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Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative Christians Using Interventions that Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Alternative Biblical Interpretations

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Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative Christians Using Interventions
that Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Alternative Biblical Interpretations

Abstract

To determine how brief interventions that include either empirical research evidence about spanking, alternative biblical interpretations related to spanking, or both, affect college students' attitudes and intentions about spanking. A sample of 129 college students (70% female; 30% male; *Age* = 19) attending a private, Christian, liberal arts, university were randomly assigned to one of three intervention conditions: 1) Research Only, 2) Religion Only, or Research and Religion. Four weeks prior to the intervention sessions, students completed a Demographic Form, the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Spanking (ATS) scale. Following the intervention, students completed the ATS scale a second time. A two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for the intervention condition and an interaction effect between intervention condition and religious fundamentalism, indicating that ATS change scores were impacted most significantly by the Research and Religion intervention condition ($F(2, 123)=4.05, p=.02$) with ATS scores demonstrating the greatest change within the Religious Fundamentalism Group in that condition ($F(2, 123)=4.50, p=.01$). A second two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for conservative Protestantism ($F(2, 123) = 4.39, p=.04$) but not for conservative Protestantism and their interaction. A brief intervention focusing on both empirical research on the effects of spanking as well as alternative biblical interpretations to scripture can reduce positive attitudes toward, and intentions to use, spanking. This study has implications for decreasing spanking use among Conservative Christians and for the development of training programs to reduce parents' use of spanking as a disciplinary strategy.

Key Words: Spanking attitudes, spanking attitude intervention, conservative Christian orientation, religious fundamentalism

Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative
Christians Using Interventions that Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and
Alternative Biblical Interpretations

Physical punishment of children, defined as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort” (UNCRC, 2007, p. 4), is a common disciplinary practice around the world (UNICEF, 2014). Spanking is the most common form of physical punishment of children and typically refers to hitting a child with an open hand. Spanking as a disciplinary practice is particularly common and culturally accepted in the U.S. In the 2014 General Social Survey, for example, almost three-fourths of Americans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking” (Smith, Hout, Marsden, & Kim, 2015). In addition, the vast majority of American parents have spanked their children at some point during childhood. In a national survey, Gershoff and colleagues found that 80% of mothers of 3rd graders reported spanking their child at some point, and 27% reported spanking their child in the previous week (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012).

Although spanking is a common disciplinary practice, particularly among U.S. parents, it has been the focus of significant attention by social scientists in recent years, mostly because of concerns about its impact on children’s development. A review of the research evidence on physical punishment of children in general, and spanking in particular, suggests that not only is physical punishment ineffective, or at least no more effective than non-physical disciplinary techniques, but it is also potentially harmful to children’s development (Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Straus, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014). Spanking and hitting children is associated with adverse effects on such important outcomes as children’s aggressive behavior,

mental health, and relationships with parents (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). In addition, spanking is associated with increased risk for physical abuse. In a recent meta-analysis examining 50 years of research on outcomes associated with spanking, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) found that of all of the outcomes studied, physical abuse victimization was linked most strongly with spanking. Although a single variable's cause and effect relation does not always work universally for complex matters related to human development and behavior, hitting children is clearly a significant factor that places children at risk for negative developmental outcomes.

For some, the issues of potential harm and ineffectiveness are secondary to a larger issue; spanking is a violation of children's human rights. Children have a right not to be hit. A number of international conventions and charters have condemned physical punishment as a form of violence against children (Bitensky, 2006; Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007; Newell, 2013). For example, Article 19 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted in 1989, encourages member states to take "all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). In response to these human rights arguments, nearly 50 countries now prohibit physical punishment in the home (Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment of Children, 2016).

In large part as a result of research findings and human rights arguments, organizations concerned with the welfare of children and their members have voiced concerns about the use of spanking. In a survey of members of the American Psychological Association, for example, Miller-Perrin (2016) found that 86% of psychologists indicated that psychologists should never recommend that parents spank their children. Furthermore, the same survey found that the

majority (77%) believed it was unethical for a mental health professional to suggest spanking to a parent. Several professional organizations have also issued statements recommending that parents refrain from using physical punishment with their children such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (1998, 2014), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2012), and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (2016). There is, therefore, growing agreement among professionals who work with children that parents should avoid using physical punishment in favor of other disciplinary techniques. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently called for educational initiatives to reduce support for and use of physical punishment (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016).

Interventions Directed at Changing Attitudes about Spanking

Since pro-spanking attitudes strongly predict use of physical punishment as a disciplinary strategy (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006), changing attitudes about spanking is an important strategy to help prevent and reduce the use of physical punishment. Several studies, all of them randomized controlled trials, suggest that access to new information can alter attitudes about physical punishment (Holden, Brown, Baldwin, & Caderao, 2014; Holland & Holden, 2016; Reich, Penner, Duncan, & Auger, 2012; Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005; Romano, Bell, & Norian, 2013; Perrin, Miller-Perrin, & Song, in press). Although each of these research-driven interventions have met with some success, none of them addresses contextual factors that are associated with spanking such as various cultural and/or religious beliefs and practices. Spanking attitudes and behaviors vary by race, ethnicity, and religion (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Gerhsoff et al., 2012; MacKenzie, Nicklas, Brooks-Gunn & Wldfogel, 2011).

Religious affiliation and belief is one cultural variable that has been strongly associated with spanking but that has largely been understudied. Christians generally, and conservative Protestants specifically, are significantly more likely than other parents to support and practice physical punishment (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007; Vieth, 2014). This support for and use of corporal punishment is largely based on conservative beliefs that the Bible is inerrant and should be interpreted literally. Several Bible verses, primarily in the Old Testament book of Proverbs, are interpreted by some Christians as a mandate to spank; “he who spares the rod, spoils the child” (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). In addition, many conservative Protestants believe that children are prone to egocentrism and sinfulness, and if left to their own devices will defy their parents and God. Parents must therefore shape the will of the inherently rebellious child (Abelow, 2011; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Vieth, 2014).

It stands to reason that Christians who believe spanking is biblical will be less amenable to interventions that focus solely on empirical research evidence (Perrin, Miller-Perrin, & Song, in press; Vieth, 2014). As James Dobson writes in his influential 1970 book, *Dare to Discipline*, “The principles of good discipline cannot be ascertained by scientific inquiry” (p. 13). Ellison and Sherkat (1993) concluded that conservative Protestants “emphatically reject popular and academic criticisms of corporal punishment” (p. 132).

If conservative Christians believe that the Bible instructs them to spank, the most effective interventions will not only address research on harm and ineffectiveness, but will also offer alternative interpretations of biblical passages on physical punishment. Perrin, Miller-Perrin, and Song (in press) recently attempted to change attitudes toward spanking among a group of students attending a Christian university. They examined the effectiveness of two

interventions: an empirical research intervention that focused on the empirical evidence of the ineffectiveness and potential harm of spanking, and a research and religion intervention that included information about the empirical research and also provided a progressive interpretation of biblical passages that are sometimes used by Christians to justify spanking. Students were randomly assigned to one of the two intervention conditions or a control group and their attitudes toward spanking were assessed pre- and post-intervention. Results indicated that attitudes toward spanking decreased in both intervention conditions compared to the control condition and that a greater decrease in favorable attitudes toward spanking was observed for the combined research and religion condition compared to the research only condition. Unfortunately, it was not clear in this study how conservative Protestant affiliation and fundamentalist beliefs contributed to the study's findings.

The Present Study

The present study focused on alternative biblical interpretations of scripture in an attempt to bring about attitude change toward spanking among a group of students attending a private, Christian, liberal arts university. If indeed the Bible “trumps” science for many Christians, it is important to address biblical understandings. It is also important to address the role of conservative Protestant affiliation and fundamentalist religious beliefs in an attempt to further understand how these affiliations and beliefs affect intervention outcomes. Finally, it is important to conduct interventions with, and address attitudes of, college students, the majority of whom will eventually become parents, in an effort to change attitudes about spanking *before* spanking occurs.

The current study evaluated the effectiveness of a research intervention and a religion intervention, in three separate experimental groups; a research only group who received a

summary of the research on the ineffectiveness, and potential harm, of spanking, a religion only group who received a summary of an alternative interpretation of the Bible that challenges pre-spanking beliefs, and a third group that received both the research intervention and the religion intervention. We also included two measures of conservative religious orientation as independent variables: denominational affiliation and religious fundamentalist attitudes. We hypothesized that an intervention addressing understandings of biblical teachings as well as empirical research findings about the ineffectiveness and harm associated with spanking would be more effective at changing attitudes toward spanking than either an intervention focusing solely on empirical research findings related to spanking or solely on alternative understandings of biblical teachings. In addition, we hypothesized that attitude change would be greater among conservative Protestants and those scoring high on religious fundamentalism within both intervention conditions that included alternative understandings of biblical teachings.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 185 undergraduate students attending a small, private, Christian university in Southern California was recruited to participate in the study. A total of 129 completed the pre-intervention and intervention portions of the study for a response rate of 70%. The participants, who were recruited from Social Science courses at the university, were compensated for their participation with research participation credit for their course. The final sample included 91 women and 38 men ranging in age from 18-23 years ($M=19$), none of whom were married or parents. Approximately 54% of students self-identified as Caucasian, 19% Asian, 7% African American, 12% Latino, and 8% Other Ethnicity. Self-identified religious

affiliation was as follows conservative Protestant (54%), non conservative Protestant (10%), Catholic (16%), non Christian Faith (4%), and Other or None (16%).

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire. Participants completed a short demographic form which assessed sex, age, marital status, race/ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

Religious Fundamentalism Scale. The revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale is a 12-item scale rated on an 8-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$ in the present sample). The scale assesses religious fundamentalism, defined by four core religious beliefs including 1) there exists one set of true religious teachings, 2) evil forces exist that must be opposed, 3) religious practices of today must follow unchangeable practices of the past, and 4) individuals with such fundamental beliefs have a special relationship with a deity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Six items were reversed scored. Total scores range from -48 to +48 with high scores indicating greater religious fundamentalist beliefs. Example items included, "God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed," "The basic cause of evil in this world is Satan, who is still constantly and ferociously fighting against God," and "Scriptures may contain general truths, but they should NOT be considered completely, literally true from beginning to end." This measure has demonstrated good reliability and validity (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004).

Attitudes Toward Child Discipline. A 28-item scale assessed students' attitudes toward child discipline. The scale included a modified version of the Attitudes Toward Spanking Questionnaire (ATS; Holden et al., 1995) which was the dependent measure used for the current study. The modified ATS included 11 items rated on a 7-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$ in the present sample). Four items were reverse scored. Total scores ranged from 7 to 77 with high

scores indicating more favorable attitudes toward spanking. The items assessed both attitudes toward spanking as well as future intention to spank since this was a non-parent sample.

Example items included, “Sometimes a spank is the best way to get a child to listen,” “A spank is not an effective method to change a child’s behavior for the long term,” “Spanking is never necessary to instill proper moral and social conduct in a child,” and “If and when I become a parent, I plan to spank my child.”

Materials and Procedure

Four weeks prior to the intervention sessions, students were asked to read and sign an informed consent form and then completed the Demographic Form, the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Child Discipline scale. Students were then randomly assigned to participate in one of three intervention conditions: Research Only ($n=43$), Religion Only ($n=43$), or Research and Religion ($n=43$). Following the interventions, students completed the Attitudes Toward Child Discipline scale a second time.

For each intervention condition, multiple 30-40 minute intervention sessions of approximately 5-20 students each were conducted by the authors in a classroom setting. Students in all conditions were exposed to interventions specifically designed to influence attitudes toward spanking. In each of these conditions, students read a summary about information related to child discipline and spanking followed by a brief oral summary of that information and a time to clarify any questions about the information.

For the Research Only condition, students read a summary that described the research evidence showing a link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes including noncompliance, aggression toward others, anxiety and depression, negative parent-child

interactions, and delinquent behavior (see Perrin et al., in press). The summary concluded by stating that “the preponderance of evidence suggests that spanking causes more harm than good.”

For the Religion Only condition, students read a summary describing a progressive Christian interpretation of biblical passages about discipline (see Perrin et al., in press). The summary addressed the importance of viewing biblical passages within a cultural context that suggests that such passages are actually meant to place restrictions on violence in a culture where violence was common. The summary also emphasized that many current Christian interpretations of these biblical passages are not literal interpretations, such as Focus on the Family’s “two smack max” policy (Ingram, n.d.). The summary concluded by suggesting that, although the biblical passages address the importance of child discipline, non-violent disciplinary practices are likely more effective and that Christians need not, and should not, spank .

Students in the Research and Religion condition were provided with summaries from both the Research Only and Religion Only conditions. As in the other intervention conditions, students read the summary followed by a brief oral summary of that information and a time to clarify any questions about the information

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine any differences in demographic variables, religious fundamentalism scores, and baseline ATS scores across the three intervention conditions, and no significant differences were observed.

Conservative Protestantism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Attitudes Toward Spanking

We measured the conservative religious orientation of participants by examining both conservative Protestantism (CoPr) and Religious Fundamentalism (RF) in order to examine the

relationships between conservative religious orientation, attitudes toward spanking, and the interaction between conservative religious orientation and intervention condition. A conservative Protestant (CoPr) variable was created using self-identified religious affiliation. Participants who self-identified with denominations standardly defined as conservative Protestant (e.g., Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, etc.; see Ellison, Musick, & Holen, 2011) were classified as CoPr while all other denominations were classified as non CoPr (NCoPr). Using this method, 54% of participants were assigned to the CoPr group. To determine the relationship between CoPr and attitudes toward spanking, t-tests were conducted between CoPr groups on ATS scores and significant differences were observed both on pre-intervention ATS scores, $t(127)=3.96, p<.001, d=0.70$ and post-intervention ATS scores ($t(127)=2.77, p<.01, d=0.48$). The CoPr group exhibited more positive attitudes toward spanking compared to the NCoPr group both at pre-intervention (CoPr $M=45.16$ and NCoPr $M=33.80$) and post-intervention (CoPr $M=39.67$ and NCoPr $M=31.93$).

A Religious Fundamentalism (RF) variable was created using a median-split method on scores from the Religious Fundamentalism Scale to create two groups: Religious Fundamentalism (RF) and non Religious Fundamentalism (NRF). Using this method, 55% of participants were assigned to the RF group. To determine the relationship between RF and attitudes toward spanking, t-tests were conducted between RF groups on ATS scores and significant differences were observed on pre-intervention ATS scores, $t(127)=2.60, p<.02, d=0.47$) but not post-intervention ATS scores ($t(127)=1.64, p=.10$). At pre-intervention, the RF group exhibited more positive attitudes toward spanking compared to the NRF group (RF $M=43.35$ and NRF $M=35.62$).

Impact of Intervention Conditions and Effect of Conservative Religious Orientation

In order to examine the impact of the intervention conditions, CoPr, and RF groups on ATS scores, an ATS Change score was created by calculating the difference between pre-intervention and post-intervention ATS scores. High Change Scores indicate decreased favorable attitudes toward spanking. A 3 (Intervention Condition: Research Only, Religion Only, and Research and Religion) X 2 (Religious Fundamentalism: RF, NRF) ANOVA was conducted on ATS Change scores and results are displayed in Table 1. A significant main effect for Intervention Condition was observed, $F(2, 123)=4.05, p=.02, \eta^2=.06$. Participants in the Research and Religion condition had higher ATS Change scores ($M=7.19, SD=15.30$) compared to the Research Only condition ($M=.77, SD=8.24$), reflecting a greater decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking from pre- to post-intervention. Although scores for the Religion Only ($M=3.56, SD=8.19$) condition were intermediate between the Research Only and Research and Religion conditions, the differences were not statistically significant.

No significant main effect for Religious Fundamentalism was observed, $F(1, 123)= 2.14, p= .15$ but there was a significant Religious Fundamentalism X Condition interaction for ATS Change scores, $F(2, 123)=4.50, p=.02, \eta^2=.07$ indicating that the impact of the intervention condition was influenced by whether or not participants were religiously fundamentalist. ATS Change scores were highest among the RF group in the Research and Religion Group. These results are depicted in Figure 1.

A 3 (Intervention Condition: Research Only, Religion Only, and Research and Religion) X 2 (Conservative Protestantism: CoPr, NCoPr) ANOVA was conducted on ATS Change scores to further examine the impact of CoPr on ATS scores and the interaction between CoPr and Intervention Condition. Results are displayed in Table 2. A significant main effect for Conservative Protestantism was observed, $F(1, 123)= 4.39, p= .04$ but there was no significant

CoPr X Condition interaction for ATS Change scores, $F(2, 123)=1.04$, $p=.36$ indicating that the impact of the intervention condition was not influenced by whether or not participants were conservative Protestant. These results are depicted in Figure 2.

Discussion

In the United States, spanking remains the norm. An estimated 80% of parents spank, and 70% agree or strongly agree that it is sometimes necessary to give a child a good hard spanking (Straus et al., 2014). For much of the rest of the western world, on the other hand, spanking is very uncommon. In most wealthy democracies, in fact, it is actually criminalized. In an earlier paper we suggested that one of the reasons the U.S. lags behind Western Europe in attitudes and behavior is that so many Americans believe the Bible instructs them to spank (Perrin et al., in press). In the current study, both conservative Protestant affiliation and fundamentalist religious attitudes were associated with more favorable attitudes toward spanking in the pre-test, a finding that is consistent with previous research (Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Fréchette & Romano, 2015; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007; Petts, 2012; Taylor, Lee, Guterman, & Rice, 2010).

The current study evaluated the effectiveness of an intervention designed to challenge conservative Christian beliefs about spanking. We hypothesized that an intervention addressing understandings of biblical teachings as well as empirical research findings about the ineffectiveness and harm of spanking would be more effective at changing attitudes toward spanking than either intervention alone. In addition, we hypothesized that attitude change would be greater among conservative Protestants and those scoring high on religious fundamentalism. Both of our hypotheses were, for the most part, supported.

As far as we know, our research is the first to examine the impact of a religiously sensitive intervention in changing spanking attitudes (see also Perrin et al., in press). This particular study is the first to look specifically at the impact of conservative religious orientation on intervention outcomes. Findings indicated that the intervention conditions decreased positive attitudes toward spanking and that the impact of the intervention condition was influenced by whether or not participants were had a conservative religious orientation. In short, the more religiously conservative students evidenced greater change in their attitudes toward spanking. The greatest change occurred in those participants who heard both the research evidence and the alternative biblical interpretations. Although decreases in positive attitudes were in the predicted direction for all three intervention conditions, differences in spanking attitudes were only statistically significant between the Research Only and Research and Religion conditions.

There is also some evidence that attitude change was greatest among those with a conservative Protestant affiliation. Examining the means across intervention conditions among conservative Protestants indicated a decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking for all three groups. When examining conservative Protestant affiliation as the measure of conservative religious orientation, no interaction between intervention and affiliation was observed. These findings suggest the importance of examining conservative religious orientation in a variety of ways including examining denominational affiliation as well as measures of specific beliefs. Additional research should also examine specific religious behaviors as previous research has found significant differences in attitudes and behavior with regard to spanking depending on whether religious affiliation or religion-related behavior, such as attending religious services, is examined (Petts, 2012).

It is encouraging that several research-based intervention studies have successfully altered attitudes on physical punishment (Holden et al., 2014; Reich et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2005; Romano et al., 2013; Scholer et al., 2010). The findings from the current study are consistent with previous research on a biblically-oriented intervention (Perrin et al., in press) and suggest that interventions, especially among those with conservative religious orientations, might be even *more effective* when they focus on both the research evidence and challenge conservative Christian interpretations of the Bible. It is important to emphasize that the students in the Research and Religion condition were exposed to *both* the empirical research on spanking as well as alternative interpretations of biblical scripture. The combined intervention was the most successful in producing attitudinal change, although the additional change beyond the Research Only condition was not significant. This finding provides further confirmation for our argument that, for some, additional attitude change is possible when religious convictions are addressed in addition to empirical findings.

There are several important limitations to the current study that should be noted. First, we measured attitudes, not behavior. This limitation is consistent with other studies in this research area (e.g., Chavis et al., 2013; Reich et al., 2012). Secondly, and more significantly, the sample for the current study included unmarried college students. Most of these students are several years from child bearing responsibilities, and one could reasonably question the long-term stability of the attitude change we witnessed. Although we recognize the fact that our nonparent sample is a limitation, we would argue that interventions that target young adults who are yet to become parents is important because there is preventative value in targeting individuals *before* they become parents and spank their children.

That said, it clear that future research needs to move beyond college samples. We envision intervention research directed toward various racial and ethnic groups, lower SES families, and studies conducted in various geographic locations. We envision interventions that specifically targets religiously conservative populations, perhaps even conducting the interventions in churches. We know that all of these variables are correlated with spanking attitudes and practices (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Gershoff et al., 2012).

It is clear that progress is being made to change attitudes toward spanking in both the U.S. and abroad. Many professional organizations have released statements discouraging the use of physical punishment and encouraging more positive forms of parenting. Various religious organizations have also passed resolutions urging parents not to spank their children, including the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodist Church (General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 2012; United Methodist Church, 2008). We hope that the current research, along with these recent developments, will help promote broad changes in attitudes toward spanking with the goal of reducing the use of spanking.

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