

Study suggests parental warmth does not remove the anxiety that follows punishment

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A loving mom can't overcome the anxiety and aggression caused by corporal punishment, and her otherwise warm demeanor may make it worse, according to research led by Duke University that was recently published in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*.

"If you believe that you can shake your children or slap them across the face and then smooth things over gradually by smothering them with love, you are mistaken," wrote lead researcher Jennifer E. Lansford on the Child and Family Blog. Lansford is a research professor at the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University. "Being very warm with a [child](#) whom you hit in this manner rarely makes things better. It can make a child more, not less, anxious."

The blog is a joint project of the Future of Children at Princeton University and the Applied Developmental Psychology Research Group at the University of Cambridge.

Lansford calls it "one of many worrying findings" in the multicenter research about corporal punishment. They interviewed more than 1,000 children and their mothers, from eight different countries, asking about levels of physical punishment and also about anxiety and aggressive behavior on the part of the children.

They found that while maternal warmth can lessen the impact of "low levels of corporal punishment" among children ages 8 to 10, both anxiety and [aggression](#) still remain—just not quite as much. It doesn't typically

diminish the negative impact of high levels of physical punishment. Lansford said countries with a more authoritarian parenting style, like Kenya and Colombia, see less effect on the children than other countries.

"Generally, childhood anxiety actually gets worse when parents are very loving alongside using corporate punishment," she wrote. The researchers aren't sure why, but she said it might be "simply too confusing and unnerving for a child to be hit hard and loved warmly all in the same home."

More severe punishment leads to more severe aggression and [anxiety](#), she said, adding that 43 countries have outlawed [corporal punishment](#).

"It's far more effective and less risky to use nonphysical discipline," Janet Lansbury, a Los Angeles parent educator, told the Deseret News recently for a story on effective nonphysical discipline. "Discipline means 'to teach,' not 'punishment.' "

"Discipline is tricky terrain, but experts say there are effective nonphysical ways to promote wanted behaviors. Using techniques that teach proper behavior while treating both parent and child with respect frees parents from worry about how physical is too physical when it comes to discipline," the article said. It included ideas based on a child's age and the type of issue being addressed. For example, taking things away from a teenager may not be as effective as making a teenager participate in activities that benefit others and broaden the teen's experience. Putting younger children in time-out yields results.

Parenting "styles" are largely determined based on how a parent chooses to discipline. According to [Psychology Today](#), authoritarian parents "see their primary job to be bending the will of the child to that of authority—the parent, the church, the teacher." Authoritative parents are strict and consistent but use nonphysical discipline to get their points

across, it said.

More information: "Corporal Punishment, Maternal Warmth, and Child Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study in Eight Countries," *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 43:4, 670-685, [DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2014.893518](https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2014.893518)

Provided by Duke University

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