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# Does Stress Increase and Support Decrease the Use of Spanking as a Discipline Strategy?

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# Does Stress Increase and Support Decrease the Use of Spanking as a Discipline Strategy?

## **Abstract**

I reviewed the literature on discipline to discover which factors change reliance on spanking as a disciplinary strategy, and I compared my reaction patterns to them. For a significant period of time I was a single parent of two children, but now I have a very supportive partner. Pinderhughes, Bates, Dodge, Pettit, and Zelli (2008) found that the use of physical discipline is higher for single parents, when there are a large number of children, and unplanned children. This makes sense. A single parent is responsible for every bill, meal, and other chore that needs to be done. As a result, there is less patience for children's misbehavior. Further, the amount of work and stress I experienced increased exponentially as the number of children went from one to two; therefore, it makes a great deal of sense to me that a larger number of children would be even more stressful. Further, I found out first hand that an unplanned pregnancy can be very stressful, and I found that when I was under stress, I had less patience for a child acting out. Barnett (2008) found that distress can be due to economic pressure, and this too fits with my experience. When more bills were to be paid than I had money coming in, I felt very stressed. Martorell and Bugental (2006) found that distress can be due to lack of support in a marriage and a sense of powerlessness or lack of control. I could not establish a good relationship with the children's father, and the lack of support from him made life difficult. There was no one to listen or to help out when the children's misbehavior was stressful. To endure the same things everyday for extended periods of time also led to feelings of powerlessness. Many times when I would try hard to get ahead in work or the relationship with the father of my children I was set back by another uncontrollable event. When the children were sick I would miss work and loose income, and many illnesses spread from one child to the other, leading to more lost time at work. I was passed up for promotions and raises because of lost time from work. Mirowski and Ross (2003) found that distress is lessened by emotional support from family, friends, or a significant other. This is very, very true! I am no longer a single parent, and I have someone who can help me calm down or take over when I have become too frustrated. A factor not mentioned in the literature is education as a source of hope. I am in college, and I can see a better life in the future. So it is not simply that a more highly educated mother does not rely on spanking as much (Barnett, 2008; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), but education as a process is a very positive force in my life. Now that I have monetary support and social support, I am much more patient with my children, more likely to use time out and talking with them instead of spanking. Thus the literature fits my experience. These findings suggest that supporting parents and alleviating parental distress is very important for promoting a more patient teaching style of parenting.

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DOES STRESS INCREASE AND SUPPORT DECREASE THE USE OF  
SPANKING AS A DISCIPLINE STRATEGY?

By

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### Abstract

I reviewed the literature on discipline to discover which factors change reliance on spanking as a disciplinary strategy, and I compared my reaction patterns to them. For a significant period of time I was a single parent of two children, but now I have a very supportive partner. Pinderhughes, Bates, Dodge, Pettit, and Zelli (2008) found that the use of physical discipline is higher for single parents, when there are a large number of children, and unplanned children. This makes sense. A single parent is responsible for every bill, meal, and other chore that needs to be done. As a result, there is less patience for children's misbehavior. Further, the amount of work and stress I experienced increased exponentially as the number of children went from one to two; therefore, it makes a great deal of sense to me that a larger number of children would be even more stressful. Further, I found out first hand that an unplanned pregnancy can be very stressful, and I found that when I was under stress, I had less patience for a child acting out. Barnett (2008) found that distress can be due to economic pressure, and this too fits with my experience. When more bills were to be paid than I had money coming in, I felt very stressed. Martorell and Bugental (2006) found that distress can be due to lack of support in a marriage and a sense of powerlessness or lack of control. I could not establish a good relationship with the children's father, and the lack of support from him made life difficult. There was no one to listen or to help out when the children's misbehavior was stressful. To endure the same things everyday for extended periods of time also led to feelings of powerlessness. Many times when I would try hard to get ahead in work or the relationship with the father of my children I was set back by another uncontrollable event. When the children were sick I would miss work and loose income,

and many illnesses spread from one child to the other, leading to more lost time at work. I was passed up for promotions and raises because of lost time from work. Mirowski and Ross (2003) found that distress is lessened by emotional support from family, friends, or a significant other. This is very, very true! I am no longer a single parent, and I have someone who can help me calm down or take over when I have become too frustrated. A factor not mentioned in the literature is education as a source of hope. I am in college, and I can see a better life in the future. So it is not simply that a more highly educated mother does not rely on spanking as much (Barnett, 2008; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), but education as a process is a very positive force in my life. Now that I have monetary support and social support, I am much more patient with my children, more likely to use time out and talking with them instead of spanking. Thus the literature fits my experience. These findings suggest that supporting parents and alleviating parental distress is very important for promoting a more patient teaching style of parenting.

## **Does Stress Increase and Support Decrease the Use of Spanking as a Discipline Strategy?**

Discipline comes from the Latin word “disciplinare” which means “to teach” (Banks, 2002). Discipline should teach and be age appropriate. A child achieves a sense of competence through discipline, and it should be a mostly positive learning experience. Parents should reinforce a child’s positive behaviors as part of positive parenting (Banks, 2002). When considering discipline, most people think of physical punishment, such as spanking. Spanking is less effective and is more controversial.

A child is often spanked for misbehaving. Many times a child misbehaves, because he or she is tired, bored, hungry, or deprived of adult attention, or because he or she lacks good discipline or self control. A problem with punishing undesired behavior is unintentional, namely it may reinforce the behavior (Banks, 2002). Being inconsistent is also a problem, because the child does not know what to expect when he or she is misbehaving (Rizzo, 2002).

Physical punishment has many harmful effects. Durrant (2008) reported that physical punishment is associated with weaker internalization of moral values, increased levels of antisocial behavior against siblings and peers, and more frequent dating violence. In longitudinal studies, spanking predicts higher levels of antisocial behavior two years later. This finding is the same across ethnic groups even when controlling for the warmth the parent shows the child.

There are different types of spanking. Lazalere and Kuhn (2005) differentiate three types of spanking. First, there is conditional spanking which is spanking under limited conditions. It is mostly used when other discipline strategies, such as time out,



have not worked. Second, there is customary physical punishment when spanking is the usual disciplinary strategy which parents use. Third, there is overly severe physical punishment when the parent uses excessive force such as, hitting with an object or slapping in the face. When considering physical punishment, these different types of spanking should be taken into account.

There are risk factors that dispose parents to use physical punishment.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a factor, but there are specific stressors due to SES. These stressors include single parenthood, large numbers of children, and unplanned pregnancy (Pinderhughes, Bates, Dodge, et al, 2008). There are different evaluations of maternal education as a risk factor. In research done by Grogan-Kaylor and Otis (2007), maternal education did not show a relationship with the parent's use of corporal punishment; however, in other research, maternal education has been found to be a significant variable for predicting the use of spanking children (Barnett, 2008; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

Distress may be a factor in spanking a child as well. Distress is negative stress in one's life. A psychosocial stressor may consist of the cognitive interpretation of some event (Everly & Lating 2002). According to the family stress model, psychological distress is a key mediator in the relationship between economic pressure and parenting behaviors (Barnett, 2008). From this model, psychological stress comes from economic pressure, but it can come from other avenues as well. Mirowsky and Ross (2003) mention a number of social causes of psychological distress. Martorell and Bugental (2006) cite the lack of support in a marriage and in child rearing, neighborhood disorder which also is also distressing for the families that live in that area. As already mentioned above, they indicate as stressors low levels of education and income, and a lack of control

or powerlessness. Martorell and Bugental (2006) also mention lack of control or powerlessness as a social cause of psychological distress.

I hypothesize that the more stress a parent feels the more spanking the parent will engage in. I expect that a feeling of control and emotional support will moderate the distress a parent feels and may correlate with parents using less spanking.

## Method

### **Participants**

I intended to ask students who are parents and taking classes at EMU to participate. Further, if possible to arrange it, I also planned to hand out the questionnaires at the EMU Childcare Center and the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire asks participants anonymously what their parenting practices are; see the questionnaire in the Appendix. The questions are based on a review of the literature on spanking and helps test the hypotheses that stress increases and support decreases the amount of spanking used as a discipline strategy.

### **Procedure**

The questionnaire takes about 20 minutes. My plan was that I would first obtain research approval from the Human Subject Review Committee of EMU, and then I would ask for permission from the EMU Childcare Center and the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services. The method for dispersing the questionnaires at the EMU childcare center and the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services would maintain confidentiality. The Informed Consent forms would be made available to the parents and the questionnaires would be available upon request from the teachers of the EMU Childcare Center and the secretaries at the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services. Upon completion of the questionnaire, the participant himself or herself would slide the questionnaire into a mail-slotted cardboard box that the researcher would empty once a week. On the campus of EMU, the researcher would post flyers

with contact information and interested individuals would contact the researcher for a time to complete the questionnaire. Similarly flyers would be posted at the EMU Childcare Center and the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services. The flyers at the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services would mention a drawing for two \$50.00 gift certificates to Wal-Mart. The questionnaire packet would have a separate sheet to fill out to enter the drawing. This sheet would be separated by the participant, name and phone and/or e-mail address filled in, and entered into a different mail-slotted box available at each of the three locations. Winners of the drawing were to be contacted by email or phone once the data gathering phase of the research was done.

## Results

The Human Subjects Review Committee indicated that it would not be permissible to include parents from the Washtenaw County Department of Human Services, because some of them are vulnerable. As one of these parents I acknowledge that some of the parents are vulnerable, so I was very willing not to go there to request participation.

The Human Subjects Review Committee indicated that parents at EMU could not be anonymous participants, because a combination of questions might indicate the possibility that parents were abusing their children. It was recommended that I eliminate the questions on spanking and replace them with a questionnaire which predicts abuse and that the Informed Consent would be signed by the participants to permit reporting of possible abuse. My interest was not in abuse but in the discipline strategies used within the normal range of disciplining of children; therefore, substituting the scale for abuse-prediction was not consistent with the intent of the research. Further, combining questions to predict possible abuse is beyond my ability as an undergraduate.

Consequently the research was changed to check whether my experience raising two children as a single mother led to behavior and temptations consistent with the findings in the literature.

**Use of physical discipline is higher for single parents, when there are a large number of children, and unplanned children (Pinderhughes, Bates, Dodge, Pettit, & Zelli 2008)**

As I look back on what I have experienced, this does seem to be the case. While being a single parent, there are many issues that a parent has to take care of by themselves. The parent is responsible for every bill, meal, and any other chore that needs to be done. When these issues start to get overwhelming, there is less patience for children's misbehavior.

I do not know about large numbers of children, but it seems reasonable to me. I have two children, and it was much more stressful to have two children than to have just one. It almost seems to be an exponential difference. If two children are much more stressful than a single child, then a larger number of children probably would be even more stressful.

An unplanned pregnancy can be very stressful. I found in my own experience that when a parent is under stress that parent may be less able to handle a child acting out. When a parent is already having trouble taking care of one child and finds out she has to take care of another child the stress can be tremendous. Stress tends to build one issue on top of the other.

**Distress can be due to economic pressure (Barnett, 2008), lack of support in the marriage, and a sense of lack of control or powerlessness (Martorell & Bugental, 2006).**

I have learned that economic pressure is very distressing. As a parent, when I was consumed with the fact that there was more money that needed to go out than was coming in, it was very hard to deal with two children that did not listen or that argued constantly.

A lack of support was also very stressful. Not having someone to be there to listen or even to take over, so I could have a break from the fighting children was very stressful.

A sense of powerlessness also was important. To endure the same things everyday for extended periods of time also can lead to a feeling of powerlessness. Many times when I would try hard to get ahead in work or the relationship with the father of my children I was set back by events out of my control.

The children would get sick, and I would have to miss work. I have two children, so when one child would get sick, then the next would get sick, and I would have to miss double time. I would miss out on wages, but also I would get passed up on promotions and raises. It seemed like no matter how hard I tried I could not get along with my children's father and that was very stressful, because we were always arguing. When I argued with him I had no energy to deal with the messes that the children made, or with the children acting up. I would either retreat or be harsh. As a result I also became inconsistent at times, and this was not helpful for my children, because it lessens predictability of what I would do.

**Distress is lessened by emotional support from family, friends, or a significant other (Mirowski & Ross, 2003).**

This is very, very true! I am no longer a single parent, and I have someone who can help me calm down or take over when I have become very frustrated.

**A factor not mentioned in the literature**

Education gives hope and is a supportive factor. I am in college, and I can see a better life in the future. So it is not simply that a more highly educated mother does not rely on spanking as much (Barnett, 2008; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), but education as a process is a very positive force in my life.

**Reflection**

Now that my situation is drastically different, I am able to discipline my children in a different way. I still work at a minimum wage job, but I am not consumed with financial pressure, because I have monetary support. I feel that I have much more control over my life than I did before, and it has made a difference in how I discipline my children. I am much more patient than before, and I can revert to using time out and talking more than spanking.

**Summary**

When considering my experience, the literature seems to be correct. Single parenthood, multiple children and unplanned pregnancies do seem to correlate with the use of spanking as a means of discipline. Distress also seems to be a large variable in how often I reverted to spanking my children. Opposing the negative stress is emotional support, and in my experience emotional support is a barrier to negative stress. In that way emotional support moderates how often I spank my children and instead rely on time out and talking with them.

In addition, education brings hope of a better life.



These findings suggest that supporting parents and alleviating parental distress is very important for promoting a more patient teaching style of parenting.

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## Appendix

If one of your children has been more difficult to parent, please answer the questions with this child in mind.

1. How many children do you have: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Are you a single parent?      No      Yes
3. Does another adult actively help you in child rearing?      No      Yes
4. Are you married?      No      Yes
5. Are you cohabitating?      No      Yes
  
6. To what degree do you feel like you have control over your most difficult child?  
     Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely
7. To what degree does this child listen to you?  
     Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely
8. To what degree do you feel like you have control over your life?  
     Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely
9. To what degree do you have resources available to you to make sure your needs are met?  
     Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely
10. Do you have resources available to you to make sure your child's needs are met?  
     Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely
  
11. Do you have trouble paying your electric bill?      No      Yes
12. Do you have trouble paying your water bill?      No      Yes
13. Do you have trouble paying your rent?      No      Yes
14. Do you have trouble paying your gas (for heating or cooking) bill?      No      Yes
15. Have you had any of your utilities disconnected for nonpayment in the last year?      No      Yes
16. Have you been evicted or threatened with eviction for nonpayment in the last year?  
     No      Yes
17. Do you have an emotionally supportive friend, family member or significant other?  
     No      Yes

18. To what degree do you have monetary help from family, friends, or a significant other?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

19. To what degree is your family, friends, or significant other helpful in providing rides to appointments if needed?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

20. To what degree is your family, friends, or significant other helpful in providing babysitting if needed?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

21. To what degree is the other parent helpful in the child rearing?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

22. Is the relationship with the other parent strained?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

23. Do you have a strained relationship with a significant other who is not the parent?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

24. To what degree does the other parent provide monetary support for the child?

Not at all      Somewhat      To an extensive degree      Yes, absolutely

25. Do you spank your child?      No      Yes

26. How often do you spank your child?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

27. Do you use spanking as your main form of discipline?      No      Yes

28. If you spank your child, do you feel angry as you do so?

Not at all      Seldom      Usually      Yes, absolutely      I don't spank

29. Have you been concerned that you may have been overly harsh or aggressive with this child in the last year?      No      Yes

30. To what degree do you use time out as a form of discipline?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

31. To what degree do you yell at your child as a form of discipline?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

32. Do you feel that yelling as a form of discipline makes your child behave better?      No

Yes

33. Do you feel that time out as a form of discipline makes your child behave better?      No

Yes

34. Do you feel that spanking as a form of discipline makes your child behave better?

No    Yes

35. Do you believe that children need to be spanked in order to behave appropriately?

No    Yes

36. Do you believe that spanking children hurts the development of the child?      No    Yes

37. Does your religion indicate that you should spank to discipline your child?      No    Yes

38. How often do you praise your child for doing something good or appropriate?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

39. How often do you offer rewards for good behavior?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

40. How often do you do enjoyable activities with your children?

- A.      Not at all
- B.      Once every six months
- C.      Once every two months
- D.      Once a month
- E.      Once a week
- F.      Once a day
- G.      Many times a day

41. What is your gender?    Male \_\_\_\_\_      Female \_\_\_\_\_

42. How old were you when you had your first child?      \_\_\_\_\_ years

43. What level of education do you have?

- A. Did not graduate from high school
- B. Graduated from high school
- C. Took some college courses
- D. Have my Associate's degree
- E. Have a four-year university degree
- F. Took some graduate courses
- G. Have an advanced degree or certificate

44. How often do you feel overwhelmed with childrearing?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

45. Was one or more of your children unplanned?      No      Yes

46. Is one of your children a difficult child to raise?      No      Yes

47. Do any of your children have a genetic problem (Down's syndrome, Turner's syndrome, etc.)?

If so, please indicate here what the problem is

\_\_\_\_\_

48. Do any of your children have a physical problem (Cerebral palsy, heart defect)?

If so, please indicate here what the problem is

\_\_\_\_\_

49. Do any of your children have a mental problem (Attention deficit disorder, depression)?

If so, please indicate here what the problem is

\_\_\_\_\_

50. Please indicate your age: \_\_\_\_\_ years

51. With respect to your current schedule, how often do you feel stressed?

Not at all      Seldom      Many times per week      Everyday

52. With respect to employment, how often do you feel stressed?

- A. I am not employed
- B. I am stressed everyday
- C. I am stressed two times a week
- D. I am stressed once a month
- E. I am almost never stressed

53. Do you enjoy the kind of work you do?

- A. I am not employed
- B. I do not enjoy it at all
- C. I enjoy my job rarely
- D. I enjoy my job
- E. I enjoy my job very much

54. How would you describe your economic situation as you grew up?

- A. I had barely enough to get by
- B. I had enough, but no more
- C. I definitely had enough of everything, but no luxuries
- D. I had enough and some luxuries
- E. I had a lot of luxuries

55. How would you describe your current economic situation?

- A. I have barely enough to get by
- B. I have enough, but no more
- C. I definitely have enough of everything, but no luxuries
- D. I have enough and some luxuries
- E. I have a lot of luxuries

56. Your racial/ethnic group membership is:

- A. African American
- B. Asian American (including Indian and Pacific Island regions)
- C. Caucasian or European American
- D. Hispanic American
- E. Native American
- F. Native American
- G. Middle-Eastern American
- H. Other: Please indicate here: \_\_\_\_\_