Physical punishment in children and adult mental health

A cross-sectional study investigating a possible link between harsh physical punishment and mental health disorders reports that reducing physical punishment may help to reduce the prevalence of mental health disorders in the general population. It suggests giving parents information about alternative discipline strategies, such as positive reinforcement.

Overview: Physical punishment (also referred to as smacking or corporal punishment) involves hitting a child as a means of discipline.

It is distinct from child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment, and physical and emotional neglect), which has been established to be associated with adult mental disorders. However, while the relationship between physical punishment and mental health remains uncertain, the use of physical punishment to discipline children is controversial.

Currently children are protected by law from all corporal punishment in 32 countries, not including the UK, US and Canada.

Current advice: In the UK, physical punishment is prohibited in all maintained and full-time independent schools, in children’s homes, in local authority foster homes and Early Years provision. Any use of force against children can be charged as a criminal offence. However, the reasonable punishment defence can be used in cases where the punishment is mild and where the person administering it is a parent or acting in place of a parent (in loco parentis) and they are able to argue that they administered a ‘reasonable punishment’ (Department for Education 2010).

New evidence: A cross-sectional study (Afifi et al. 2012) analysed data from the US National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions for 24,653 adults aged 20 years and older to investigate the possible link between harsh physical punishment as children (that is, pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, or hitting) in the absence of more severe child maltreatment (that is, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, or exposure to intimate partner violence) and mental health disorders in adulthood.

The survey, conducted with a representative population sample in the United States, asked the question: "As a child, how often were you ever pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped or hit by your parents or any adult living in your house?" Respondents who answered 'sometimes' or greater were considered to have experienced harsh physical punishment. Respondents who reported child maltreatment were excluded from the sample.

Of the 20,607 eligible after exclusions, 5.9% of respondents (1,258) reported experiencing harsh physical punishment, the majority of whom were men (59.4%). Further analysis showed harsh
physical punishment to be associated with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance abuse/dependence, and personality disorders in a general population sample.

The cross-sectional design precludes definitive conclusions about the link between harsh physical punishment and mental disorders. However, the researchers emphasise the need for paediatricians and other healthcare providers to be aware of the link between physical punishment and mental health disorders, and note that from a public health perspective, reducing physical punishment may help to decrease the prevalence of mental health disorders in the general population. They call for guidance to explicitly state that physical punishment should not be used with children of any age, and to provide more information about alternative discipline strategies, such as positive reinforcement.

Commentary: “This large study provides strong evidence suggesting that responder recall of harsh punishment, in the absence of child maltreatment, is associated with mental health problems in adulthood. If this association is causal, 2–7% of associated mental health problems could be prevented by avoiding harsh physical punishment of children, including teenagers. The study is highly relevant to the UK, which has a similar prevalence and spectrum of harsh physical punishment and personality disorders.

Although corporal punishment has been outlawed in the UK in schools, it is legal in the home when carried out by a parent as ‘reasonable chastisement’. This study provides further evidence that harsh physical punishment has adverse outcomes for children and adolescents. This study should encourage community services such as teachers and clinicians to promote non-violent positive parenting methods. Adult depression alone in the UK has been estimated to cost £9 billion per year (£370 million of this being through direct treatment costs) and thus a change in attitude towards disciplining children may also reap economic benefit.” – Ruth Gilbert, Professor of clinical epidemiology and Annie Herbert, PhD student, Institute of Child Health, University College London