

Corporal punishment of children remains common worldwide, UNC studies find

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This photo, taken by police, shows an 8-year-old boy with welts on his back after his father beat him with a belt. Credit: Image source: www.corpun.com

Spanking has declined in the U.S. since 1975 but nearly 80 percent of preschool children are still disciplined in this fashion. In addition, corporal punishment of children remains common worldwide, despite bans on corporal punishment that have been adopted in 24 countries since 1979.

These are some of the more thought-provoking findings reported in three separate, recently published studies of corporal punishment led by

researchers at the University of North Carolina Injury Prevention Research Center.

"The findings are stark. Harsh treatment of [children](#) was epidemic in all communities. Our data support the conclusions that maltreatment occurs in all nations," said Desmond Runyan, MD, DrPH, professor of social medicine at UNC and lead author of a study that conducted surveys in Egypt, India, Chile, the Philippines, Brazil and the U.S. to track international variations in corporal punishment.

Some findings of Runyan's study, published online Aug. 2 by the journal *Pediatrics*, include:

- Rates of harsh physical discipline revealed by the surveys were "dramatically higher" in all communities "than published rates of official physical abuse in any country."
- Mothers with fewer years of education more commonly used physical punishment.
- Rates of corporal punishment vary widely among communities within the same country. For example, both the highest and lowest rates of hitting a child on the buttocks with an object (such as a paddle) were found in different communities in India. (About one quarter of respondents in the U.S. sample used this form of punishment.)
- Harsh punishment of children by parents is not less common in countries other than the U.S. It may be more common, especially in low and middle income countries.

The other two studies were led by Adam J. Zolotor, MD, MPH, assistant professor of family medicine in the UNC School of Medicine. The first, published online in June by the journal *Child Abuse Review*, tracked corporal punishment and physical abuse trends for three-to-11-year-old children in the U.S. as demonstrated by four separate surveys conducted in 1975, 1985, 1995 (all national surveys) and 2002 (in North Carolina and South Carolina).

This study found that 18 percent fewer children were slapped or spanked by caregivers in 2002 compared to 1975. However, even after this decline, most preschool-aged children are spanked (79 percent), and nearly half of children ages eight and nine in the 2002 survey were hit with an object such as a paddle or switch.

"This study shows that the U.S., unlike most other high income countries, has had little change in the use of corporal punishment as commonplace," Zolotor said. "Given the weight of evidence that spanking does more harm than good, it is important that parents understand the full range of options for helping to teach their children. A bit of good news is that the decline in the use of harsher forms of punishment is somewhat more impressive."

The second study led by Zolotor was a systematic review of the laws and changes in attitudes and behaviors in countries that have adopted bans on corporal punishment since the passage of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1979. The United Nations adopted the convention in November 1989 and by September 1990, 20 nations signed on to enforce the treaty. Currently, 193 nations have signed on to enforce it, but the U.S. and Somalia have not. A bill that opposes signing of the convention, sponsored by Republican Sen. Jim Demint of South Carolina, is currently pending in the U.S. Senate and is supported by 30 senators, all Republicans.

Zolotor's second study was published online in July by Child Abuse Review and appears in the July/August 2010 print issue of the journal.

Findings of that study include:

- Although 24 countries have banned corporal punishment, this is only 12 per cent of the world's countries.
- Of the 24 countries with corporal punishment bans, 19 are in Europe, including all of the Scandinavian and near Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland). Three others are in Central or South America, one in the Middle East and one in Oceania (the region that includes Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Ocean island nations such as Malaysia and Indonesia).
- There are no national bans on corporal punishment anywhere in Asia or North America.
- National bans on corporal punishment are closely associated with declining popular support for corporal punishment and parent report of spanking. However, this decline seems to begin before the passage of such law. The association between such bans and [child abuse](#) are less clear, but studies suggest a decline in abuse following legal prohibition.

"This study shows us that, over 30 years after the passage of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations and after ratification by 193 member countries, a small number have supported this convention by explicit prohibition of corporal punishment. It also underscores the important relationship between social change and

legislative change," Zolotor said.

Provided by University of North Carolina School of Medicine

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