

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Spanking and Child Development Across the First Decade of Life

MacKenzie, M. J., Nicklas, E., Waldfogel, J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2013). Spanking and child development across the first decade of life. *Pediatrics*, 132(5), e1118-e1125. doi:10.1542/peds.2013-1227

SUMMARY: A nationally representative sample of families was studied to examine the prevalence of maternal and paternal spanking of children at age three and age five. Associations between spanking and children's externalizing behavior and receptive vocabulary at age nine were also examined. Results indicated that spanking negatively impacted children's externalizing behaviors and receptive vocabulary.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Fifty-seven percent of mothers and 40% of fathers engaged in spanking when the child was three years old. 52% of mothers and 33% of fathers engaged in spanking when the child was five years old.
- Age five maternal spanking (at both low and high frequency) is a significant predictor of higher externalizing behavior (at age nine) after controlling for many child and family characteristics (including father spanking and earlier externalizing behavior).
- Frequent paternal spanking at age five was associated with lower scores on receptive vocabulary at age nine.
- The effects of spanking on child development were not associated with race/ethnicity or gender.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Attend trainings about the impact of spanking on child well-being in order to better inform military parents
- Facilitate support groups for military parents coping with child behavioral issues

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide parental training in effective discipline techniques for preschool aged children
- Provide information to military families regarding the negative effects of spanking on child cognitive and behavioral development

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend that parent training programs continue to be offered in an accessible, low-cost manner for Service members and their partners
- Advocate for staff training on use of evidence based parent-training programs for military families

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METHODS

- Data were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being study that is a longitudinal birth cohort study.
- Data were used from child ages three and five (demographics, prenatal risks, maternal risks, spanking), and age nine (externalizing behaviors and receptive vocabulary).
- Children included in the study were born between 1998-2000 and were from 20 different cities across the U.S.

PARTICIPANTS

- One thousand nine hundred thirty-three families were included in the externalizing behavior analyses and 1,532 were included in the receptive vocabulary analyses.
- The mean age of mother at birth was 25 years (SD = 6.0 years).
- Fifty-two percent of participants were Black and 24% White.
- Twenty-one percent reported prenatal drug use, moderate or high alcohol use, or smoking.

LIMITATIONS

- The externalizing measure used was maternal report of externalizing behavior; information was not gathered about paternal perspectives, which limits what can be garnered from the results.
- The analyses used were not described, making replication difficult.
- This study only included a civilian sample; results may not be generalizable to military families.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore reasons why spanking impacts externalizing behavior and cognitive development among civilian and military children
- Examine the differential impact of maternal and paternal spanking on child cognitive development and externalizing behavior
- Investigate rates of spanking among military families to determine if military families utilize corporal punishment at similar rates as civilian families

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