

# Childhood spankings can lead to adult mental health problems

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Getting spanked as a child can lead to a host of mental health problems in adulthood, say University of Michigan researchers.

A new study by Andrew Grogan-Kaylor and Shawna Lee, both U-M associate professors of social work, and colleagues indicates the violence caused by spanking can lead adults to feel depressed, attempt suicide, drink at moderate-to-heavy levels or use illegal drugs.

"Placing spanking in a similar category to physical/emotional [abuse](#) experiences would increase our understanding of these adult mental [health](#) problems," Grogan-Kaylor said.

Spanking is defined as using physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, to correct or control the youth's behavior.

Researchers note that given that both spanking and physical abuse involves the use of force and infliction of pain, as well as being linked with similar mental health outcomes, it raises the question of whether spanking should be considered an adverse childhood experience. This involves abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, which includes divorce and an incarcerated relative.

The study used data from the CDC-Kaiser ACE study, which sampled more than 8,300 people, ranging in age from 19 to 97 years. Study participants completed self-reports while seeking routine health checks

at an outpatient clinic.

They were asked about how often they were spanked in their first 18 years, their household background and if an adult inflicted [physical abuse](#) (push, grab, slap or shoved) or emotional abuse (insulted or cursed)

In the study sample, nearly 55 percent of respondents reported being spanked. Men were more likely to experience childhood spanking than women. Compared to white respondents, minority respondents—other than Asians—were more likely to report being spanked.

Those reporting exposure to [spanking](#) had increased odds of depression and other [mental health problems](#), the study showed.

Lead author Tracie Afifi, associate professor at the University of Manitoba, says that it's important to prevent not just child maltreatment, but also harsh parenting before it occurs.

"This can be achieved by promoting evidence-based parenting programs and policies designed to prevent early adversities, and associated risk factors," said Lee, who is also a faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research. "Prevention should be a critical direction for public health initiatives to take."

The findings appear in *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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