

Is Spanking Harmful? Why Research Hasnt Given Us a Clear Answer

The spanking debate, in case you have not heard, [is over](#). Or is it?

Contrary to [Psychology Today's](#) pronouncement, arguments over the effectiveness are far from over. Child professionals line up either on either side of the debate, armed with an arsenal of research supporting their own view.

One of the more recent studies, conducted by Elizabeth Gershoff, seems to conclusively prove that spanking is bad for children. The research was so convincing, in fact, that it led Psychology Today to publish an article titled: "[Research on Spanking: It's Bad for ALL Kids](#)."

But there's a catch: the data isn't actually valid.

Health professionals of the American College of Pediatricians (ACP) point out that the conclusions of Gershoff's anti-spanking research is "[misleading](#)."

This research, the authors contend, suffers from many of the same defects as other anti-spanking studies. Here are the three defects the authors cited:

1. The Correlational Fallacy:

Correlation does not equal causation. For a humorous illustration of this, take a look at this [example](#) from Spurious Correlations:

Obviously correlation here does not signal causation: Fewer divorces do not predict a fall in margarine consumption, nor do spikes in margarine sales cause divorce.

Anti-spanking researchers have made the same mistake. After finding a correlation between spanking and aggressive behavior in children, they prematurely concluded that spanking must be the *cause* of aggressive behavior.

But this is a *correlational fallacy*. As the ACP says:

“[T]his kind of correlation technique superficially makes spanking appear to cause aggression since the children spanked more often are the children who were more aggressive during the same time period.Â However, one must ask which came first, the spanking or the aggressive behavior? Did the aggression occur first and elicit more spanking from the parents, or did the spanking occur before the aggression?”

Aggressive behavior and spanking correlate, but without more evidence, we can't know which one causes the other (or whether one causes the other at all).

2. The Extrapolation Fallacy:

Extrapolating data involves predicting scenarios that fall outside of the collected data. Extrapolated data may be helpful in some cases. But it's unwise to present extrapolated data as if it's on par with scientifically proven data, since it is less reliable. In the end, extrapolation is nothing but an educated guess.

This is the problem that the ACP sees with most anti-spanking research: research *does* show that infrequent spanking has better outcomes than overly frequent spanking. However, this does not prove that no spanking at all is better than infrequent spanking. Anti-spanking researchers present their prediction as if it were proven when in reality they have merely extrapolated the data.

3. The Lumping Fallacy:

Another major problem that the ACP identifies has to do with

what qualifies as spanking. Spanking is traditionally [defined](#) as "physically non-injurious, intended to modify behavior, and administered with the open hand to the extremities or buttocks. "But anti-spanking researchers didn't limit their research to spanking of this sort they included all forms of corporal punishment in their research. According to the ACP:

"Only 4 of their 75 studies were limited to two open-handed swats to the buttocks for child defiance. The other 71 studies lumped together all "spanking" regardless of how it was implemented and why it was used. Those were the four studies that found spanking to be as effective or more effective than the three alternatives investigated for enforcing cooperation with time out in defiant 2- to 6-year-olds."

Professionals at the ACP call this the "Lumping Fallacy". This consists in "lumping" a wide range of things into one group without considering whether they actually belong together. This is misleading spanking is quite different than say, smacking a child in the face or back, and it should be treated differently. The anti-spanking studies are not valid, researchers said, because they don't actually limit studies to spanking.

The ACP rejects the conclusions of the anti-spanking studies because of these three fallacies. And they hint that spanking may actually be helpful (of course, they add, spanking is only acceptable and useful under [certain](#) conditions).

All this is to say that the spanking debate not over. It's a complex issue, and there will likely be no single answer.

Maybe someday we will have conclusive data on the issue of spanking. Maybe we won't. In the meantime, parents must confront the same old question: does spanking correct bad behavior? Or does it only make the problem worse?

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