

Study indicates negative outcomes for Native American children who are spanked

August 19 2019

Some people may believe that if you live in a community with different cultural values, spanking might not be harmful—an assumption that does not appear to be correct, according to a new University of Michigan study.

In the first longitudinal examination of the effects of spanking among the Native American population, U-M researchers say that spanking is just as harmful for them as it is for black and [white children](#). They say it can lead to greater externalizing behavior (e.g., being defiant, hitting others, throwing temper tantrums).

The findings appear in the recent issue of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

Research has increasingly recommended that parents avoid spanking, concluding that the harms of physical punishment outweigh the benefits. When race and ethnicity are factored into studies, most of the research focuses on whites and African Americans, but not Native Americans.

In the current study, researchers analyzed data of more than 3,600 mothers from 20 U.S. cities with more than 200,000 residents. Three waves of data were collected when children were 1, 3 and 5 years old. Participants disclosed the frequency they spanked their children.

Among white, African American and Native American groups, spanking was associated with greater child externalizing behavior. In other words,

spanking is harmful for all three [racial groups](#) despite the fact that the practice may be considered "acceptable" or "normal" in some groups.

"Contrary to the idea that spanking may be 'normal,' and therefore not harmful in some groups, these results demonstrate that spanking is similarly associated with detrimental outcomes among white, black and American Indian children in the United States," said the study's lead author Kaitlin Ward, U-M doctoral student in [social work](#) and developmental psychology.

Native American and white mothers were equally likely to use spanking, the study indicated. Additionally, the effects of spanking on Native American children were statistically indistinguishable from the effects found among white and African American children.

The research showed that across all groups, maternal spanking of children at age 1 predicted child behavior issues at age 3, which then made spanking more likely to happen at age 5.

Ward said mental health workers and practitioners working with the Native American population—when recommending other discipline alternatives to spanking—should be very mindful of the historical trauma and oppression associated with the use of physical punishment.

More information: Kaitlin P. Ward et al. Physical Punishment and Child Externalizing Behavior: Comparing American Indian, White, and African American Children, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0886260519861678](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519861678)

Provided by University of Michigan

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