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# Introduction

## *The Rationale for Reducing Physical Punishment*

Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Shawna J. Lee

Many parents use physical punishment because they hope it will make their children more compliant and better behaved. Yet several decades of research on parents' use of physical punishment have yielded a clear conclusion that physical punishment generally, and spanking specifically, is ineffective at improving children's behavior and in fact leads to a worsening of child behavior over time (Altschul, Lee, & Gershoff, 2016; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012). The more children are physically punished, the more aggressive they are, the more behavior problems they have, the more mental health problems they have, and the worse they do on tests of cognitive ability (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Physical punishment is thus ineffective at achieving parents' goals of improving children's behavior and instead increases the risk that children will experience a range of negative side effects.

One such side effect is physical harm to the children. Despite common euphemisms such as "spanking" that minimize the fact that it involves violence, physical punishment involves hitting and hurting children (Gershoff, 2013). Adults are larger and stronger than children, and when they hit children with their hands or with objects, adults run the risk of causing physical harm. It is thus not surprising that parents who use physical punishment have an increased risk of physically abusing their children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014).

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Indeed, physical punishment and physical abuse appear to be points along a single continuum of violence against children. Research studies that examined both physical punishment and physical abuse found that physical punishment is linked with the same detrimental outcomes for children as is physical abuse (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Research on adverse childhood experiences has also found that adults who recalled being spanked as children had more mental health and substance abuse problems than did adults who were not spanked as children, over and above whether they had experienced physical or emotional abuse (Afifi et al., 2017).

The strength of the evidence demonstrating physical punishment's risks has led increasing numbers of professional organizations serving children and families to strongly discourage physical punishment. For example, the American Psychological Association (2019), American Academy of Pediatrics (Sege, Siegel, Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2018), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2012), American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (2016), Canadian Paediatric Society (Durrant, Ensom, & Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth, 2004), Canadian Psychological Association (2004), and National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (2011) have each stated that physical punishment is harmful to children, that parents should avoid it, and that their members should help parents find alternative forms of discipline. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently published a guidance document on the prevention of child maltreatment that called for educational and legislative interventions to reduce support for and use of physical punishment as a strategy to prevent child physical abuse (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016). This book documents a range of interventions, from the individual level to the community level, that can support the recommendations of these professional organizations to reduce parents' use of physical punishment.

Opposition to the physical punishment of children is not limited to U.S. and Canadian organizations; globally, an increasing number of international groups and nation states are taking action to reduce or eliminate physical punishment of children. The United Nations has unequivocally stated (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007) that all physical punishment, no matter how "mild," violates children's right to protection from violence under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007) called for all countries that have ratified the Convention to legally ban and eliminate all physical punishment of children, including that by parents. As a result, 56 countries have heeded the United Nations' call and have legally prohibited all physical punishment of children (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019).

Although physical punishment can cause harm and does not improve children's behavior, it remains prevalent in the United States and around the world. In a large community-based study of urban American families, 53% of

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mothers and 44% of fathers of 3-year-olds reported that they had spanked their child at least once in the month before the survey (Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2015). Lifetime prevalence of physical punishment in national studies tends to be more than 80% (Gershoff et al., 2012), meaning that the majority of children in the United States experience physical punishment at least once in their lifetimes. Prevalence around the world is similarly high: Nearly two thirds of 2- to 4-year-old children (63%) in a global survey had been physically punished in the previous month (UNICEF, 2017). With this book, we aim to change that.

## THE PRESENT BOOK

The good news is that parenting behaviors are malleable and can be changed through education and training. A variety of approaches have been used successfully to prevent or reduce parents' use of physical punishment. However, there have been very few efforts to identify and synthesize these approaches. Indeed, a recent, purportedly comprehensive, review of parenting interventions by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) neglected to include interventions aimed at reducing physical punishment. Therefore, professionals do not have a clear picture of the approaches available or of their levels of success.

The goal of this book is to identify and describe several of the leading evidence-based interventions that have successfully reduced parents' use of, or positive attitudes about, physical punishment. The authors describe 15 such interventions. This book is an in-depth follow-up to an article we published that provided narrative summaries of approaches to reduce physical punishment (Gershoff, Lee, & Durrant, 2017). To provide the detail we couldn't provide in the article, this book highlights each intervention in a separate chapter. Each chapter provides information about the evidence base for the intervention, its generalizability across populations and contexts, and how the intervention can be implemented in community and clinical settings.

To facilitate comparisons between interventions, each chapter follows the same general structure, first describing the intervention and its content that is relevant to physical punishment and how the intervention has been implemented to date. Next, authors review the evidence base regarding the intervention; most interventions have information from process evaluations, and all have evidence from outcome evaluations. Each chapter includes a discussion of limitations as well as suggested future uses of the program. The volume itself concludes with an afterword that summarizes common themes and discusses directions for future work in this area.

This book is targeted to clinicians, community practitioners, and policymakers who are interested in effective interventions to reduce and prevent physical punishment at the individual, group, or even societal level. The book includes information that interventionists require to decide which intervention to implement, including costs and how to obtain intervention materials.

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We acknowledge that our list is not a comprehensive list of all interventions, but it is, we believe, illustrative of the range of interventions that have successfully reduced parents' positive attitudes about or use of physical punishment. We also note that the chapters are, in many cases, written by the program developers—a fact that both strengthens and limits the book, in different ways. Program developers are most familiar with their own programs and can thus provide the most authoritative program descriptions; however, the developers' attachment to their own work can also introduce bias when discussing research on their program's effectiveness. For this reason, each chapter discusses the limitations of the program as well as whether the program has been externally validated in online clearinghouses, which collect information about programs and rate the quality of the evidence supporting the program or that produce reports that recommend particular programs or types of intervention.

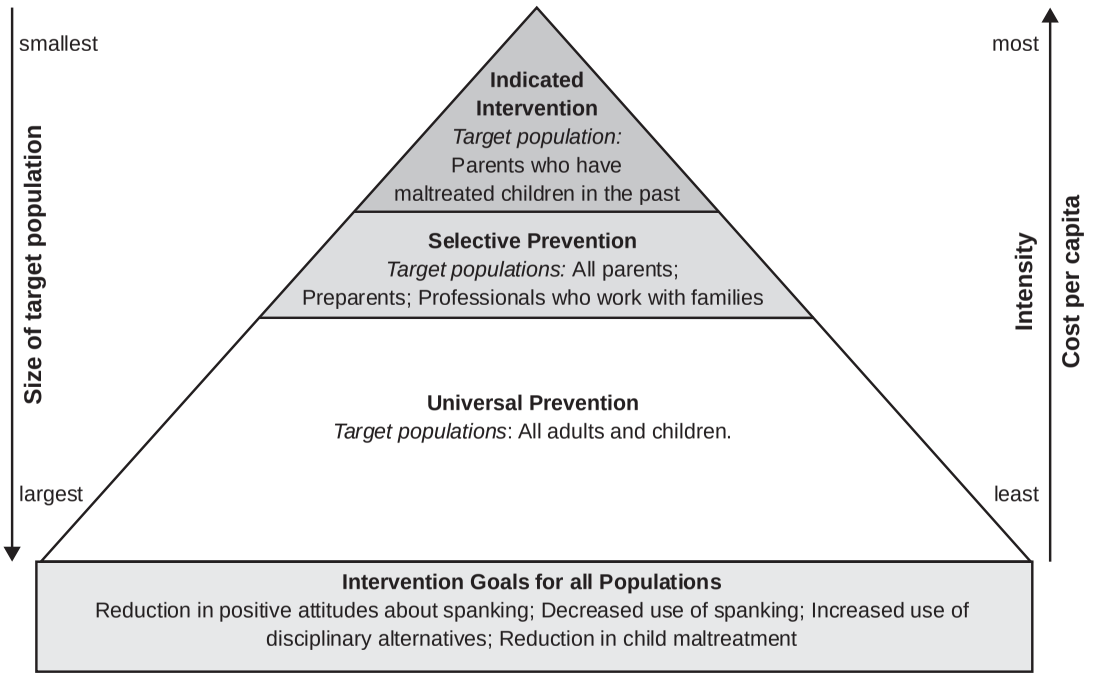
## EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL BASES OF THE BOOK

Hundreds of studies on physical punishment have been conducted across disciplines (e.g., psychology, medicine, education) and across cultures and countries. The research consistently has shown that physical punishment increases the risk that children will engage in problem behavior and that they will experience other negative outcomes such as mental health problems (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Several prominent theories in psychology (e.g., social learning theory, hostile attribution bias theory, attachment theory, and coercive family process theory) explain the mechanisms whereby parents who physically punish their children tend to elicit negative outcomes from them, including increased aggression, increased antisocial behavior, and lower academic and cognitive outcomes (Gershoff, 2002).

The book also draws heavily from the field of prevention research. In a review of prevention and intervention research, the Institute of Medicine identified three levels of intervention: indicated interventions, selective interventions, and universal interventions (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). Figure 1 displays these three types of interventions in a typical pyramid diagram organized by the intensity and the size of the target population, with the specific populations for the prevention of physical punishment identified within each type. *Indicated intervention programs* have the goal of changing rates of an undesirable behavior among a population that either has already displayed the behavior or is at substantial risk for doing so. Because they are so targeted, they serve the fewest number of people, but they tend to involve intensive services, so are often the most expensive. *Selective prevention programs* are aimed at subgroups of the population that collectively have higher than average risk for the behavior of concern, either immediately or at some point in the individuals' lifetimes. *Universal prevention programs* target an entire population and are not based on any specific risk. They are the least intensive but have the widest reach and thus are, per capita, the least expensive interventions.

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**FIGURE 1. Levels of and Targets for Intervention to Prevent or Reduce Physical Punishment**




From "Promising Intervention Strategies to Reduce Parents' Use of Physical Punishment," by E. T. Gershoff, S. J. Lee, and J. E. Durrant, 2017, *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal, 71*, p. 10. Copyright 2017 by Elsevier. Reprinted with permission.

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As with all interventions, the interventions in this book can each be categorized on the basis of one of these three levels of intervention. Thus, each chapter begins by noting whether the intervention it describes is indicated, selective, or universal as an indication of both the target population (e.g., everyone or a specific group of families) and how it might be implemented (e.g., an indicated intervention might be delivered one-on-one, whereas a universal intervention will need to be delivered to hundreds or thousands of people at a time). We hope these designations will be helpful to anyone deciding which intervention to reduce physical punishment fits best with their goals.

## CONCLUSION

We are excited to be able to highlight these 15 interventions and are impressed by each program's demonstrated effectiveness at reducing approval of and use of physical punishment. We believe the interventions in this book will be useful to clinicians working with individual families or groups of families, community practitioners hoping to promote positive parenting broadly, and policymakers aiming to reduce all forms of violence against children at state and national levels. We hope that this book will also increase the dissemination and implementation of the interventions described herein.

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