Detrimental Effects of School Corporal Punishment on Children

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Contributor: Mark Assink

School corporal punishment (SCP) is still a widely used and legal practice in many countries for disciplining children. The infliction of SCP upon children is associated with externalizing behavior problems, internalizing behavior problems, and reduced school performance. Awareness of its detrimental effects is needed to make the school environment a safe place for all children across the world.

school corporal punishment | school performance | child development | meta-analysis | review | discipline

1. Introduction

School corporal punishment (SCP) is widely used around the world for disciplining children [1]. Despite a shift towards the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools across many countries, it is still a lawful discipline strategy in 64 countries, including the Australian states of Queensland and Western Australia, and 19 states of the United States of America [2]. Furthermore, even in countries where SCP is not allowed, prevalence studies show that SCP still occurs [3].

2. Detrimental Effects of School Corporal Punishment on Children

Corporal punishment (CP) can be defined as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” [4]. Examples are hitting, kicking, and shaking a child, but also pulling a child’s hair, and forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions. SCP is a form of CP applied by teachers or other school staff, and not by other children. Teachers or other school staff may use their hands to punish children, but may also use objects such as a belt, a wooden stick, or a shoe. Qualitative studies show that children are corporally punished in school for a variety of behaviors, such as fighting with other children [5], coming late to class, disturbing the class, academic failure [6], not wearing the school uniform, failure of parents to pay school fees [7], not following school rules, not writing properly, and not having the right equipment [8]. All pupils in a class can also be subjected to corporal punishment at once, for instance because they perform academically poorly or because one pupil disrupts the classroom [9].

Several issues arise when SCP is inflicted upon a child. First, SCP conflicts with several children’s rights and in particular with article 19 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child [10] stating that States Parties should, among other things, protect children from all forms of physical violence. Furthermore, article 28 of that same convention states that States Parties should ensure that school discipline should be used in line with the child’s human dignity. When SCP is inflicted, children are not protected from physical violence, and SCP causes feelings of indignity [7]. Thus, SCP conflicts with multiple children’s rights. On top of this rights-based perspective, research shows that children tend to be repeatedly punished by a teacher [11], raising the question about SCP’s effectiveness. After all, one could argue that SCP is effective when the pupil stops his disruptive behavior and SCP does not have to be inflicted again. Relatedly, teachers using SCP do generally not explain to children why their behavior is undesired and how they should behave [9], which, in turn, makes it unlikely that children will positively change their behavior. Fourth, research shows that children will change their behavior rather out of fear for CP [12] than out of respect for the teacher and an understanding of the behavioral norms [13]. Fifth, meta-analyses of the outcomes of CP inflicted on children by their parents or caregivers in the home environment found detrimental effects on children’s behavior and cognitive functioning [14][15][16][17].

Several theories can explain why the use of SCP is associated with negative outcomes for children. First, from the perspective of social-learning theory [18], exposure to SCP can increase children’s externalizing behavior, which is defined as outwardly directed behavior (e.g., aggression, conduct problems, hyperactivity, hostile behavior [19]). By observing and imitating behaviors expressed by significant others, a child tends to learn that being aggressive is an acceptable response to

others that do not behave in the way the child desires [18]. Thus, teachers or school staff inflicting corporal punishment on a child indirectly approve aggressive behavior. In turn, it is likely that the child internalizes aggression as an acceptable way to react, and therefore tends to show aggressive behaviors to others. A previous study from Nigeria indeed showed that school corporal punishment was a significant risk factor for physical aggressive behavior of boys [20]. Thus, instead of reducing children's disruptive behavior by using SCP, it is far more likely that children's disruptive behavior increases.

From an extended attachment theory perspective [21], it can be expected that exposure to SCP increases children's internalizing behavior, which is defined as inwardly directed behavior in which emotions and feelings are overcontrolled and unregulated (e.g., anxiety, depression, social inhibition, and psychosomatic complaints; [19]). Although the teacher–student relationship differs from a parent–child relationship because it is not exclusive and more short-term [22], teachers can serve as an attachment figure for children. When student–teacher relationships are positive (i.e., relationships are characterized by a high level of closeness and a low level of conflict), children generally feel emotionally secure. As a consequence, they dare to explore the classroom environment [23]. On the other hand, negative student–teacher relationships (i.e., relationships characterized by high levels of conflict and low levels of closeness) are associated with less secure children [23] with lower levels of self-worth [24]. When children are corporally punished by their teachers, a negative student–teacher relationship may develop. This, in turn, decreases their emotional security and, therefore, increases their internalizing behavior problems (such as anxiety, depression, and social inhibition). A cross-sectional study on Indian secondary school children indeed showed that the more children are exposed to school corporal punishment, the more internalizing problems they have [25].

From the same theoretical perspective [21], it can also be expected that exposure to SCP reduces children's school performance. A negative teacher–student relationship may result in a lower emotional security [23], which redirects energy from academic tasks [26]. Consequently, this hampers and interferes with natural efforts to be involved and engaged in academic tasks and, thus, school performance decreases (i.e., obtaining lower school grades [26]).

Further, from a biopsychosocial perspective, it can be expected that SCP negatively affects children's cognitive development as a result of stress. Children exposed to CP may perceive this as stressful [27]. As stress negatively influences a child's brain structure and development, it also affects a child's overall functioning [28]. This is in line with previous research on parental corporal punishment showing that CP changes children's brain structure [29]. Thus, children exposed to SCP may have impaired cognitive functioning due to stress-associated changes in brain development. A study on Jamaican primary school children showed that the more exposed children are to school corporal punishment, the lower they score on spelling skills, mathematics performance, and reading tests [30]. Thus, theory as well as empirical findings indicate negative effects of SCP.

The main reason for teachers applying SCP is the belief that SCP is needed to make reoccurrences of undesirable behavior less likely [1]. Further, because SCP was an acceptable teacher discipline strategy for multiple decades, teachers themselves may have internalized SCP as proper teacher behavior. This may be due to their own victimization of SCP or because they have witnessed SCP as a child, resulting in their acceptance of SCP as a proper discipline strategy [31] and having positive attitudes towards SCP [32]. Engaging in SCP or other inappropriate responses to children's behavior may also be the consequence of teachers experiencing stress [32] that can be due to, for instance, underpayment, large classes, and poor school resources [7]. Furthermore, a teacher's lack of knowledge of the adverse consequences of SCP on one hand and alternative more positive discipline methods on the other contributes to teachers engaging in SCP [31].

SCP is a risk factor for externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and reduced school performance of children. Other techniques than SCP should be used for class management, and recommends implementing psychoeducational programs for schools and the wider community in which corporal punishment is still used. These programs should convey the detrimental effects of SCP and the importance of alternative discipline techniques. After all, more awareness of the detrimental effects of SCP is needed to make the school environment a safe place for all children across the world.

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