

Tulane Researchers Find Spanking Can Make Children More Aggressive Later

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Keith Brannon
kbrannon@tulane.edu
504-862-8789

Children who are spanked frequently at age 3 are more likely to be aggressive when they're 5, even when you account for possible confounding factors, according to a new study co-authored by Tulane University School of Public Health community health researcher Catherine Taylor.

The study, "Mothers' Spanking of 3-Year-Old Children and Subsequent Risk of Children's Aggressive Behavior," will appear in the May issue of *Pediatrics*.

"Toddlers that are spanked more frequently at age 3 are at increased risk for being more aggressive at age 5," said Taylor, assistant professor of Community Health Sciences at Tulane and lead author of the study. "We found this to be true even after taking into account other factors that might have explained this association such as the parents' level of stress, depression, use of drugs or alcohol, and the presence of other aggression within the family."

Study authors asked nearly 2,500 mothers how often they spanked their 3-year-old child in the past month, as well as questions about their child's level of aggression, demographic features and eight identified maternal parenting risk factors. Almost half (45.6 percent) of the mothers reported no spanking in the previous month, while 27.9 percent reported spanking one or two times, and 26.5 percent reported spanking more than twice. Mothers with more parenting risk factors were more likely to spank frequently. However, even accounting for these potential confounding factors, frequent spanking at age 3 increased the odds of higher levels of aggression at age 5. Signs of aggression included behaviors such as arguing or screaming; cruelty, bullying or meanness to others; destroys things; fighting and frequently threatening others.

Despite recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics against spanking, most parents in the United States approve of and have used corporal punishment as a form of child discipline. The study suggests that even minor forms of corporal punishment increase the risk for child aggressive behavior.

"There are ways to discipline children effectively that do not involve hitting them and that can actually lower their risk for being more aggressive," Taylor said. "So the good news is, parents don't have to rely on spanking to get the results that they want. If they avoid spanking but instead use effective, non-physical types of discipline, their child has a better chance of being healthier, and behaving better later."

The study, which is available online at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/>, is co-authored by Jennifer A. Manganello, assistant professor in the Department of Health Policy, Management and Behavior at the University at Albany, SUNY, School of Public Health; Shawna J. Lee, assistant professor at the School of Social Work at Wayne State University and Janet. C. Rice, associate professor of biostatistics at Tulane.