

Real-time audio of corporal punishment shows kids misbehave within 10 minutes of spanking

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A new study based on real-time audio recordings of parents practicing corporal punishment discovered that spanking was far more common than parents admit, that children were hit for trivial misdeeds and that children then misbehaved within 10 minutes of being punished.

Advocates of corporal punishment have outlined best practices for responsible spanking. But real-time audio from this study revealed that parents fail to follow the guidelines, said psychologist George Holden, who is lead author on the study and a parenting and child development expert at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

The real-time audio interactions revealed that parents were not always calm, as the guidelines recommend, but instead were often angry when they spanked or hit their child; they didn't spank as a last resort; and they gave spankings for minor infractions, not just serious misbehavior. And while many spanking advocates recommend hitting [children](#) no more than twice, parents in the [audio recordings](#) were slapping and hitting their children more often.

"From the audio, we heard parents hitting their children for the most extraordinarily mundane offenses, typically violations of social conventions," Holden said. "Also, corporal punishment wasn't being used as a last resort. On average, parents hit or spanked just half a minute after the conflict began."

Parents who used corporal punishment in the audio commonly violated three of the six "use" guidelines the researchers examined: Spank infrequently, use it only for serious misbehavior, and only as a last resort.

"The recordings show that most parents responded either impulsively or emotionally, rather than being intentional with their discipline," Holden said.

The findings are reported in "Eavesdropping on the Family: A Pilot Investigation of Corporal Punishment in the Home," which was published online April 15 at <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2014-12893-001/> by the American

Psychological Association before it appears in a final print and online issue of *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Parents agreed to wear tape recorders to capture home interactions

The unique recordings captured parent and child interactions in 33 families over the course of four to six evenings. Parents volunteered to wear the recorders; most were mothers who were home with their children after a day's work. The recordings captured 41 instances of corporal punishment, mainly during everyday activities such as fixing supper and bathing children.

More than 80 percent of the moms were married and had completed more education than the general population. About 60 percent were white and worked outside the home, and their children averaged just shy of 4 years old.

In 90 percent of the incidents, noncompliance was the immediate cause, such as sucking fingers, eating improperly, getting out of a chair, and going outside without permission. In 49 percent of the incidents, the parent sounded angry prior to spanking or hitting. On average, less than 30 seconds elapsed from the time when parents initiated nonviolent discipline to when they used corporal punishment. In 30 of the 41 incidents, the children misbehaved again within 10 minutes of being hit or spanked. The youngest child hit was 7 months old. One mother hit her child 11 times in a row.

Most remarkably, the researchers noted an unusual finding: The rate of corporal punishment exceeded estimates in other studies, which relied on parents self-reporting. Those studies found that American [parents](#) of a 2-year-old typically report they spank or slap about 18 times a year.

"The average rate we observed using the real-time audio equates to an alarming 18 times a week," Holden said.

Holden co-authored the study with Paul A. Williamson and Grant W.O. Holland, also of SMU. Funding for the study was provided by the nonprofit Timberlawn Psychiatric Research Foundation, Dallas.

"Although spanking advocates may acknowledge these incidents as inappropriate use of [corporal punishment](#), evidence indicates that mothers who report their child gets spanked are also more likely to report physical abuse of that child," the authors noted.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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