid, researchers from Duke University in North Carolina, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Göteborg University in Sweden, the University of Naples, the University of Rome and the Istituto Universitario di Scienze Motorie in Italy, Chiang Mai University in Thailand, the University of Delhi in India, the University of Oregon and California State University-Long Beach questioned 336 mothers and their children in China, India, Italy, Kenya, the Philippines, and Thailand about cultural norms surrounding the use of physical discipline and how it affects children's aggression and anxiety.

They first asked mothers how often they physically disciplined their children, and then asked mothers and children how often they thought *other* parents in their country physically disciplined their children. Finally, they asked mothers and children how often the child worries, is fearful, gets in fights, bullies others and other questions to measure children's aggression and anxiety.

The researchers found differences in how often mothers used physical discipline and the mothers' perceptions of how often other parents used physical discipline. Specifically:

- Mothers in Thailand were least likely to physically discipline their children, followed by mothers in China, the Philippines, Italy, India, and Kenya, with mothers in Kenya most likely to physically discipline their children.
- More frequent use of physical discipline was less strongly associated with child aggression and anxiety when it was perceived as being more culturally accepted, but physical discipline was also associated with more aggression and anxiety regardless of the perception of cultural acceptance.
- In countries in which physical discipline was more common and culturally accepted, children who were physically disciplined were less aggressive and less anxious than children who were physically disciplined in countries where physical discipline was rarely used.
- In all countries, however, higher use of physical discipline was associated with more child aggression and anxiety.

**MORE...**

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“One implication of our findings is the need for caution in making recommendations about parenting practices across different cultural groups,” said lead researcher Jennifer Lansford, Ph.D., a research scientist at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. “A particular parenting practice may become a problem only if parents use it in a cultural context that does not support the practice (for example, if they migrate from one country to another).”

However, she notes, some practices that were condoned historically (e.g., child labor) are now condemned, at least in certain countries. “A larger question is whether a parenting practice is acceptable, regardless of whether it occurs commonly within a cultural group.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 76, Issue 6, *Physical Discipline and Children's Adjustment: Cultural Normativeness as a Moderator* by Lansford JE, Dodge KA, Malone PS and Quinn N. (Duke University), Chang L (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Oburu P and Palmérus K (Göteborg University), Bacchini D (University of Naples), Pastorelli C and Bombi AS (Rome University), Zelli A (Istituto Universitario di Scienze Motorie), Tapanya S (Chiang Mai University), Chaudhary N (University of Delhi), Deater-Deckard K (University of Oregon), and Manke B (California State University, Long Beach). Copyright 2005 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.