

# Physical abuse and punishment impact children's academic performance

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A Penn State researcher and her collaborator found that physical abuse was associated with decreases in children's cognitive performance, while non-abusive forms of physical punishment were independently associated with reduced school engagement and increased peer isolation.

Sarah Font, assistant professor of sociology and co-funded faculty member of the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network, and Jamie Cage, assistant professor in Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Social Work, found that [children's](#) performances and engagement in the classroom are significantly influenced by their exposure to mild, harsh and abusive physical punishment in the home. Their study was recently published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

While [corporal punishment](#) and physical abuse have been linked with reduced cognitive development and academic achievement in children previously, Font's study is one of the few that simultaneously examines abusive and non-abusive physical punishment as reported by both children and caregivers.

Even if physical punishment does not result in serious physical injury, children may experience fear and distress, and this stress has been found to negatively impact brain structure, development and overall well-being.

"This punishment style is meant to inflict minor pain so the child will change their behavior to avoid future punishment, but it does not give children the opportunity to learn how to behave appropriately through explanation and reasoning," stated Font.

In this study, over 650 children and their caregivers were examined in three areas of physical punishment: mild corporal punishment, harsh corporal punishment, and physical abuse. The groups reported their use or experience with physical punishment and researchers then measured cognitive outcomes, [school](#) engagement, and peer isolation in the children. The data was analyzed to determine trajectories between cognitive and academic performance and how initial and varying exposure to physical punishment and abuse influences them.

"We found that while all forms of physical punishment and abuse are associated with declines in [school engagement](#), only initial exposure to physical abuse has a significant negative influence on [cognitive performance](#), and only harsh corporal punishment notably increases peer isolation in children and was observed in both child and caregiver reports. This suggests that preventing physical abuse could promote children's cognitive performance, but it may not be enough to get children to be involved and well-adjusted in school," said Font.

Considering that mild [physical punishment](#) can develop into physical [abuse](#) and that even these mild punishments have consequences on children's cognitive and social school functioning, parent education on alternative forms of punishment may be one solution to prevent [physical abuse](#).

Programs that reach parents during services that they regularly use may be one way to give them alternative [punishment](#) technique education. This could be a medical professional informing parents during a child's health visit or staff members of an Early Head Start program providing parent education during the child's enrollment. "Further research and efforts in these types of interventions needs to continue so we can learn more," Font said.

**More information:** Sarah A. Font et al. Dimensions of physical punishment and their associations with children's cognitive performance and school adjustment, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.008)

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