

Corporal Punishment as a Stressor Among Youth

This article addresses the impact of corporal punishment by parents on the psychological well-being of youth. The present research used the National Youth Victimization Prevention Study (NYVPS), a nationally representative sample of 1,042 boys and 958 girls, ages 10–16. Based on a stress-process framework, we examine: (a) the effects of frequency of corporal punishment experienced by youth ages 10–16 on psychological distress and clinically relevant depression and (b) the moderating influence of parental support on the associations between corporal punishment and psychological outcomes. Controlling for sociodemographic factors and physical abuse, our findings indicate a positive association between the frequency of corporal punishment and both psychological distress and depression. Although distress is greatest at higher frequencies of punishment, the association is also present at low and moderate levels of corporal punishment. An interaction between corporal punishment and parental support was also evident, showing that the impact of frequent punishment relative to no corporal punishment was greater in the context of high parental support.

Corporal punishment or physical punishment refers to "the use of physical force with the inten-

tion of causing a child pain, but not injury, for purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior" (Straus & Donnelly, 1993, p. 420). The corporal punishment of children by parents is a normative form of discipline in our society. In fact, spanking and slapping children are not only considered acceptable, but generally believed to be highly effective and quite necessary. Straus (1991) found that 84% of a national sample of adults agreed that a "good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary." Parents who refuse to use corporal punishment on children are viewed as too lenient and ineffective—in essence, "poor" parents (Carson, 1986).

Consistent with these norms, almost all parents use corporal punishment on their toddlers (Straus, 1991, 1994). While the prevalence of corporal punishment declines with the age of the child, it still remains high even into adolescence. Recently, Straus and Donnelly (1993) found that almost half of the children in early adolescence experience corporal punishment by a parent. Moreover, adolescents report being physically punished at a median frequency of four times per year. Straus and Donnelly suggest that this is likely a lower bound estimate, since it only includes punishment from one parent.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AS A CHILDHOOD STRESSOR

A variety of negative health and behavioral outcomes suggests that acts involving physical punishment are stressful for children. The most well-

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Key Words: corporal punishment, depression, parental support, psychological distress, stress, youth.

known outcome of corporal punishment is that it increases violent behavior by the punished child (Larzelere, 1986; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1977; Maurer, 1974; Parke & Slaby, 1983; Straus, 1991). For example, Straus (1991) found that children who received "ordinary" corporal punishment were 3 times more likely to assault siblings than those who were never physically punished. Similarly, Larzelere (1986) reported a linear relationship, across several age groups of children, between frequency of corporal punishment and aggressive acts.

Although most research on the effects of physical punishment has focused on child aggression, other negative effects on behavior and health have been reported also. For example, several studies related physical punishment to depression in children (Holmes & Robins, 1988; Maurer, 1974; Straus, 1994). Bryan and Freed (1982) found that college students who were physically punished in childhood manifested several long-term effects, including having fewer friends and a greater frequency of negative social interactions, as well as elevated levels of depression and anxiety. Similarly, Straus and Kaufman-Kantor (1994) found that corporal punishment experienced in teenage years was positively associated with drinking problems, depressive symptoms, and thoughts of suicide.

Past studies concerning the effects of general parenting styles or strategies on child development also point to corporal punishment as a potential childhood stressor. For example, parenting styles defined as "authoritarian," "power assertive," "coersive," or "harsh" (all of which include an emphasis on physical discipline) have repeatedly been related to aggression in children (Anthony, 1970; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1972; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Authoritarian-type parenting also has been associated with children having less social competence with their peers, developing an external rather than an internal moral orientation, and showing less motivation for intellectual achievement relative to children of nonauthoritarian parents (Hoffman, 1970; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Bryan and Freed (1982) found that college students who reported receiving high levels of corporal punishment as children or adolescents were more likely than those who experienced less corporal punishment to describe their grades as "below average," even though there was no actual difference in their grades. The investigators attributed this to the damaging effect of corporal

punishment on self-concept. In fact, a number of scholars have suggested that authoritarian discipline, which emphasizes the use of physical punishment, contributes to negative self-judgments (self-esteem), as well as lower perceived personal control (mastery) over life outcomes (Belsky, Learner, & Spanier, 1984; Bongiovanni, 1979; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Patterson, 1982). As Pearlin (1989) argued, these two aspects of self-concept, self-esteem and mastery, can influence the extent to which stress becomes translated into psychological distress.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility that children with behavioral and emotional difficulties or both may be more likely to elicit physical punishment than children without such problems. In other words, it is possible that the causal direction of a cross-sectional association between frequency of corporal punishment and negative behavioral and psychological problems runs from the child to corporal punishment. While this interpretation is plausible, there is sufficient theoretical and empirical justification for assuming that at least some important part of this association is due to the causal impact of corporal punishment. In fact, a recent longitudinal study demonstrating the influence of corporal punishment on subsequent increases in antisocial behavior (Sugarman, Straus, & Giles-Sims, 1994), strongly supports the idea that corporal punishment is a causal factor for negative outcomes. Since depressed mood seems less likely to elicit punishment than antisocial behavior and, therefore, is even less susceptible to the alternative interpretation, we are confident that a significant part of an association between corporal punishment and child distress is due to the causal impact of corporal punishment on children's well-being.

Research on the consequences of corporal punishment runs the risk of confounding corporal punishment with physical abuse. Evidence that physical abuse represents a serious childhood trauma is well established (see National Research Council, 1993), and much of the debate concerning the effects of corporal punishment centers on whether this form of punishment has negative effects that are independent of abusive family contexts. While corporal punishment is common in nonabusive families, parents who *are* physically abusive also tend to use large amounts of corporal punishment (Straus, 1994). Unfortunately, much of the research on corporal punishment has not disentangled its effects from those of physical abuse.

A STRESS-PROCESS FRAMEWORK

Given evidence concerning the potential negative effects of corporal punishment on the well-being of children, the stress-process framework may represent a particularly useful approach for studying these issues. The stress-process model has been a widely used and effective conceptual framework for examining the link between the social environment and individual consequences. Stress research on both adults and children has clearly documented the negative impact of stressful events and circumstances on the physical and psychological health of individuals. However, while there have been studies that consider the negative effects of corporal punishment, the social stress literature generally has not recognized the experience of corporal punishment as a childhood stressor. And although important research on the corporal punishment of children can be found in parenting and child development literatures, most of this research has been conducted in the context of trying to understand the development of aggressive behavior in children. Placing corporal punishment within a stress model may allow for better theoretical development of the processes by which corporal punishment affects mental health.

For example, research on sources of stress has shown that life events perceived as negative, unexpected, or uncontrollable have the most potential to elicit negative responses (Thoits, 1983). To the extent that corporal punishment has these qualities, it may more likely result in psychological distress. Chronic strain, another important source of stress (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981), is also relevant to corporal punishment and its effects. Unlike life events, chronic strains do not have a discrete onset and ending, but represent more enduring conditions in people's lives. Corporal punishment that is very frequent may become an ongoing hardship for children. Some investigators believe that these more chronic conditions have the greatest potential for producing negative effects (Pearlin, 1989).

Part of the utility of the stress-process approach is its consideration of the social and personal contexts in which a stressor occurs. People vary considerably in the extent to which they are affected by potential stressors. At least part of this difference in response to stressors is due to variations in stress moderators. That is, individuals may possess certain social or personal resources that buffer the negative effects of stress, while

other factors may function to exacerbate its impact. Turner (in press) outlines a number of contexts or conditions under which corporal punishment is administered that may influence its outcome. One potential moderating influence is the degree to which children receive social support from their parents. Children who experience their parents as nurturant and supportive may be less adversely affected by corporal punishment. Parental support may increase the child's confidence, self-esteem, and ability to cope with stressful circumstances, making corporal punishment less distressing. Since social support buffers the negative effects of stress in numerous other contexts (see Cohen & Syme, 1985), there is reason to expect that support would also reduce the harmful impact of this childhood stressor.

While, given past research, we might expect parental support to reduce the negative impact of corporal punishment, an alternative hypothesis is worth considering. Since, in the present context, both the stress and the support experienced by the child arise from the same source (the parent), a different set of processes may take place. Rather than serve as a buffer, high parental support may create a context in which the child experiences incidents of physical punishment as inconsistent, confusing, and especially distressing. Children with high parental support may have greater emotional attachments to their parents, and, as a result, may be more negatively affected when parents are the sources of stress. If this were the case, high parental support might function to exacerbate, rather than reduce, the negative effects of corporal punishment.

In the context of this stress-process framework, the objectives of the present study are to: (a) examine the impact of corporal punishment (independent of physical abuse) on psychological distress and depression among youth aged 10-16 and (b) assess the role of perceived parental support as a contextual factor that may affect these associations.

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

The present study uses data from the National Youth Victimization Prevention Study (NYVPS), conducted in 1992. The NYVPS, designed to address child victimization and prevention of victimization, consists of a nationally representative sample of 1,042 boys and 958 girls between the

ages of 10 and 16 and their parents or guardians. The sample was randomly selected within geographical regions, with sample allocations proportional to the population distribution. Households were contacted by phone through random digit dialing and screened for the presence of eligible children. Interviewers first spoke with a parent or guardian in each household, asking him or her questions concerning the prevention of child victimization and explaining the purpose of the study. Then parental consent to interview the selected child was obtained. After making contact with the child, interviewers again explained the objectives of the study, obtained consent, and proceeded with a telephone interview. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour in length.

The participation rate was 88% for the parents or guardians contacted. Eighty-two percent of the selected children with consenting parents or guardians agreed to participate. We believe telephone interviewing is a relatively effective means of surveying young people. Children of this age generally spend considerable time talking on the telephone with friends, often about personal subjects. Moreover, telephone interviews give children a great deal of control over a potentially threatening situation. By simply hanging up, they can terminate the interview, something much more difficult in a face-to-face encounter. We believe the participation rate is quite respectable, given the sensitive topic, the length of the interview, and the required consent of two individuals.

The final sample matched census statistics for the U.S. population in this age group. The sample was 10% Black, 7% Hispanic, 3% other races, including Asian and Native American. Fourteen percent of the sample came from families with incomes of less than \$20,000 a year. Fifteen percent were living with a single parent, another 13% with a parent and step-parent, and 3% with a non-parental guardian. Given equal probability of selection into the sample with no systematic oversampling, the data were analyzed without weights.

Measures

Corporal punishment. A number of questions about disciplinary action by parents were asked. Within this context, respondents indicated how often they were spanked, slapped, or hit by parents or guardians within the past year. This operationalization of corporal punishment is similar to that used in other studies (Straus & Donnelly,

1993). Even though it is legal to hit a child with an object (a belt, paddle, or stick) as long as no serious injury results, we excluded hitting with objects from our measure. By excluding corporal punishment with objects, we created a conservative measure of corporal punishment that we believe reduces the chance of including behaviors considered abusive. Thus, we think our measure represents what most Americans would view as "normal" physical punishment.

The original measure ranges from 0 (never spanked, slapped, or hit within the past year) to 5 (spanked, slapped, or hit more than once a week). Much of the public policy debate, however, concerns whether moderate or infrequent corporal punishment is helpful or hurtful. Therefore, we wanted to determine if *any* physical punishment or *low* levels of physical punishment are detrimental, or whether it is only when corporal punishment is relatively frequent that it has negative effects on the well-being of youth. In defining levels of corporal punishment, we reasoned that one or two incidents of corporal punishment per year likely represent rare, last resort efforts at discipline, whereas frequent punishment of one or more times a month is more likely to reflect corporal punishment as a preferred strategy of discipline. Moderate levels of punishment fall between these low and frequent levels. Therefore, we constructed four dummy variables: no physical punishment in the past year (1 = none, 0 = other), low physical punishment (1 = once or twice in the last year, 0 = other), moderate (1 = 3–11 times in the last year, 0 = other), and frequent (1 = 1 or more times a month, 0 = other).

Psychological distress. A measure of psychological distress based on the mean score of five items was constructed. Respondents indicated how often in the past month they "were sad," "felt alone," "felt bad about school," "felt bad about their looks," "felt they were doing things wrong" on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* (0) to *always* (3), with a mean score of .82 ($SD = .44$). The reliability coefficient for this scale is .60. Although this alpha coefficient is rather low, a factor analysis reveals only one factor, and each item is similarly related to the underlying construct. Since low reliability generally attenuates associations, we anticipate that the strength of relationships found between distress and the predictor variables will represent lower bound estimates. Analyses involving this variable should be considered largely exploratory.

Depression. Using a modified version of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS; see Robins, Helzer, Crougham, Williams, & Spitzer, 1981), a dichotomous measure of depression was constructed. Following DSM-III guidelines, children who had a period of 2 weeks or longer when they felt unhappy or lost interest in things they usually liked to do and who experienced 5 out of the 11 depression-congruent symptoms during this period were classified as depressed. We departed from the DIS format by asking respondents whether they had "ever" experienced the screening events, rather than whether they had experienced them "in the past 6 months." However, only youth who met the DIS criteria and indicated on an additional screener that they had felt sad many times or all the time in the *past month* were included in the depressed category. Therefore, the youth in our sample who were classified as depressed had experienced a Major Depressive Syndrome at some point in their lives, and it could be assumed that they were experiencing significant negative affect in the month preceding the interview.

On the basis of this procedure, a total of 107 youth, 5.4% of the total sample, were classified as depressed. This percentage is within the range of prevalence estimates of current depression or depression experienced within the last 6 months derived from other child and adolescent samples (see Fleming & Offord, 1990).

Parental support. Respondents' mean scores on five items reflecting the supportive quality of the respondents' relationships with their parent(s) or guardian(s) were used to construct a measure of parental support. Respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* (0) to *always* (4) questions such as: "Do they trust you?", "If you were in trouble would you talk to them?", "Do you and your parents have fun together?" This yielded a mean of 3.7 ($SD = .65$). The alpha coefficient for this scale is .67.

Sociodemographics. Since both corporal punishment and psychological outcomes are likely to vary by child and family background characteristics, three sociodemographic factors were considered. Specifically, ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic regression analyses included age, gender, and parent's income as control variables. Age was coded in years, from 10 to 16. Gender was dummy coded (1 = male, 2 = female). Par-

ent's yearly income was coded into the midpoints of 10 categories, ranging from \$2,500 to \$125,000.

Physical abuse. Past studies have found correlations between the frequency of "normative" physical punishment and the occurrence of physical abuse (Straus, 1994). For this reason, a dummy variable indicating whether the child had *ever* experienced a completed or attempted incident of severe physical assault by a parent or guardian was included as a control variable (0 = no physical assault ever, 1 = at least one incident). Specifically, respondents received a score of 1 if they answered positively to one or both of the following: (a) "Has [a parent or guardian] ever pushed you around, hit you, or tried to beat you up?" or (b) "Has [a parent or guardian] gotten so mad or out of control you thought they were really going to hurt you badly?" Respondents who indicated that during an episode of physical punishment by parents they were "hit so hard they bled or had to go to the hospital" were also given a score of 1 on physical abuse.

RESULTS

The sample is relatively evenly divided between males and females (52.1% male, 47.9% female). The age distribution of the sample is also relatively uniform, with each of the 10–16-year-old groups representing between 11.3% and 16.3% of the sample. The mean parental income was \$43,544 per year ($SD = \$26,770$). Almost 5% of the respondents had experienced some type of severe physical assault by a parent or guardian at some point in their lives.

Approximately 30% of the sample of youth had been physically punished within the past year. Almost 17% experienced a "low" frequency of corporal punishment (once or twice in the past year). Five and one-half percent reported "moderate" frequencies of physical punishment (3–11 times in the past year), and almost 7% reported frequent corporal punishment of at least once a month.

In order to examine the association between psychological distress and corporal punishment, several OLS regression analyses were performed. These analyses are presented in Table 1. In the first equation, distress is regressed on the set of three dummy variables for corporal punishment (low, moderate, and frequent). Thus, in these (and subsequent) analyses, respondents who experi-

enced no corporal punishment represent the comparison group. The smaller sample size seen in these analyses is due to missing values, primarily on the income variable. Results indicate that, although the overall variance explained by corporal punishment is relatively small, all levels of corporal punishment are significantly related to psychological distress. Moreover, these associations remain statistically significant when the sociodemographic control variables (sex, age, and parental income) are added to the equation.

Since other studies (e.g., Straus, 1994) have found a correlation between the frequency of corporal punishment and severe forms of physical child abuse, we believed it was important to include a measure of physical abuse as a control. That is, since we are interested in the potential impact of "normative" physical punishment on psychological outcomes, we wanted to consider its effect, net of physical abuse. Equation 3 includes a measure of the occurrence of physical abuse as a control variable. Although physical abuse is significantly related to distress, it does not account for the effect of corporal punishment. The corporal punishment coefficients remain statistically significant and are not appreciably reduced when the effects of abuse are controlled. While a high frequency of corporal punishment (more than one incident a month) had the greatest

effect on distress ($b = .286, \beta = .163, p < .001$), the less frequently punished groups were also significantly affected. In fact, respondents who had experienced corporal punishment only once or twice in the past year had significantly higher distress scores than those who were never physically punished ($b = .125, \beta = .106, p < .001$). The moderate group (3–10 times a year) fell between the low and severe groups ($b = .257, \beta = .133, p < .001$). These associations exist independent of age, gender, parent's income, and the occurrence of physical abuse.

Another frequent argument in the debate over corporal punishment is that, if administered in an otherwise loving environment, corporal punishment will not have negative effects. In this view, it is primarily corporal punishment given by an angry, rejecting parent that leads to problems. Indeed, in taking a stress-process approach, we would expect the impact of corporal punishment as a stressor to be conditional upon the social context. Therefore, another objective of this research was to examine the impact of parental support on the association between corporal punishment and psychological outcomes. In particular, we wished to determine whether parental support buffers the detrimental effect of physical punishment on distress.

TABLE 1. PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS REGRESSED ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT (EQUATION 1).
CONTROLLING FOR SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS (EQUATION 2) AND PHYSICAL ABUSE (EQUATION 3)

Variables	Equation 1		Equation 2		Equation 3	
	Regression Coefficient SE	β	Regression Coefficient SE	β	Regression Coefficient SE	β
Corporal punishment						
Low	.114*** (.028)	.097	.143*** (.027)	.121	.125*** (.028)	.106
Moderate	.234*** (.046)	.121	.265*** (.049)	.137	.257*** (.044)	.133
Frequent	.236*** (.042)	.134	.301*** (.041)	.171	.286*** (.041)	.163
Sex			.162*** (.020)	.185	.159*** (.020)	.189
Age			.042*** (.005)	.184	.040*** (.005)	.177
Parent's income			-.000 (.000)	-.021	-.000 (.000)	-.017
Any physical abuse					.201*** (.047)	.098
R ²	.034		.106		.115	
N = 1,704						

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS REGRESSED ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, CONTROL VARIABLES, PARENTAL SUPPORT (EQUATION 1), AND SUPPORT/CORPORAL PUNISHMENT INTERACTION (EQUATION 2)

Variables	Equation 1		Equation 2	
	Regression Coefficient SE	β	Regression Coefficient SE	β
Corporal punishment				
Low	.073** (.026)	.061	.072** (.026)	.061
Moderate	.183*** (.042)	.095	.168*** (.043)	.087
Frequent	.196*** (.039)	.111	.233** (.040)	.132
Sex	.166*** (.019)	.189	.168*** (.019)	.191
Age	.016** (.005)	.070	.016** (.005)	.070
Parent's income	-.000 (.000)	-.019	-.000 (.000)	-.020
Any physical abuse	.127** (.045)	.061	.135** (.045)	.066
Parental support	-.222** (.015)	-.330	-.224*** (.016)	-.333
Interactions				
Low \times support			.027 (.038)	.015
Moderate \times support			-.045 (.056)	-.020
Frequent \times support			.193*** (.054)	.081
R^2	.208		.215	
$N = 1,704$				

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

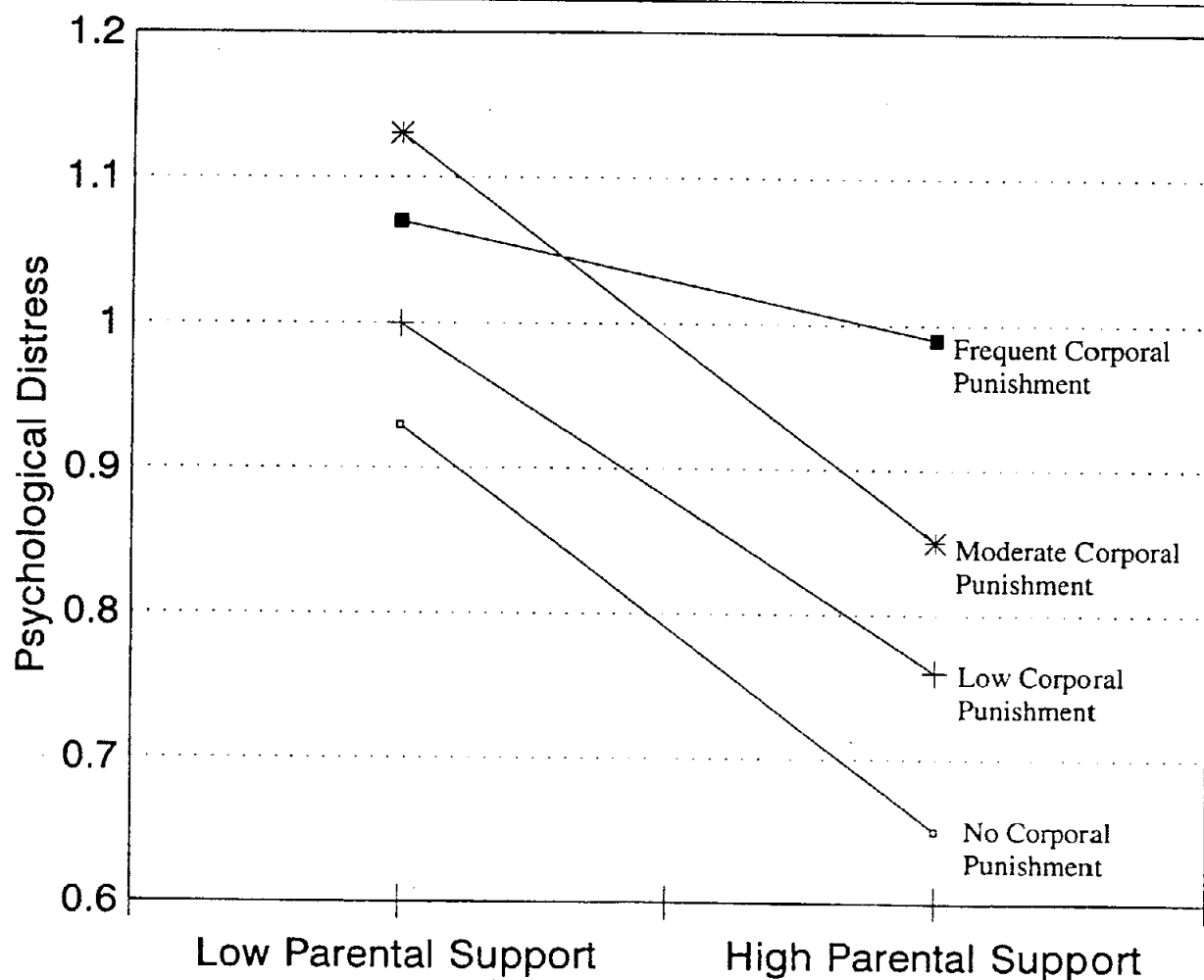
To examine this, we added parental support to the equation and then tested for a statistical interaction between each level of corporal punishment and support. As shown in Equation 1 of Table 2, parental support has a strong negative effect on level of psychological distress experienced by these youth ($\beta = -.330$, $p < .001$), independent of corporal punishment, physical abuse, and the sociodemographic factors. However, all levels of corporal punishment still have positive effects on distress, independent of parental support.

In Equation 2, the three interaction terms were added to the model. Results indicate that parental support interacted with corporal punishment among the frequently punished group. Thus, among those experiencing a high frequency of corporal punishment, its effect on distress is conditional upon the level of parental support experienced. However, the direction of this interaction is contrary to our expectations. The stress-process

model predicts that corporal punishment will have a more detrimental effect when there is low parental support. That is, we expected that the association between distress and frequent corporal punishment would be greater under conditions of low support. In this analysis, however, the effect of frequent corporal punishment relative to no punishment is greater in the context of high parental support. In other words, parental support is less influential among youth experiencing frequent corporal punishment. In addition to the statistical interaction, both frequent corporal punishment and parental support still show substantial main effects on psychological distress.

Figure 1 graphs the adjusted mean distress scores of the corporal punishment groups (frequent, moderate, low, none) separately for those reporting low and high parental support. As the graph indicates, parental support affects psychological distress in an important way. For all cor-

FIGURE 1. ADJUSTED MEAN DISTRESS SCORES FOR LOW AND HIGH PARENTAL SUPPORT AMONG LOW, MODERATE, AND SEVERE CORPORAL PUNISHMENT GROUPS



Note: Scores are adjusted for age, sex, parental income, and physical abuse.

poral punishment groups, we see a decrease in distress when parental support is high. However, the magnitude of this decrease is considerably smaller among the frequently punished group. Viewed another way, the difference in distress scores between frequently punished youth and those who were never physically punished is much greater among those who report high parental support.

Further examination of the frequently punished group shows that the sex and age distribution of respondents reporting high parental support is significantly different from those reporting low support (analyses not shown). Specifically, youth who report both a high frequency of physical punishment and high parental support are more likely to be male and are younger than youth who experience frequent punishment but perceive low support. In fact, 57% of those reporting both high punishment and high support

are under 12 years old, and none is 15 or 16 years old.

While the analyses presented thus far focus on the relationship between corporal punishment and a more general measure of distress, we also wished to determine the potential impact of physical punishment on depression. For these analyses, we performed a multivariate logistic regression using the dichotomous measure of clinically relevant depression described earlier as the outcome variable. Odds ratios, reported in Table 3, were calculated by exponentiating the logistic coefficients. These odds ratios can be interpreted as the relative odds of depression among respondents who differ by one unit on the predictor variable. For example, results indicate that the odds of depression are 3.19 times higher for females relative to males, independent of the other variables.

TABLE 3. LOGISTIC REGRESSION
PREDICTING YOUTH DEPRESSION

	Odds Ratios (95% Confidence Intervals)	
Sex	3.19***	(2.70–3.68)
Age	1.26***	(1.13–1.39)
Parental income	.95	(0.84–1.06)
Physical abuse	2.12*	(1.44–2.80)
Corporal punishment		
Low	1.17	(0.57–1.77)
Moderate	1.56	(0.72–2.40)
Frequent	2.95**	(2.22–3.68)
Parental support	.31***	(0.00–0.64)
N = 1,704		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

With respect to corporal punishment, only the frequently punished group had a greater odds of depression relative to those who were not physically punished. Specifically, the odds for depression were almost 3 times higher for those experiencing frequent corporal punishment. Both the low and moderate corporal punishment groups were not significantly different on odds of depression from the group experiencing no corporal punishment. Results also indicate that increases in parental support substantially reduced the odds of depression. Statistical interactions between parental support and the dummy variables for corporal punishment were tested, but were not statistically significant.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The present research supports the conclusion that corporal punishment represents a potential source of stress among youth. Of central importance are the findings that corporal punishment significantly contributes to both psychological distress and depression. Although physical abuse by a parent also has negative psychological consequences for the child, physical punishment within the past year is related to distress and depression, independent of abuse. Especially significant are the findings concerning the impact of different frequencies of corporal punishment on psychological distress. Although respondents in the most severe punishment category are the most affected, even low levels of physical punishment (once or twice a year) appear to contribute to feelings of distress. Findings also indicate that corporal punishment is related to a measure of clinically relevant depression, although only for respondents experiencing a high frequency of physical punishment. Thus, while any physical punishment appears to be dis-

tressing, only very frequent physical punishment (one or more times a month) appears to contribute to major depression. Consistent with past research, females and older youth (adolescents) experience greater psychological distress and greater odds of depression than do males and younger youth (pre-adolescents).

The association between corporal punishment and psychological distress is partly conditional upon how supportive the parents were perceived to be. Among respondents who experienced a high frequency of physical punishment, low parental support reduced, rather than accentuated, the negative impact of physical punishment on distress. That is, parental support in this context did not buffer the stress of frequent corporal punishment. Instead, the magnitude of the positive association between frequent physical punishment and distress was stronger among those reporting high parental support.

While it is not entirely clear why these findings emerged, a number of explanations seem plausible. For example, it is possible that parents who are highly supportive *and* who frequently administer corporal punishment tend to be more inconsistent and arbitrary in their parenting practices. The tendency for parents to be unpredictable—sometimes nurturant, sometimes physically aggressive—may be particularly distressing. Indeed, the child development literature emphasizes the importance of consistency in parenting for healthy development. Moreover, stress research has found that life events perceived as unexpected are more likely to be stressful and result in negative outcomes than events that are anticipated. To the extent that corporal punishment by highly supportive parents more often has this unexpected quality, youth who experience both high support and frequent physical punishment may be at risk for increased psychological distress.

An alternative explanation of why parental support may be less beneficial for respondents experiencing frequent corporal punishment concerns differences in respondents' attributions about their parents' behavior. Perceiving parents as less supportive in the context of being frequently spanked, slapped, or hit may have a self-preserving function by allowing children to attribute their parents' "violent" responses to their being "mean" or "unfair." On the other hand, children who perceive parents as nurturant, fun, and trusting at the same time that they are frequently hit by them may attribute the physical punishment to their own inadequacies or inabilities. Children

with highly supportive parents may also be more emotionally attached and likely to identify with their parents. Greater identification may make the parent's "violent" responses more hurtful than if the child was more detached from the parent. These latter interpretations are consistent with the fact that most youth who report both severe punishment and high parental support are under 12 years old, rather than teenagers. Younger youth are probably more attached to their parents and less able to evaluate parents negatively, even when punished frequently, because they have not yet started identifying with peers and disengaging from parents to the same extent as older youth.

These findings, of course, do not imply that children or adolescents are better off with less supportive parents. On the contrary, of all variables considered, parental support proved the most powerful factor in reducing the level of distress and lowering the odds of depression among youth. The findings do suggest, however, that using physical punishment is not beneficial to the well-being of children or adolescents even in the context of a supportive parent-child relationship. In fact, this "loving" context may affect the meaning that children attach to the punishment, such that they are more likely to attribute it to their own failures and deficiencies, or experience the discipline as arbitrary and unexpected. Indeed, believing that "they spank me often because they love me" may be more distressing than believing that "they spank me often because we don't get along."

The findings of the present study are consistent with other research linking parenting behavior with child and adolescent outcomes. For example, Patterson (1982) describes how "inept discipline," which includes the use of physical forms of punishment, can set in motion a long chain of negative outcomes. Harsh discipline leads to antisocial behavior, which contributes to academic failure and social rejection. These conditions reduce self-esteem and create depressed mood, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of delinquency in adolescence and ultimately contribute to problems in marriage and work as adults. Patterson views parental discipline as the malleable determinant in this process. Indeed, his findings show that training parents to use nonphysical forms of punishment reduces the likelihood of negative outcomes. More recently, Ge, Conger, Lorenz, and Simons (1994) found that "harsh, hostile, and inconsistent parenting" by either mothers or fathers was significantly related to de-

pressive symptoms in adolescent boys and girls. They showed that such parenting practices can represent important mediating factors between stressful life events experienced by parents and adolescent depression.

The present study builds on this research by examining how more "normative" forms of discipline influence the psychological outcomes of youth. Although these past studies show that "inept," "inconsistent," or "harsh" parenting has negative outcomes, the current research suggests that even what most Americans consider "reasonable" levels of physical punishment can have negative effects on their children. While it may take very frequent physical punishment to affect clinical levels of depression, infrequent or moderate spanking of children can contribute to more general psychological distress.

A number of limitations of this research should be acknowledged. First, the measure of psychological distress used in this study has a relatively low internal reliability of .60. Although all the individual items load on only one factor, and although all are similarly related to the underlying construct, they are not highly consistent with one another. Since low reliability generally attenuates associations, the relationships found between distress and the predictor variables probably represent conservative estimates. This problem may also apply to the measure of parental support, since it too has only a moderate reliability of .67.

Another potential limitation is associated with the use of cross-sectional data. In these analyses, we are unable to actually establish the causal direction of the associations between corporal punishment and distress/depression. It is possible that distressed or depressed youth cause parents to adopt disciplinary styles that favor physical punishment. Moreover, distressed youth may be more likely to exhibit behavioral problems that, in turn, elicit physical punishment. Current states of distress or depression can also directly alter an individual's perceptions and can affect the accuracy of recall. Thus, as a result of their affective state, distressed or depressed youth may be more likely to perceive their parents in a negative light and overestimate the number of times they were physically punished. The fact that we were forced to rely on the child as a single source of information, including information about the parent's behavior, increases the chances of bias.

We were not able to measure a number of relevant and potentially important factors that might have helped to rule out alternative explanations or

better specify the processes involved. For example, measures of possible behavioral problems, such as child aggression, as well as measures of the parents' psychological dispositions could have provided additional insight. Finally, it is important to remember that this study focuses on youth between the ages of 10 and 16. The findings may not be generalizable to younger children.

In conclusion, this research adds to the growing body of literature showing the importance of family context in child and adolescent development. Disciplinary practices, even those that are viewed as ordinary and acceptable, may affect well-being in important ways. Moreover, the character of interpersonal relations within the family provides the context in which children interpret and respond to the actions of their parents. The stress-process model provides a useful framework for studying corporal punishment by taking into account both the qualities of the stressor and the social and personal contexts that may influence its impact. Further research on stress processes involving corporal punishment and its impact on children's development and well-being is clearly warranted.

NOTE

The authors would like to acknowledge the Boy Scouts of America for their support of this project. Survey research reported here was carried out by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalis, Inc.

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