

Parents less likely to spank after reading briefly about its links to problems in children

22 January 2014, by Margaret Allen

(Medical Xpress)—Parents who spank their children believe it's an effective form of discipline. But decades of research studies have found that spanking is linked to short- and long-term child behavior problems.

Is there any way to get parents to change their minds and stop [spanking](#)? Child psychologist George Holden, who favors humane alternatives to corporal punishment, wanted to see if parents' positive views toward spanking could be reversed if they were made aware of the research.

Holden and three colleagues at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, used a simple, fast, inexpensive method to briefly expose subjects to short research summaries that detailed spanking's negative impact.

Carrying out two studies, one with non-parents and one with parents, Holden and his co-authors on the research found that [attitudes](#) were significantly altered.

"Parents spank with good intentions—they believe it will promote good behavior, and they don't intend to harm the child. But research increasingly indicates that spanking is actually a harmful practice," said Holden, lead author on the study. "These studies demonstrate that a brief exposure to [research findings](#) can reduce positive corporal punishment attitudes in parents and non-parents."

The researchers believe the study is the first of its kind to find that brief exposure to spanking research can alter people's views toward spanking. Previous studies in the field have relied on more intensive, time-consuming and costly methods to attempt to change attitudes toward spanking.

"If we can educate people about this issue of

corporal punishment, these studies show that we can in a very quick way begin changing attitudes," said Holden, a professor in the SMU Department of Psychology who has carried out extensive research on spanking.

The findings, "Research findings can change attitudes about corporal punishment," [have been published](#) in the international journal of *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

Study probed attitudes, which research has found predict behaviors

Research has found that parents who spank believe spanking can make children behave or respect them. That belief drives parental behavior, more so than their level of anger, the seriousness of the child's misbehavior or the parent's perceived intent of the child's misbehavior.

Additionally, parents form their opinions based on advice from others they trust, primarily their own parents, their spouse and pediatricians, followed by mental health workers, teachers, parent educators and religious leaders.

Two studies with parents and non-parents both find changed attitudes

In the first SMU study, the subjects were 118 non-parent college students divided into two groups: one that actively processed web-based information about spanking research; and one that passively read web summaries.

The summary consisted of several sentences describing the link between spanking and short- and long-term child behavior problems, including aggressive and delinquent acts, poor quality of parent-child relationships and an increased risk of

child physical abuse.

The majority of the participants in the study, 74.6 percent, thought less favorably of spanking after reading the summary. Unexpectedly, the researchers said, attitude change was significant for both active and passive participants.

A second study replicated the first study, but with 263 parent participants, predominantly white mothers. The researchers suspected parents might be more resistant to change their attitudes. Parents already have established disciplinary practices, are more invested in their current practices and have sought advice from trusted individuals.

But the results indicated otherwise. After reading brief research statements on the web, 46.7 percent of the parents changed their attitudes and expressed less approval of spanking.

"Given the brevity of our intervention, the results are notable," said the authors. "Our Web-based approach is less expensive, potentially quicker, and more easily scaled up to use at a community level."

Holden noted that with spanking a public health concern, this approach offers a simple way to reach a large audience to change attitudes and reduce [parents'](#) reliance on [corporal punishment](#). For example, educational modules could be developed for high school students, the authors said.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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