

Parental Physical Punishment “Discipline” to Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

There are several intense discussions in the literature regarding the effectiveness of using physical punishment to discipline children, as well as its impact on the development of aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents. This literature review aims to investigate literature related to the use of physical punishment on children and the associated impact of physical punishment on child behavior development. A total of 10 articles were selected using PRISMA flowchart from relevant databases: PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Cochrane based on inclusion criteria. The literature indicates that physical punishment by parents is significantly associated with various child behaviors. It causes children to experience long-term depression until adolescence and adulthood. Additionally, the review suggests that children who experience physical punishment at home may suffer negative consequences at school. The research findings emphasize the importance of opposing the use of physical punishment as disciplinary method by parents and increasing awareness of the negative effects.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Physically punishment to children who misbehave is part of the way parents discipline their children. Many cultures still occur in this regard, including hitting, kicking, and slapping children. (Heilmann et al., 2021). Despite growing evidence that physical punishment constitutes a form of child abuse, approximately 63% of children continue to experience severe physical discipline from parents or caregivers. Yet, the overall impact of such disciplinary practices remains insufficiently understood, as some literature reports neutral or even beneficial outcomes. Importantly, the use of corporal punishment can progress into more serious forms of harm. Severe physical discipline is strongly associated with increased risks of sexual, physical, and emotional maltreatment in childhood. These findings suggest that reducing children's exposure to corporal punishment may play a crucial role in preventing and limiting the development of more severe abusive behaviors. (Wiggers & Paas, 2022).

Some studies highlight the need to account for the varying levels of risk and the unique ways in which each child responds to corporal punishment within the family environment. The age at which a child experiences violence can have a variable impact on the likelihood of behavior into adolescence and even adulthood, or even future victimization. (Cunha et al., 2024). For instance, children's emotional and behavioral

difficulties following exposure to violence can differ based on how much affection their parents show and the ways parents manage and resolve conflicts (Bonache et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, there are multiple perspectives on parental punishment of children. Research indicates that cultural and ethnic backgrounds can influence how physical discipline impacts children's development. For instance, African American parents are generally more likely than European American parents to view corporal punishment as acceptable and effective (Wiggers & Paas, 2022). For scholars working in this field, it is essential to take the wider cultural setting into account when examining these associations. This review seeks to explore existing literature on the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy for children and to assess its implications for children's behavioral development.

2. METHOD

This research employed a systematic literature review design. The process of identifying and selecting articles followed the PRISMA flowchart guidelines. Searches were carried out across the PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Cochrane databases. The search strategy incorporated the following keywords: corporal punishment, physical punishment, children, adolescence, development, perspective. Boolean techniques were used to focus the research and search as follows: "corporal punishment" OR "physical punishment" AND "children" OR "adolescence" AND "development" AND "perspective". The inclusion criteria required that the articles be written in English, available in full text, and published between 2017 and 2024. The studies that met these criteria were subsequently evaluated for methodological quality using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) appraisal tools.

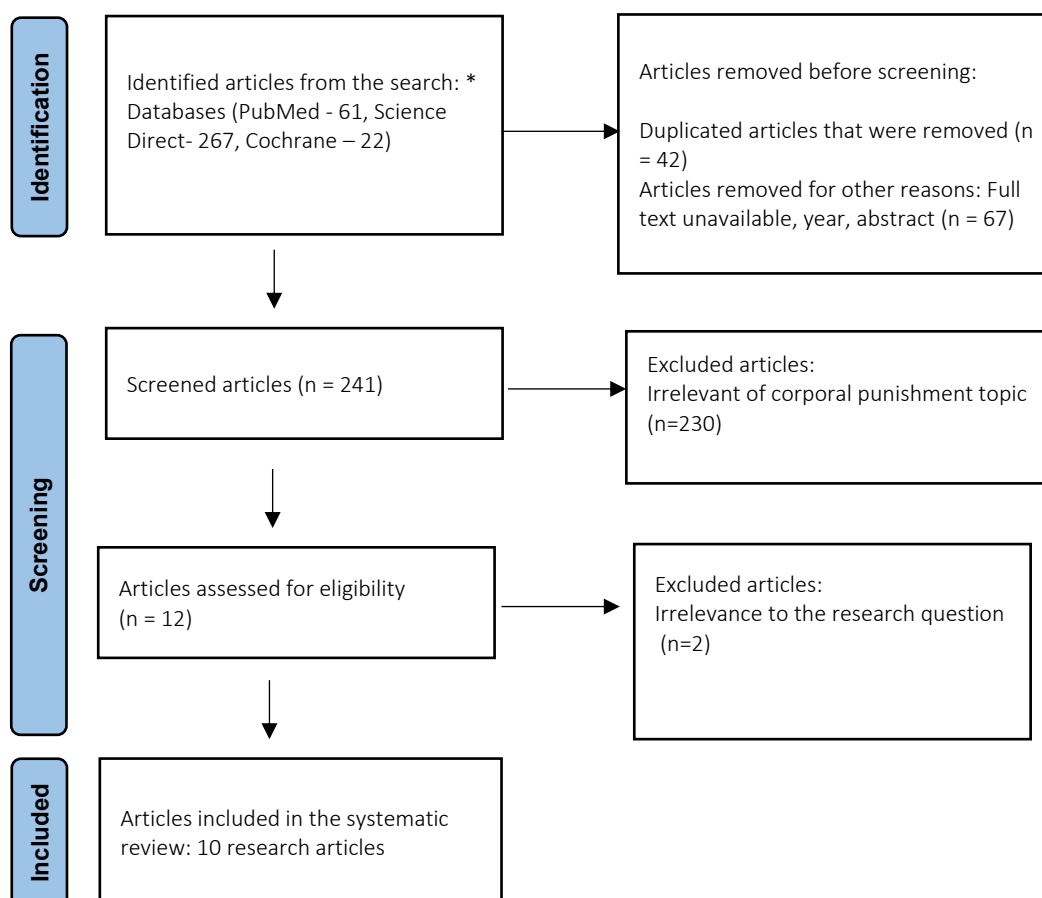


Figure 1. Prisma Flowchart

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review was carried out through several phases. The initial search identified 61 articles from PubMed, 267 from ScienceDirect, and 22 from Cochrane that addressed corporal punishment in children. After screening for topic relevance, 12 articles remained. Of these, 10 met all inclusion criteria. These studies were then examined in detail, and their key findings are summarized in Table 1.

This review examines the link between corporal punishment and the behavioral development of children. The evidence consistently demonstrates that parental use of physical discipline is associated with various negative outcomes, including increased aggression, antisocial behavior, destructive tendencies, and a higher acceptance of physical violence as a problem-solving strategy. These findings align with social learning theory, which proposes that children imitate the behaviors they observe in their parents, making them more likely to adopt and exhibit aggressive behaviors themselves (Alampay et al., 2017; Weidi Liu et al., 2021). Corporal punishment is associated with the incidence of aggression in adolescents exacerbating the problem and causing a cycle of violent acts in environments including schools (Choi B, 2021). This triggers children's tendency to view physical violence as an effective way to solve problems, hindering their learning process towards better social responses.

There have been many studies showing the negative outcomes and consequences of using corporal punishment on children. Some of the negative impacts of spanking are seen in early to late childhood. Corporal punishment has been associated with antisocial behavior in both children and adolescents (Geoff Ward et al., 2021). Children who are spanked or hit as a form of discipline have higher rates of mental health disorders later in life, such as anxiety, substance abuse, and long-term major depressive disorder (Azad & Sunny, 2023; Chen et al., 2021). For parents and teachers, it is important to practice peaceful parenting, parents should be supported in learning appropriate teaching approaches to children, should increase self-efficacy in parenting, and an understanding of positive teaching is needed (Azad & Sunny, 2023). Children who had been struck or physically abused demonstrated heightened activation in several medial and lateral prefrontal cortex regions—including the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, bilateral frontal pole, and left middle frontal gyrus—when responding to fearful rather than neutral facial expressions, compared to children who had not been hit. These results indicate that spanking may modify neural processing of environmental threats in a manner similar to the neural patterns associated with more severe forms of maltreatment (Cuartas et al., 2021).

The results show that how children perceive social norms can influence how strong the relationship between the use of corporal punishment and their behavioral adjustment is. Specifically, if children perceive the corporal punishment they receive as common, they are less likely to perceive the negative impact on their behavior. When children believe that the punishment, they receive is in line with what their peers experience, they are more likely to internalize the discipline messages given by their parents. Thus, if a child perceives their parents' treatment as normal, the discipline is less likely to lead to undesirable behavior (Neaverson et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that while perceived social norms may reduce the negative impact of corporal punishment, cultural or ethnic differences only influence how much of an impact it has. On the other hand, regardless of how children perceive social norms, corporal punishment remains ineffective as a way to correct unwanted behavior. Therefore, parents are encouraged to refrain from using corporal punishment, mental health professionals should counsel families and advocate against its use, and policymakers need to implement strategies that raise public awareness about its risks and promote effective non-violent disciplinary alternatives (Gershoff et al., 2018).

However, it is likely that corporal punishment is more prevalent in parent–child relationships with lower levels of warmth, which may increase the risk of externalizing behaviors in children who experience frequent physical discipline (Li et al., 2022). However, further research is needed to examine the role of parental warmth in regulating the effects of corporal punishment on child and adolescent development. Children who receive corporal punishment at home also experience various difficulties at school. More specifically, research findings demonstrate that corporal punishment is linked to poorer academic achievement, reduced cognitive functioning, and increased feelings of isolation at school, particularly in relation to peer interactions. (Font & Cage, 2018; Stephen & Alfred, 2022).



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Table 1. Data Extraction

No	Author, Year	Country	Methods	Aims	Themes	Result
1.	(Poulsen, 2019)	Australia	Contemporary and online literature survey	To look at the incidence of family violence	1) Prevention of child homicide 2) The context of family violence 3) Policy development against violence and corporal punishment	Preventing family violence and child abuse is an Australian government priority; however, corporal punishment (CP) or physical punishment is one type of family violence that has not been adequately addressed. Adverse consequences linked to child maltreatment include aggression, perpetrating abuse, and involvement in violent behavior later in adulthood. Understanding how widespread corporal punishment is, along with its patterns, duration, and intensity, is essential for building a comprehensive ecological perspective on family violence and serves as a foundational component of prevention-focused policy initiatives.
2.	(Weidi Liu et al., 2021)	Shanghai, Tiongkok	Quantitative-Cross sectional	The role of approval of violence and low self-control in explaining how parental corporal punishment contributes to aggressive behavior in adolescents.as well as investigating whether intervention mechanisms operate differently according to different levels of parental responses and demands.	1) Intervention mechanism 2) Punishment context if there is a difference with parents	Provides stronger empirical support for collective initiatives aimed at reducing aggressive behavior in adolescents by eliminating the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method. The intervention can also reduce adolescent aggression through developing resilience, increasing self-control and emotion management, fostering moral beliefs that disapprove of violence, resilience, improving self-control and emotion management, fostering moral beliefs that disapprove of violence.
3.	(Neaverson et al., 2020)	UK	Longitudinal research-quantitative	To find out self-control in protecting and providing protection and physical legal exposure obtained by children to adolescents	1) Self-control of parents 2) Internal public of child - youth violence	The connection between corporal punishment, self-control, and aggression continues to be relevant throughout adolescence. Evidence shows that this relationship stays significant over time, as both current and concurrent levels of corporal punishment and self-control consistently predict aggressive behavior, regardless of the child's stage of development.



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4	(Li et al., 2022)	Ghuangzhou China	Qualitative	Testing potential mediators linking parental corporal punishment to aggressive behavior	Aggressive behavior	Victimization experiences act as an intermediary pathway that links parental corporal punishment to heightened aggressive behavior in adolescents.
5.	(Heilmann et al., 2021)	England	Quasi experimental	Knowing the punishment corporal punishment in a format accessible to policymakers, community leaders, and practitioners policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners.	Corporal punishment leads to continuation of the case	Corporal punishment is linked to negative developmental outcomes for children. Considering how widespread its use remains, all nations should respond to the UN's appeal to protect children's rights and support their well-being by banning corporal punishment in every setting and situation.
6.	(Bender et al., 2017)	USA	Qualitative	Exploring how strict or harsh parental discipline is connected to the quality of relationships between parents and their teenage children.	Symptoms of externalization and internalization. The influence of parenting on the incidence of violence in children - adolescents	Building autonomy while maintaining relationships with parents, in adolescents with harsh discipline.
7.	(Azad & Sunny, 2023)	Bangladesh	Qualitative and report study	Understanding the effects of corporal punishment, the parenting practices that shape it, and the diverse cultural views on CP within Bangladesh.	Change the disciplinary administration for those who commit violence against children	The following initiatives are extended to implement positive discipline for better impact in the prohibition of corporal punishment, especially at home and school: 1) Encourage the use of calm, nonviolent parenting practices; 2) Provide parents with support and guidance in adopting effective teaching strategies; 3)Strengthen parents' confidence in their own parenting abilities; 4) Ensure parents gain knowledge about positive discipline methods; 5) Help shift the common belief that parent-child conflict is caused by intentional misbehavior; and 6) Reduce parents' negative emotional reactions (such as disappointment) when their children face difficulties.



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8.	(Cuartas et al., 2021)	Washington DC	Qualitative	Investigated how spanking relates to children's neural reactions to fearful facial expressions, which signal potential environmental threats.	The emotional impact on nerves that occurs and can result in public violence.	Findings indicate that spanking is linked to unusual patterns of brain activity in areas typically affected by more severe physical or sexual abuse. Increasing research shows that spanking is connected to poorer cognitive and behavioral outcomes, as well as altered neural responses to threatening emotional cues in children. Therefore, the United States and other nations should work to eliminate corporal punishment in line with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
9.	(Chen et al., 2021)	Taiwan	Qualitative	Understanding how parental use of corporal punishment relates to children's disciplinary behavior.	Parents' belief in the physical punishment given to their children. The onset of depression due to child abuse	The findings suggest that the effects of parental corporal punishment on children's depressive symptoms and engagement in violent behavior depend on whether the punishment is delivered directly by the parents. Consequently, interventions aimed at reducing depression and violent tendencies in Taiwanese children should incorporate strategies that address the use of corporal punishment within the family context.
10.	(Bassam et al., 2018)	Lebanon	Quantitative-Cross sectional	Assess the extent of Lebanese pediatricians' knowledge about corporal punishment, as well as their responsibilities in prevention, education, and legal advocacy.	1) Assess pediatricians' understanding of what constitutes corporal punishment, its prevalence, and its effects on children's physical health and behavioral problems. 2) Assess how often pediatricians take action (discuss and advise parents) related to corporal punishment. 3) Examine the extent to which pediatricians seek information about legal reforms in other countries that ban the use of corporal punishment. 4) Examine physicians' perspectives on their	Ending corporal punishment is an urgent social and public health priority, and pediatricians are central to this effort. Eliminating corporal punishment requires comprehensive family education, which depends on enhancing pediatricians' skills and implementing legal reforms in Lebanon that ban the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method.



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responsibilities in educating about corporal punishment within the pediatric curriculum, their role in offering guidance in clinical and hospital settings, their involvement in residency training and training provided through the Lebanese Pediatric Society, as well as their responsibilities within the legal framework.

This literature review has several limitations. Due to its limited scope, it was not possible to examine all available research on the topic. Although the inclusion criteria were consistently applied, differences in how individual studies defined and measured key constructs may have resulted in varying interpretations of the findings. Finally, cultural context must be acknowledged, as cultural norms and beliefs significantly influence how physical discipline is practiced, perceived, and reported by both parents and children. Cooke (2021) reported that the existence of a racist culture towards the color of a child's skin also led to different perceptions of maturation through corporal punishment. The research suggests that African-American children receive more severe consequences (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). Future studies need to consider cultural differences in how children and their parents or caregivers perceive corporal punishment. This review focused exclusively on studies investigating the use of corporal punishment by parents or caregivers as a method of discipline. The evidence reviewed indicates that such practices in the home may negatively influence children's behavior, including within school settings. Further studies could also examine the effects of corporal punishment administered in educational environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic review provides comprehensive evidence that the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy is associated with an increased likelihood of behavioral difficulties across childhood and adolescence. Across the reviewed studies, corporal punishment was consistently linked to a range of adverse outcomes, including externalizing behaviors, emotional dysregulation, and social adjustment problems. Importantly, while cultural norms and broader social environments may influence how corporal punishment is perceived and practiced, the harmful associations were observed across diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental contexts. This suggests that cultural acceptance does not mitigate the negative developmental consequences of physical punishment. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the effects of corporal punishment are not confined to the home environment. Children exposed to physical punishment by caregivers are more likely to experience difficulties in school settings, including behavioral problems, impaired peer relationships, and challenges in academic engagement. These patterns highlight the cumulative and cross-contextual nature of the harm associated with corporal punishment, underscoring its potential to disrupt multiple domains of child and adolescent development.

Overall, the evidence synthesized in this review demonstrates that corporal punishment is not only ineffective in promoting positive behavior but also unnecessary and detrimental across developmental stages. Given its consistent association with negative outcomes, corporal punishment should be recognized as a significant public health and child protection concern. Therefore, it is imperative for policymakers, educators, and health professionals to collaborate in discouraging the use of corporal punishment and in promoting safer, evidence-based disciplinary approaches. Open dialogue between government institutions, schools, and families, alongside public education and supportive parenting interventions, is essential to raise awareness of the harmful effects of physical punishment and to foster non-violent disciplinary practices that support healthy child and adolescent development.

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