

Parents get physical with unruly kids, study finds

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Parents get physical with their misbehaving children in public much more than they show in laboratory experiments and acknowledge in surveys, according to one of the first real-world studies of caregiver discipline.

The study, led by Michigan State University's Kathy Stansbury, found that 23 percent of [youngsters](#) received some type of "negative touch" when they failed to comply with a parental request in public places such as restaurants and parks. Negative touch included arm pulling, pinching, slapping and spanking.

"I was very surprised to see what many people consider a socially undesirable behavior done by nearly a quarter of the caregivers," Stansbury said. "I have also seen hundreds of kids and their [parents](#) in a lab setting and never once witnessed any of this behavior."

Stansbury is a trained psychologist and associate professor in MSU's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. With the study, she wanted to get a realistic gauge of how often parents use what she calls positive and negative touch in noncompliance episodes with their [children](#), in a real-world natural setting, outside the laboratory.

A group of university student researchers anonymously observed 106 discipline interactions between caregivers and children ages 3-5 in public places and recorded the results. The data were vetted, analyzed and published in the current issue of the research journal *Behavior and*

Social Issues.

Stansbury said another surprising finding was that male caregivers touched the children more during discipline settings than female caregivers – and the majority of the time it was in a positive manner. Positive touch included hugging, tickling and patting.

She said this positive approach contradicts the age-old stereotype of the father as the parent who lays down the law.

"When we think of Dad, we think of him being the disciplinarian, and Mom as nurturer, but that's just not what we saw," Stansbury said. "I do think that we are shifting as a society and fathers are becoming more involved in the daily mechanics of raising kids, and that's a good thing for the kids and also a good thing for the dads."

Ultimately, positive touch caused the children to comply more often, more quickly and with less fussing than negative touch, or physical punishment, Stansbury said. When negative touch was used, even when children complied with physical punishment, they often pouted or sulked afterward, she said.

"If your child is upset and not minding you and you want to [discipline](#) them, I would use a positive, gentle touch," Stansbury said. "Our data found that negative touch didn't work."

More information: [news.msu.edu/media/documents/2 ... 092-92bce97a183d.pdf](https://news.msu.edu/media/documents/2019/09/20190920-92bce97a183d.pdf)

Provided by Michigan State University

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