

# Parental physical discipline through childhood linked to behavior problems in teens

September 15 2009

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Two new studies explore how discipline changes during childhood and adolescence, and what family factors affect those changes. They conclude that when parents use physical discipline through childhood, their children experience more behavior problems in adolescence.

The studies were conducted by researchers at Duke University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Pittsburgh, Auburn University, and Indiana University. They appear in the September/October 2009 issue of [Child Development](#).

Using data collected in two longitudinal studies—one of almost 500 children who were followed from ages 5 to 16, the other of more than 250 children followed from ages 5 to 15—the researchers sought to answer questions of how discipline changes during [childhood](#) and adolescence, and whether there are factors within families and children that are associated with these changes.

They find that parents typically adjust the way they discipline their children in response to their children's growing [cognitive abilities](#), using less physical discipline (spanking, slapping, hitting with an object) over time. As children grow older, physical discipline becomes less developmentally appropriate. However, when parents' use of physical discipline continues through childhood, by the time their children are teens, they're more likely to have behavior problems. Teens of parents

who stop using physical discipline when their children are young are less likely to have these behavior problems.

"Given these findings, mental health specialists and others who work with families should encourage parents to refrain from using physical discipline," according to Jennifer E. Lansford, associate research professor with the Social Science Research Institute and Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, who led the study. "They should also help parents—especially mothers who are at high risk of using harsh physical discipline because they have children whose behavior is challenging or they are dealing with a lot of stress in their environment—come up with alternate strategies for disciplining their children."

"Low income, low educational attainment, single parenthood, family stress, and living in a dangerous neighborhood form a constellation of risk that increases the chances that parents will continue to use physical discipline with their children," Lansford adds. "Parents are also more likely to continue using physical discipline with [children](#) who behave aggressively."

More information: *Child Development*, Vol. 80, Issue 5, Trajectories of Physical Discipline: Early Childhood Antecedents and Developmental Outcomes by Lansford, JE (Duke University), Criss, MM (Oklahoma State University), Dodge, KA (Duke University), Shaw, DS (University of Pittsburgh), Pettit, GS (Auburn University), and Bates, JE (Indiana University).

Source: Society for Research in Child Development ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Parental physical discipline through childhood linked to behavior problems in teens

(2009, September 15) retrieved 10 July 2023 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-parental-physical-discipline-childhood-linked.html>

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