

Mothers' self-recorded audio gives unique real-time view of spanking in context of day-to-day life

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In one recording, a mom spanks her 3-year-old 11 times for fighting with his sister. In another, a mom slaps her son for turning the page of a book while she reads to him. In still another, a mom spanks her 5-year-old when he refuses to clean up his room after repeated warnings to do so.

Those are examples of the corporal punishment captured by a study of 37 families in which mothers voluntarily recorded their evening interactions with their young children over the course of six days, say the study's researchers.

The audio recordings, believed to be the first of their kind, provide real-time data captured before, during and after mothers disciplined their children with spanking or slapping, said psychologist and parenting expert George W. Holden at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

The unique recordings capture from 12 hours to 36 hours of data from each mother, mainly the daily ordinary activities such as fixing supper and bathing children, said Holden, lead researcher on the study.

But occasionally conflict erupts, sometimes followed by corporal punishment.

The data go to the heart of the long-running debate over whether parents should spank their children.

"In the case where the child was slapped for grabbing a book, it was not 10 seconds later he did it again," said Holden. "The amazing thing is, the mom was reading so nicely to the child and the child was being so normal, reaching for the book or wanting to turn the page or point to something."

Believed to be first audio data of naturally occurring spanking

With its "event-sampling" approach, the research is a unique opportunity to understand what's going on in the life of a family before spanking, including whether [conflict](#) gradually escalates or instead blows up out of nowhere, Holden said. It also reveals what occurs with spanking, such as verbal reprimands, admonitions, yelling or time-out.

"Despite the fact there have been hundreds of studies on spanking, I think with these [audio recordings](#) we have the first data of naturally occurring spanking," said Holden, who has published five books and more than 55 scientific papers on parenting and child development.

"Virtually all previous studies have relied on verbal reports, either asking parents how often they spank, and a few asking children how they felt about being spanked," he said. "This study is not affected or biased by memory or attitudes or orientations toward discipline because it's what's happening in the home."

The research, "Investigating Actual Incidents of Spanking in the Home," was presented June 3-4 at the international conference "Global Summit on Ending Corporal Punishment and Promoting Positive Discipline" in Dallas.

Holden, a professor in the SMU Department of Psychology, was a conference organizer and is an advocate of positive alternatives to spanking as cited in his psychology textbook "Parenting: A Dynamic Perspective" (Sage Publications Inc., 2010).

Chaotic interactions indicate parents didn't alter practices

Participants in the study included families of various ethnicities, ranging from affluent to middle income

to poor, said Paul Williamson, a researcher on the study. Acts of corporal punishment also varied, from spanking with a belt to admonishing children while hitting, said Williamson, an SMU psychology doctoral student.

"One interaction in particular, a child of 2 or 3 years of age had either been hitting or kicking her mother, and in response the mother either spanks the child or slaps the child on the hand and says, 'That'll teach you not to hit your mother,'" Williamson said. "We've captured interactions with families that are very chaotic. Some of them are actually quite difficult to listen to. That tells us, at least for some families, they're not inhibiting or suppressing the kinds of parenting practices they use."

Spanking and negative unintended consequences

Researchers invited mothers to participate in the study through fliers distributed at day-care centers, said Williamson. Mothers were informed of the study's purpose to look at parent-child interactions. The mothers agreed to wear the audio recording devices each evening for up to six days.

"We're finding a wide range of reactions to the spanking," Holden said. "Some children don't appear to react, whereas the majority react with crying, some tantruming and some whimpering that can go from just a few seconds, to our longest is about 75 seconds."

Parents didn't shy from talking with the researchers about spanking and their belief that it's effective and necessary discipline, the researchers said.

"So many parents believe in the technique and are not defensive about their use of it," Holden said. "They erroneously believe it's a useful technique to raise well-behaved kids."

Spanking widespread globally, despite harm to children

From 70 percent to 90 percent of parents spank their children, and it's practiced in the vast majority of countries worldwide, Holden said. Studies have shown that its single positive effect is immediate

compliance. Increasingly, however, the evidence is clear that spanking is associated with many unintended negative consequences, he said.

"Children who are spanked are more likely to be aggressive toward other children and adults," Holden said. "Over the long term they tend to be more difficult and noncompliant, have various behavior problems, can develop anxiety disorders or depression, and later develop antisocial behavior. They are more at risk to be involved in intimate partner violence, and they are at risk to become child abusers."

The discipline also can escalate, Holden said.

"We know that the majority of physical child abuses cases actually begin with a disciplinary encounter that then gets out of control," he said. "So for that reason alone, it's not a good idea to use corporal punishment."

The researchers hope their study ultimately will help [parents](#) use positive discipline and less punishment, he said.

"It's not the once or twice a year that a child may be swatted, but it's the kids who are exposed to frequent corporal punishment - that is the concern," Holden said. "Kids need discipline, but centered on mutual respect and love, without potentially harming the child with corporal punishment."

Besides Holden and Williamson, other researchers included Grant Holland, SMU psychology graduate student, and Rose Dunn, an SMU psychology department graduate. The study was funded by Timberlawn Psychiatric Research Foundation in Dallas.

The "[Global Summit on Ending Corporal Punishment and Promoting Positive Discipline](#)" was sponsored by Southern Methodist University, the Center for Effective Discipline, the Center for Children and Families, the Child Rights Information Network, the Global Initiative to End [Corporal Punishment](#) of Children, the Family Violence & Sexual Assault Institute, and the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma.

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