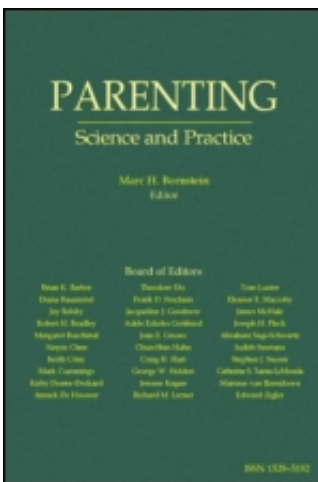


# The harms of harsh discipline are softened by a loving mother

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The use of harsh discipline of unwanted behaviour in children has long been controversial. Whether verbal (insults, disparaging remarks, threats) or physical (slapping/spanking), harsh discipline at all stages of childhood carries a large risk of manifesting antisocial 'externalising behaviours' in the child, including aggression, delinquency or hyperactivity.

But a new study published in the journal *Parenting: Science and Practice* suggests that these painful effects of harsh discipline can be moderated by the child's feelings of being loved by their mother.

The study, conducted among a group of Mexican-[American adolescents](#) by Dr Miguelina Germán of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, found that having a loving mother (or 'perception of maternal warmth') protected the youngster from externalizing problems to the extent that, at high levels of maternal warmth, harsh discipline was found to have no correlation with [antisocial behaviour](#).

Where the child's perception of maternal warmth was lower, it still resulted in a positive relationship between harsh disciplinary practices and later externalising problems.

This would suggest that, as long as the child knows they're loved, and feels that it is coming from a good place, their experiences of being strictly disciplined is unlikely to result in antisocial behaviour further down the line.

Some evidence suggests that Latino cultural norms – such as respeto (respect) and bien educacion (social responsibility) - support the use of harsh and restrictive discipline against children. [Attachment theory](#) holds that warm, responsive parenting is the critical factor in producing happy, secure children – the underlying belief that their parents love them protects them from feeling rejected, even when being harshly disciplined.

One important implication of the research is perhaps the following: the use of harsh parental discipline does not automatically result in antisocial behaviour in the child. The relationship between the two is conditional and subject to other factors. Where harsh disciplinary practices are a cultural norm, there are always other influences at play that can lessen their potential harm on the young child.

**More information:** German, M. et al. Maternal Warmth Moderates the Link between (2013) Harsh Discipline and Later Externalizing

Behaviors for Mexican American Adolescents, *Parenting: Science and Practice*. [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15295192.2013.756353](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15295192.2013.756353)

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