



# An Eriksonian Perspective on Physical Punishment and Its Impacts on Mental Health

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## ABSTRACT

Research has consistently found relationships between physical punishment in childhood and mental health problems throughout the life course, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicidal tendency. In this paper, we apply Eriksonian theory to examine the mechanisms whereby physical punishment may have its impacts. We explore development from birth to adolescence, considering the psychosocial crisis faced in each stage and the role physical punishment may play in disrupting their successful resolution. We integrate research findings to provide an empirical foundation for our arguments.

## KEYWORDS

Physical punishment; corporal punishment; mental health; psychosocial stages; Eriksonian theory

## Introduction

The foundational principle of psychoanalytic theories, that mental health is rooted in healthy child-caregiver relationships, has been repeatedly supported by empirical research (McCain and Mustard 1999; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004). All aspects of development – physical, cognitive, neurological, affective, linguistic – grow from the child’s primary relationships. Identity, selfhood, autonomy, trust, coping, and life satisfaction develop out of early experiences that affect children’s expectations of the world around them. One of the most influential psychoanalytic frameworks, conceived by Erik and Joan Erikson (Thomas 1997), described the complex unfolding processes whereby developmental pathways are shaped through interpersonal experiences.

One childhood experience common worldwide is the “everyday violence” known as physical punishment. Globally, 60% of children age 2 to 14 years experience it (UNICEF 2014) despite its documented associations with negative mental health outcomes. Even the “normative” form of physical punishment known colloquially and often dismissively as ‘spanking’<sup>1</sup> is consistently linked to lower self-esteem, lower moral internalization, weaker relationships with parents, more aggression, and more internalizing and externalizing problems in childhood (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016). It is also associated with more mental health problems, antisocial behavior, alcohol and drug use, and suicide attempts in adulthood (Afifi et al. 2017; Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016). In this article, we examine physical punishment from an Eriksonian perspective to describe the possible mechanisms through which it has its effects on children’s mental health through the first five stages of development – that is, from infancy through adolescence.

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## An Eriksonian analysis of physical punishment's impacts on development

Erik Erikson, student of Sigmund Freud and colleague of Anna Freud, collaborated with his wife, Joan Mowat Erikson, for six decades on a reconceptualization and extension of Freudian theory (Benveniste 1998). The Eriksons' theory became one of the most influential of the 20th century and remains an important framework for understanding development today. The Eriksons extended Freud's concepts beyond adolescence and, as ego psychologists, emphasized the role of social interactions over psychosexual phenomena in development within the social structure of society. But like Freud, they were stage theorists who held that successful development depended on successful navigation of each stage. They believed that development follows the epigenetic principle, unfolding according to an innate sequence, but influenced by family interactions and other social and cultural factors. The Eriksons proposed that humans develop sequentially through eight stages,<sup>2</sup> each of which is characterized by a psychosocial "crisis" that must be resolved in order to proceed to the next. Psychological growth is the result of the successful resolution of each crisis; in each stage, a "basic strength" emerges. Particular kinds of experiences at critical times can disturb this process, resulting in a "core weakness" that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully resolve the crises of subsequent stages without psychotherapy. In the following sections, we will integrate empirical findings on physical punishment with the first five Eriksonian stages in an effort to illuminate the mechanisms through which physical punishment can impact children's mental health.

### **Stage 1: basic trust versus mistrust**

The first crisis that infants must face grows out of their complete dependency on others to have their needs met. Unable to speak, feed themselves, or control any aspect of their environment, they must rely on caregivers to meet all of their physiological, sensory, and affective needs. Caregivers' responsiveness, therefore, is critical. If infants' cries are met with loving, sensitive and timely responses, they come to sense that their needs will be met and begin to establish fundamental trust in those around them. If this trust is not compromised, infants gradually become able to delay gratification in the immediate absence of their caregivers, as they sense that those caregivers will return to meet their needs. They also begin to develop trust in themselves, which becomes apparent in the emergence of early self-regulation – for example, crying less often and less intensely. The basic strength that develops with the achievement of basic trust is *hope* – an expectation that stresses and challenges can be overcome. If basic trust is not established, the infant does not acquire a sense of hope, which is manifested in withdrawal. Thus, the human capacity for coping develops within the earliest interpersonal relationships, whereby outer predictabilities become inner certainties (Erikson 1963). "Hope" is the belief that one can effect change, a belief that begins to form when caregivers respond to their infants' cries and meet their infants' physical and affective needs. This learning is the beginning of a sense of efficacy and self-worth.

What would the impact of physical punishment be during this stage? If a caregiver – rather than providing comfort and security, soothing the infant, and responding gently and sensitively – strikes out at the infant, Eriksonian theory would predict that this action will profoundly undermine trust. The infant will sense that the caregiver is unpredictable,

unreliable, and a source of pain that cannot be avoided other than by inhibiting expressions of need – that is, withdrawing. Rather than gaining a sense of security, the infant feels anxiety that cannot yet be articulated but that is manifested in the quality of the child's attachment to the caregiver, a concept pioneered by John Bowlby, who was a student of Melanie Klein, and further developed by his own student, Mary Ainsworth. As the Eriksons would predict, attachment grows out of consistent, sensitive, responsive caregiving that creates a sense of trust and security in the infant. An infant who is securely attached to a caregiver will seek proximity to that individual when distressed; the caregiver is relied upon as a protector. If, rather than protecting the child, the caregiver hurts the child, attachment is disrupted. The relationship becomes characterized more by fear and avoidance than by security and proximity.

Some empirical research has supported this proposition. For example, Coyl, Roggman, and Newland (2002) found that maternal spanking frequency was directly related to decreased infant attachment security at 14 months of age. Others have found that a punitive climate in the family of origin is related to fearful attachment in adults (Diehl et al. 1998). Of course, it is not uncommon for infants to be punished for the very proximity seeking that characterizes attachment; toddlers may be considered attention-seeking or non-compliant when they reach out in distress. Such painful and frustrating experiences may result in deactivation of the attachment system through denial or suppression of affective experience and inhibition of emotional expression (i.e., avoidant attachment). Alternatively, punishment for proximity-seeking may lead to hyperactivation of the attachment system as intense effort is directed toward satisfying the need for security (i.e., anxious attachment) (Mikulincer and Shaver 2008). The magnitude of these impacts is apparent in the findings of UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys: worldwide, 50% of infants aged 12 to 23 months experience physical punishment *on a regular basis* (UNICEF 2017). In the US, the proportion of infants who are spanked increases steadily through their first two years of life. MacKenzie et al. (2012) found that the rate increases from 10% of 10- and 11-month-olds to 25% of 15-month-olds, 40% of 18-month-olds, and 45% of infants 20 months of age and older. Among a national sample of children, Finkelhor et al. (2019) found a similar increase: while less than 8% of infants under 1 year of age had been spanked, 32% of 1-year-olds, and 52% of 2-year-olds had this experience.

Bowlby (like Winnicott) proposed that the patterns of attachment that emerge from caregivers' responses form the basis of the child's "internal working models" of relationships going forward, influencing the child's expectations of others' actions toward them. Thus, their "internal working models" now provide the lens through which children will view both their social worlds and themselves as they navigate subsequent stages of their development. Like the Eriksons, Bowlby and Ainsworth argued that attachment quality will affect the child's self-confidence and self-esteem, which are the platform for the second developmental stage.

### **Stage 2: autonomy versus shame and doubt**

The Eriksons' second stage of development is characterized by a crisis centered on the child's drive for autonomy, which becomes strongly apparent as toddlers acquire large and small motor skills, language, and independent mobility. They are driven to learn how to

do things for themselves, yet they do not yet have the experience or understanding needed to foresee danger, the verbal fluency needed to fully express themselves, or the emotional insight and perspective taking needed to consider their impacts on others. If caregivers respond with patience and understanding, they can support children's learning, gradually scaffolding their autonomy while keeping them safe. Toddlers also begin to realize that their goals may conflict with those of their caregivers, initially resulting in frustration and intense emotion that is difficult to manage and regulate, for child and parent alike. Those who are given opportunities to learn and practice self-regulation within a trusting relationship come to learn that they can tolerate and even master frustration – that they can cope and solve problems (Durrant 2016). They also will begin to learn about the impact of their behavior on others, which is the root of moral development. The basic strength acquired through successful resolution of this stage is *will* or *determination* – what we might today call “agency.”

But toddlers are frequently frustrated, misunderstood, and thwarted in their attempts at self-determination and punished for their emotional expression. Caregivers who attempt to control or coerce young children are often met with strong resistance, which they might interpret as “defiance” – a threat to their authority. Such caregiver attributions are likely to generate anger and aggression (Beckerman et al. 2018; Crouch et al. 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that, in some countries, the prevalence of physical punishment rises in this stage (Clément, Chamberland, and Bouchard 2015; Straus, Douglas, and Medeiros 2014). Globally, 63% of children aged 2 to 4 years regularly experience physical punishment (UNICEF 2017). In the US, Finkelhor et al. (2019) found that spanking peaked in this stage – more than 60% of children age 3 to 4 years in 2013–2014 had been spanked – declining thereafter.

What might be the impact of physical punishment on the child's quest for autonomy? Eriksonian theory would predict that children who are criticized, controlled, punished and hurt in response to their attempts at self-expression and self-determination will come to doubt their own abilities and decision-making, become dependent on others to tell them what to do and how to do it, and feel ashamed of their own ideas and quest for independence. They also will suppress their real emotions, leading to difficulties in self-regulation (impulsiveness, hyperreactivity) and/or compulsive avoidance of failure. There is empirical evidence of the Eriksons' prediction. For example, Bugental, Martorell, and Barraza (2003) found that toddlers whose mothers reported using physical punishment were more likely to be hyperreactive to stress. Neurodevelopmental research suggests that harsh parenting (shaking, pinching, threatening to slap, shouting, name-calling) “may overrule the role of genetic factors” in externalizing behavior (Windhorst et al. 2016, 12). This may be, in part, due to sympathetic nervous system activation, which mobilizes the brain and body for self-defense in situations of fear and anxiety. Repeated activation can lead to changes in cortisol and GABA production, impacting the child's capacity to regulate stress (Dodaj, Sesar, and Šimić 2018). Indeed, researchers have consistently found that slapping and spanking of toddlers predict higher levels of aggression, attentional difficulties, behavior problems, and impatience (Berlin et al. 2009; Callender et al. 2012; Gromoske and Maguire-Jack 2012; Lee et al. 2010, 2013; MacKenzie et al. 2012; Mendez et al. 2016; Okuzono et al. 2017; Scott et al. 2014; Taylor et al. 2010). Thus, rather than helping the child gain an internal capacity for self-regulation, physical punishment tends to impair children's capacity to manage their emotions on their own. As they begin

to increasingly imitate their caregivers' behavior in the next stage, these issues become compounded.

### **Stage 3: initiative versus guilt**

As toddlers grow into preschoolers, their skills, language, and mobility continue to expand, along with their capacity for symbolic thought and imaginative play. As artists and certified Montessori teachers, the Eriksons placed emphasis on play as a natural activity of this stage and a source of learning.<sup>3</sup> "Initiative" might be understood as autonomy with a longer-term goal. It involves planning and undertaking a task for the satisfaction and joy that come with mastery. Preschoolers can visualize a goal and intentionally take steps to achieve it, whether it is building a tower of blocks, setting up a scene for playing house, making up rules for a game, or learning to ride a bicycle. They begin to understand that they can direct social interactions and, to some extent, control outcomes. Through this stage, their interactions become more collaborative so that they can engage in joint problem solving with others. The basic strength to be achieved in this stage is a sense of *purpose*.

An essential aspect of successful development in this stage is learning by doing – exploring, experimenting, taking things apart and putting them back together – activities that can upset caregivers' sense of order. If caregivers provide a safe setting for exploration and materials for creative activity, and encourage preschoolers' imaginative play and experimentation, children have opportunities to construct new knowledge, solve problems, learn interpersonal skills, and master challenges. They learn by trying, failing, and trying again until they succeed. These experiences strengthen their sense of agency, which they are now learning to apply in a goal-directed way. Opportunities for mastery also strengthen children's sense of competence and confidence, their capacity to lead, and their understanding that their actions have an impact on the world around them, both positive and negative. They are intensely curious; their world is one of discovering how things (people and objects) work. They ask many questions to quench their thirst for knowledge and understanding. They become more attuned to the feelings of others and begin to develop empathy, which contributes to the growth of conscience and prosocial behavior. The emotion of guilt accompanies the growth of conscience, as young children begin to understand others' pain. This type of guilt is adaptive and necessary for guiding behavior throughout life.

It is during this stage that children's initiative can be misread as mischief or intentional naughtiness. Children whose attempts to solve problems, ask questions, or exercise their initiative are evaluated negatively with the moral judgment of "bad" are likely to develop feelings of guilt about their mastery drive and fear about expressing it. This type of guilt develops when children believe that they and their innate, adaptive drives are bad, immoral, inferior, evil or unhealthy. Guilt about being oneself will result in inhibition of social interaction for fear of hurting others; stifled creativity and mastery motivation for fear of doing something wrong; and a sense that one's ideas and questions are unimportant or unacceptable.

Physical punishment administered during this stage could lead to a general sense of fear or anxiety, which could interfere with moral internalization and conscience development. In the words of Hoffman (1994), "affect bears importantly on internalization: fear works

against it and empathy for it” (p. 26). Physical punishment in response to children’s initiative could lead to a sense of powerlessness and/or depression due to a belief that parts of oneself are “bad” and must therefore be suppressed. There is evidence to support these predictions. Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study showed that physical punishment at age 3 years was associated with a decrease in prosocial behavior and an increase in emotional problems at age 11 (Rajyaguru et al. 2019). Another analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study found that a warm and sensitive parent-child relationship was the factor most consistently associated with resilience to adversity between the ages of 3 and 7 years, while punishment did not ameliorate adversity’s effects (Flouri et al. 2015). UNICEF (2017) examined the socio-emotional development of children in 44 countries. In 84% of those countries, children who had been physically punished in the previous month were less likely to have achieved at least two of three social-emotional milestones: getting along well with other children; not kicking, biting or hitting other children or adults; and not getting distracted.

The most recent prevalence rates from the US indicate that about 62% of 4-year-olds and 52% of 5-year-olds have been spanked (Finkelhor et al. 2019). UNICEF (2014) compiled prevalence rates of psychological and/or physical punishment of 2- to 4-year-olds in 59 countries. They ranged from 45% in Mongolia and Panama to 95% in Tunisia.

#### **Stage 4: industry versus inferiority**

The school years expand the child’s social world in myriad and complex ways. They share space with diverse peers; learn the roles, rules and personalities of teachers, school administrators, and other adults; and encounter structures and expectations that are often new to them. It is common for implicit and explicit social comparisons to permeate children’s school days in the form of grades, report cards, assignments to groups based on achievement, and exclusion from particular peer groups. Children who navigated the previous stage successfully are likely to approach school with optimism, as they foresee exciting new challenges ahead of them. If the school climate is welcoming, accepting and inspiring – and the home climate remains secure and supportive – these children are likely to gain further confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. If they encounter tasks, people or situations that challenge them, they are likely to have confidence to persevere, strengthening their sense of accomplishment and fueling their pleasure in exerting effort. The basic strength to be achieved in this stage is *competence* – an amalgam of persistence, diligence, and mastery.

Children who came through the previous stage doubting their abilities and inhibiting their initiative will approach school with trepidation. They might exhibit anxiety about failure and develop *inertia* – or compulsion to achieve at the highest level and avoid failure at all costs. School achievement is layered with societal expectations and values; it is intimately tied to social approval. Once children are in school, they have entered a world that places common expectations on all students to achieve in those areas deemed valuable by the broader society. If, for any number of reasons, they are unable to achieve at the level of their peers, even those who entered school with a high level of initiative may become discouraged and believe that not only their abilities – but their very selves – are inferior. If children experience the humiliation of physical punishment in this stage, their anxiety will be compounded. Lansford et al. (2014) conducted interviews with 1,196

children aged 7 to 10 years and their mothers in eight countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Thailand, and the US), with follow-up interviews 1 and 2 years later. Physical punishment predicted increases in children's anxiety in all countries. In a study of 8- to 12-year-olds in New Zealand, Rodriguez (2003) found higher levels of anxiety symptoms among those children whose parents used harsher discipline practices. Wang, Wang, and Liu (2016) found that maternal physical punishment contributed significantly and uniquely to separation anxiety disorder, panic disorder and agoraphobia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder in elementary- and middle-school-aged children. These effects may continue to be borne out in adulthood. For example, Holmes and Robins (1988) found that being hit with objects or punched between the ages of 6 and 13 years strongly differentiated adults with depression and/or alcoholism from those without those diagnoses. In many countries outside of North America, physical and psychological punishments by parents peak in middle childhood (ages 5 to 9 years), with rates ranging from 46% in Costa Rica and Panama to 97% in Yemen (UNICEF 2014). US prevalence rates indicate that about 50% of 5- to 8-year-olds and 30–40% of 9- to 12-year-olds are spanked by their parents (Finkelhor et al. 2019). A recent study conducted across the US state of Florida found that physical punishment in the home may be linked to children's school performance. Between September and May of 2016, cases of physical violence against children increased by a factor of four on Saturdays preceded by a Friday report card release (Bright, Lynne, and Masyn 2019).

Moreover, children in this stage are now subject to violence inflicted by school authorities. Physical punishment remains legal in 66 countries (Global Initiative to End All Physical Punishment of Children, 2018). In some countries where it is illegal, it continues to be used (Gershoff 2017). Canings for mistakes on tests, public lashings for disobeying rules, strappings for being late for class or not doing homework – all of these degradations tell children that they are incompetent and unworthy of respect. School physical punishments include hitting with hands, sticks, leather straps or wooden paddles; pulling ears or hair; slapping the face; pushing students faces into desks; forcing children to hold stress positions, clean toilets with their hands, kneel on pencils, carry bricks, or dig holes under the hot sun; tying them to chairs; taping their mouths closed; depriving them of water, food or physical activity; and as many other acts as the human imagination can conceive. In some countries, children are subjected to such punishments because their parents are unable to pay school fees. In others, entire classrooms are punished for the behavior of one student. In a survey of 63 countries, Gershoff (2017) found that 11 had school physical punishment rates of 70–89% of students; nine had rates of over 90%. In the US, physical punishment remains legal in the public schools of 19 out of 50 states – and in the private schools of 48 states. During the 2013–2014 academic year, 109,000 students were physically punished in US schools (Sparks and Harwin 2016). Typically, this punishment involves striking them on the buttocks with a wooden paddle (Gershoff and Font 2016) – an inherently degrading and humiliating experience.

### **Stage 5: identity versus role confusion**

As children grow into adolescents, they reach “a turning point of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (Erikson 1968, 96). Their task is to increasingly separate themselves from their parents and assume their own unique identity. Just as they

experimented with objects as preschoolers, they now experiment with identities. The basic strength to be obtained in this stage is *fidelity* – truthfulness to one’s core self. Ego identity grows out of all preceding stages. Children who have come to view themselves as whole, loveable, worthy of respect and having purpose are more likely to navigate their identity crisis successfully, as they seek continuity with their past sense of self. The aim of this stage is to achieve coherence among all parts of the self.

In seeking ego identity, the youth is likely to engage with people and in activities that meet with parental and/or societal disapproval. Breaking social norms and violating school and family rules are the youth’s way of testing their value and deciding independently which ones to adopt. This behavior echoes that of the earlier stage of autonomy, when the child resisted boundaries in order to assert their own will. It is also common for youth to engage in what adults call “risk-taking behavior” – activities that involve some level of danger, but that are important to the youth for the opportunities they present to expand their sense of capability. Another hallmark of this stage is intense involvement with peers, a manifestation of growing separation from parents and an opportunity to observe and try out new ways of being. Parents who understand that their adolescent children are in search of the most valuable facet of development – a strong sense of self – will exercise patience and provide mentorship, support and guidance during this stage to optimize their children’s safety while providing opportunities for them to explore who they are (Jaureguizar, Ibabe, and Straus 2013).

But in many families, it is these important developmental tasks – norm-breaking, risk-taking, and peer involvement – that tend to provoke conflict between youth and their parents, largely due to parents’ fears about their children’s increasing autonomy. Many parents will react to their fear with control and punishment, to which many adolescents will respond with resistance. Rather than keeping the youth close, which is the parent’s goal, control and coercion push the youth away. The Eriksons would predict an outcome of repudiation or defiance of parents’ attempts to dominate them. These youth might adopt an identity that is in direct opposition to the parents’ demands, becoming aggressive, violent or antisocial. Indeed, a relationship between physical punishment in adolescence and increased aggression has been found in several studies. In a Spanish longitudinal study, physical punishment in this stage predicted a greater likelihood of psychological aggression against parents – a relationship that was not moderated by parental warmth (Hoyo-Bilbao, Gámez-Guadix, and Calvete 2018). A study conducted in China found that “harsh parenting” (yelling, beating with hands or objects, ejecting from the house) during adolescence predicted higher levels of aggression against peers (Wang 2017). A US longitudinal study using cross-lagged analysis found that mothers’ and fathers’ physical punishment of children aged 12 and 14 years predicted greater conduct problems (e.g., lying, stealing, fighting, damaging property) at ages 14 and 16 years, respectively, regardless of parental warmth (Wang and Kenny 2014). The authors conclude that “it is not sufficient for interventions to focus on increasing positive parenting in the home; rather, they need to target physical punishment specifically, and to focus on its elimination” (p. 728). Other US studies have found that parental physical punishment predicts lower prosocial attitudes and more violent intentions and perpetration among youth (DuRant et al. 1994; Ohene et al. 2006).

Alternatively, control and punishment may create fear that forecloses the youth’s opportunities to explore and understand who they truly are. These youth may adopt an

identity that pleases the parents but does not satisfy the soul. They may become apathetic or depressed, lacking passion, commitment, or purpose. There is evidence that physical punishment in adolescence predicts internalizing symptoms, unhappiness, depression, feelings of worthlessness, and hopelessness (DuRant et al. 1994; Lau, Liu, and Cheung 1999; Wang and Kenny 2014). The magnitude of these impacts at a population level can be seen when one considers that 22% of 13-year-olds and 11–18% of 14- to 17-year-olds in the US are physically punished by their parents (Finkelhor et al. 2019).

### Implications for later stages

Eriksonian theory predicts that the foundations built in childhood influence human mental health throughout the life course. The previous sections demonstrate that experiencing punitive violence at a critical point in development can have impacts on interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and coping – creating challenges for successful development through adulthood.

In order to successfully navigate the sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation, one must have a strong sense of self – which is rooted in trust and evolves with the growth of autonomy, initiative, and industry into a differentiated and unique identity. Without that foundation, the health of one's relationships will be compromised. Thus, if development through the first five stages has been impaired by punitive violence, early adulthood may be marked by difficulties in establishing intimate, loving, caring, safe relationships.

Evidence supporting this proposition can be found in research on intimate partner violence, which serves as a marker for difficulties in interpersonal communication and problem solving. In a prospective study of boys, physical punishment in early adolescence had a direct association with their later perpetration of dating violence (Simons, Lin, and Gordon 1998). A more recent longitudinal study confirmed these findings; even after controlling for sex, ethnicity, age, parental education, and child physical abuse, corporal punishment in childhood increased the odds of physical dating violence perpetration (Temple et al. 2017). In research conducted at 36 universities in 19 countries, Douglas and Straus (2006) found that, at each university site, the prevalence of physical punishment predicted the prevalence of assaulting and of injuring a dating partner. This association carries on into spousal relationships. Almost 40 years ago, Straus (1983) found that for both men and women, the more physical punishment experienced as a child, the higher the likelihood of assaulting a spouse. Later, Straus and Yodanis (1995) found that even when a range of potentially confounding variables are controlled (including exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood), there was a direct relationship between husbands' childhood experience of physical punishment by mothers and actual assaults on their wives, a link identified by other researchers, as well (Downs et al. 1992; Simons et al. 1993). Among women, childhood physical punishment predicts higher probabilities of both perpetrating spousal violence and being assaulted by husbands (Simons et al. 1993; Straus and Yodanis 1995). More recently, Afifi, Mota, and MacMillan (2017) found that children who experienced “harsh physical punishment” (pushing, grabbing, shoving, hitting and/or slapping without causing physical injury) were more likely to be victims and/or perpetrators of intimate partner violence as adults.

The Eriksons' seventh stage, spanning middle adulthood, is marked by generativity – nurturing a family, working creatively and productively, mentoring others, and

contributing to the larger community. Successful passage through this stage leads to a sense of leaving a mark on the world in a meaningful way. Those who are not successful are left with a sense of stagnation and disconnection. Generativity grows from the developmental pathway built in childhood; trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity and intimacy are its requisite building blocks. If they were not achieved, the capacity of the adult to find purpose and meaning is truncated. An examination of a national US data set lends support to this prediction. Afifi et al. (2017) studied adult health outcomes that serve as markers of the Eriksonian concept of stagnation: moderate to heavy drinking, use of street drugs, and suicide attempts. They found that “spanking” increased the odds of each of these outcomes, over and above experiencing physical and emotional “abuse” in childhood. They concluded that “spanking should be considered as an ACE [adverse childhood experience] that has the potential to negatively affect mental health outcomes” (p. 29). Others have also documented the relationship between corporal punishment in childhood and mental health in adulthood, including drug and alcohol use, depression, PTSD symptoms, hypochondriasis, and anxiety (Baer and Corrado 1974; Lynch et al. 2006; Medina et al. 2001; Schweitzer et al. 2011; Taillieu and Brownridge 2013; Turner and Muller 2004).

In their original formulation, the Eriksons proposed an eighth stage of life as the final stage. They conceptualized the focus of this stage as arriving at a sense of closure and completeness, and an acceptance of the end of life. They described successful navigation of this stage as one of ego integrity, manifested in wisdom and an absence of regret. Ego synthesis, and its interconnection with physical and interpersonal organization, results in a sense of coherence and wholeness in the face of terminal conditions (Erikson 1982).<sup>4</sup> Of course, achieving ego integrity in the face of impending death rests on all that went before. Satisfaction, lack of regret and wisdom at this stage are only possible if the pathway leading to this stage was one that consolidated trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy and generativity. Without all of these pieces in place, the final stage of life is one of regret and despair. There is a notable absence of research on associations between physical punishment in childhood and psychological well-being in old age. Given the body of literature on its long-term impacts, from infancy to middle age, it could reasonably be predicted that those individuals whose childhoods were marked by punitive violence will be more prone to depression, disengagement, and poor mental health at the end of life.

## Conclusion

Many studies have now demonstrated that physical punishment predicts poorer mental health in childhood and adulthood, measured in terms of depression, sense of purpose, self-esteem, alcoholism, substance abuse, and/or suicidal tendency (Gershoff 2002, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor 2016). It is doubtful that Joan and Erik Erikson would be surprised by these findings. Their theory – which identifies trust, security, and respect as foundational to developmental health – would predict that deliberate infliction of pain on children will undermine their successful passage along the developmental pathway. Of course, it is certainly the case that many children who experience physical punishment do not manifest mental health difficulties through life. It also is the case that many adults who do suffer as a result of their childhood experiences transcend those

experiences and heal their psychic wounds. A developmental approach assumes complexity – a multiplicity of interacting factors that change with time and can redirect an individual’s developmental trajectory. The Eriksons’ theory assumed, to a large degree, linear passage through development. Others have challenged this assumption, such as Galatzer-Lvey (2004), whose model is based on chaos theory. He proposes that while experience does shape development, its influence is not necessarily predictable. He suggests that “resilience” in the face of adversity is the result of the same mechanisms as those that lead to damage, such as interference with neural processing. What differs is the degree of opportunity to safely formulate solutions while “on the edge of chaos.” “Problematic or failed development results when the individual lacks the freedom to explore configurations of function in a sufficiently disorganized way that new possibilities can emerge” (Galatzer-Levy 2004, 435). This process can result in an abrupt qualitative systemic shift that re-organizes the personality. This formulation may help to explain why some children who face adversity, such as punitive violence, do not sustain lasting psychic damage – and why adults who have survived violence are able to achieve healthy intimate relationships and purposeful, meaningful lives.

We do know, however, that physical punishment is a significant developmental risk factor. The literature consistently shows that it predicts only negative, and never positive, outcomes throughout the life course. Thus, while it might be the case that some individuals can integrate and transcend violence in their early lives, the safer and more humane approach is to prevent that violence in the first place. A growing number of countries are taking action to eliminate punitive violence from children’s lives. At this time, 56 countries have legally abolished all physical punishment of children in all settings, including the home.<sup>5</sup> By doing so, they have proclaimed the importance of children’s healthy psychosocial development, both as an individual right and as a benefit to the larger society. In countries where these bans have been systematically studied, there is compelling evidence that they lead to rapid and dramatic reductions in approval of physical punishment, as well as its prevalence (Durrant 2019). Law reform is one pillar of a strategy to end physical violence against children. It is necessary in order to set a clear standard of caregiver conduct and to support the second pillar – public education focused on nonviolent, non-coercive methods of teaching and guiding children that build trust, respect autonomy, foster initiative and industry, provide space for identity development, and promote empathic, caring, collaborative interpersonal relationships (Durrant 2016; Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu 2017; Greene et al. 2004; Greene, Ablon, and Martin 2006).

We end with the words of the Eriksons, whose work illuminated the intricate and powerful connections among adverse experiences and psychic outcomes throughout the life course:

Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit; for such mutilation undercuts the life principle of trust, without which every human act, may it feel ever so good and seem ever so right, is prone to perversion by destructive forms of conscientiousness (Erikson 1993, 70).

## Notes

1. The word “spanking” is generally used to denote “everyday” physical punishment – typically, striking a child on the buttocks with an open hand. This term is troublesome because of its normalizing and trivializing connotation (Saunders 2018). We use the term in this paper only where it was used by the researchers we cite, for the sake of accurate reporting.
2. After Erik’s death, Joan Erikson added a ninth stage of “very old age” to their theory (Erikson 1997).
3. Joan Erikson held a master’s degree from Columbia Teachers College and was a dancer, artist, and art therapist who established a Montessori Nursery School in Massachusetts. Erik Erikson also had an interest in art. He became an art teacher at a psychoanalytically oriented school in Vienna and a certified Montessori teacher.
4. After Erik’s death, Joan Erikson, building on their previous work, identified a ninth stage, in which the oldest old (those in their late 80s and 90s) confront all of the previous eight stages once more, simultaneously. With the loss of physical capacity and personal relationships, trust in oneself and in the external world are eroded, as are autonomy, identity, intimacy and generativity. The struggle remains between ego identity and despair, but “despair, which haunts the eighth stage, is a close companion in the ninth because it is almost impossible to know what emergencies and losses of physical ability are imminent” (Erikson 1997, 105–6).
5. These countries are Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Austria, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cabo Verde, Congo, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Mongolia, Montenegro, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, San Marino, Slovenia, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Sweden, Togo, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uruguay, Venezuela.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**R. Ensom, MSW, RSW**, Ron Ensom, as a professional and volunteer, has pursued a life-long interest in children and families, child poverty, family violence, and child maltreatment. His work spans child welfare, resolving service barriers for hard-to-serve children, pediatric hospital and community management of child abuse and neglect, research, consultation and training, clinical private practice, advocacy, and provision of professional opinions in contentious child maltreatment cases. He has written a book on child sexual abuse, collaborated in developing the *Canadian Joint Statement on Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS)* and an educational video on SBS/AHT, and coauthored

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