

# Spanking may be more common than parents admit

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Small study 'eavesdropped' on family interactions with preschoolers.

(HealthDay)—Ask any busy parent of preschool children: Early evening can be a stressful time. Now a small new study that audiotaped families soon after they returned home from work and day care suggests that spanking is surprisingly common.

Among 33 families, the researchers discovered 41 incidents of [spanking](#) or hitting [children](#) in 15 different families over a six-night period. What's more, the spanking didn't seem to resolve problems. After being hit, children were misbehaving again within 10 minutes in about 75 percent of the incidents.

The study was published online recently in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

The research was originally designed to study the impact of yelling and

to test the value of using audio recorders to do research on families, said lead study author George Holden, a professor of psychology at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He expanded the scope of the research after studying the tapes.

Holden found that parents who yell are more likely to spank their children. He also discovered that audiotaping is more accurate than are self-reports, when parents estimate how much yelling and spanking occur in their homes. "We did show that it's a very rich way to capture a wide assortment of information that is often ignored," he said.

"Parents are hitting their children over trivial misdeeds and some of the moms are doing it a lot more than the self-report data has ever identified," Holden said. "Recordings give us real-time information, which self-reports cannot."

Holden designed the study to focus on evening behavior because he has often heard mothers refer to early evening as the "hell hour" or the "suicide hour."

"It's a very difficult time, trying to pull dinner together and deal with the kids, and I thought it would be likely to elicit anger," Holden said. "It's stacked up against harmonious interactions."

Although a cause-and-effect relationship between spanking and behavioral problems was not shown, the study suggests that hitting children is not a good way to teach them or promote parent-child relationships, Holden said.

"It doesn't work. But more than that, it can result in [behavioral problems](#) like aggression, or anxiety and depression," he said.

Nationwide, 70 percent to 90 percent of parents hit or slap their

children, Holden said. Yet spanking is not recommended by most experts in child psychology.

Another expert said that evidence does not support spanking.

"Based on 20 years of research on physical punishment, it is recommended that it should not be used on children of any age," said Tracie Afifi, an associate professor in the department of community health sciences at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, Canada.

In a study published in *Pediatrics* in 2012, Afifi found that spanking or slapping children may increase the odds they will develop [mental health issues](#) into adulthood.

For the new study by Holden's team, participants were recruited using fliers distributed to English-speaking mothers of 2- to 5-year-old children at day care and Head Start centers in Dallas. Only 35 mothers who reported in a screening phone interview that they yelled in anger at least twice a week were included in the study.

Among parents, 79 percent of mothers worked, either full time (61 percent) or part time (18 percent), while 91 percent of fathers worked full time outside the home.

The mothers were given a digital voice recorder to wear on their upper arm. They were told to turn on the recorder when they returned home from work or at 5 p.m. and to turn it off when their child fell asleep. The recordings were taken for four to six consecutive days.

The rate of corporal punishment, such as spanking and slapping, exceeded estimates found in other studies that relied on parents reporting their behavior. While other studies discovered that American parents of 2-year-olds typically reported they spanked or slapped their child 18

times a year, Holden's research based on the audiotapes discovered such behavior occurred 18 times a week.

The study also showed that some of the children were punished for doing extremely minor things, such as turning pages in a book or sucking on their fingers.

Afifi noted that the study had limitations. Recruiting mothers with fliers means the participants were not representative of the general population (because they were self-selected), the number of families participating was small and the time frame of observation averaged only 13 hours per family.

What can parents do to discipline their children effectively? Afifi recommended that parents take a "time out" when they feel their anger escalating, and try to notice if their response to their child's misbehavior is making the situation worse. She also suggested that [parents](#) consider the child's age and developmental stage when making decisions about discipline and parenting.

Holden agreed. "There is no magic bullet, except for time, letting kids' prefrontal cortex [the judgment and decision-making area of the brain] develop. Children don't have the self-regulation ability adults have," he said. "They cannot control themselves. They cannot keep it together when they are fatigued."

**More information:** Visit the American Academy of Pediatrics for more on [disciplining kids](#).

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