The Moderating Effect of Parental Warmth on the Association between Spanking and Child Aggression: A Longitudinal Approach

Breanna Way

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Dr. Stowell

A recent study done by Stacks, Oshio, Gerard, and Roe (2009) was done to determine the effect spanking and parental warmth had on child aggression. This study was conducted to gather information on the ongoing debate of whether or not parents should use spanking as a punishment for children. The researchers conducted the study to expand on prior research which supported the claim that spanking children for punishment led to an increase in aggressive behavior. In order to further examine the link between spanking, parental warmth, and child aggression, Stacks et al determined that it was necessary to conduct within-subjects longitudinal study.

Stacks et al. (2009) gathered information from the National Early Head Start and Research Evaluation Study. They selected 3001 mother-child dyads that had been placed in one of the Early Head Start programs around the country or who were in the comparison group. Early Head Start is one of several programs that is designed to target families whose children are at risk for developmental problems. In order to qualify to participate in the study, the family had to be living below the poverty line. The group of participants included Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic mothers who were asked to complete a parent service interview when the child was approximately fourteen months, twenty-four months, and thirty-six months. The mothers completed parent-self reports, videotaped observations, child assessments, and interviewer observations. To measure spanking, parents indicated on a self report whether the child had been spanked in the last week. The measurement of parental warmth was done by the interviewer observer. The observer examined the parent’s interaction with the child during the interview. They then marked either yes or no as to whether the mother kissed or caressed the child during the interview, praised the child during the interview, or conveyed positive feelings towards the child during the interview.

Results from the study found that child temperament, behavior, and maternal warmth varied greatly between ethnic groups. They found, for example, that at thirty-six months, aggressive behaviors were significantly higher in Caucasians then in African American or Hispanic samples. They also found that aggressive behavior did not vary among the ethnic groups when the child was twenty-four months old. Results also suggest that a mother’s ethnicity, child gender, child temperament, aggressive behavior at twenty-four months, and the use of spanking when a child is thirty-six months significantly predicted aggressive behavior when the child was thirty-six months old. A child’s chance of being aggressive at the age of thirty-six months was also increased if the child was a Caucasian male. When the researchers examined if ethnicity had an effect on the results, they found that spanking was a significant predictor of aggression at the age of thirty-six months only when the child was Caucasian. The study also found that maternal warmth did not moderate the effect of spanking for children age thirty-six months in any ethnic group.

There are several strengths to the study conducted by Stacks et al. (2009). First, the study was longitudinal and within subjects. By making the study longitudinal and within subjects, the researchers were able to examine the effect spanking has on aggressive behavior at different developmental time periods during the same child’s early life. By conducting a longitudinal, within subjects experiment, the researchers were able to determine that aggressive behavior could be correlated with spanking and not with a third variable. Second, Stacks et al. reported that while other studies have examined the effects spanking has on aggressive behavior for Caucasian and African American children, their study is the first to include Hispanic children in their sample.

There are also several limitations to the study. First, the study is limited in that it relies on self-report from the mother to report spanking and child behavior. A mother may be reluctant to report that she spanked her child within the last week because she may fear being viewed as a bad or abusive mother. The mother is also reporting the child’s behavior, which may not be completely accurate because the mother may not be able to remember the exact details of the child’s behavior over the past ten to twelve months. A mother may also be reluctant to report disruptive, aggressive, or otherwise negative behavior by her child. She may fear that others would view her as a bad mother who could not control her own child. With a majority of the answers relying on the mother to self report, it is possible that she did not report the entire truth. Another weakness is that the self report did not ask the mother to specify under what conditions spanking was used or the severity of the spanking. The fact that the socioeconomic status of all the participants was the same also creates an issue. With all of the participants living below the poverty line, the researchers cannot be certain that there is not socioeconomic status does not play a role in a child’s aggressive behavior. In order to eliminate socioeconomic status as a possible confounding issue, the researchers need to include participants of all socioeconomic statues. The study also only examined the effect spanking had on aggression. The study could have been strengthened by examining how parental behavior impacts different psychosocial outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing behavior as well as self-efficacy and emotion regulation. It could also have been strengthened by examining other types of behavior problems rather then just aggression. Finally, the study only examined the children and their behavior until the child was thirty-six months. I feel that they should have continued the study for longer then three years to examine possible longer term effects of spanking. The researchers could possibly have found more information had they continued the study until the children were between the ages of six and ten.

Stacks, A.M., Oshio, T., Gerard, J., & Roe, J. (2009). The moderating effect of parental warmth on the association between spanking and child aggression: A longitudinal approach. *Infant and Child Development, 18*, 178-194.