School corporal punishment in global perspective: prevalence, outcomes, and efforts at intervention

Elizabeth T. Gershoff

To cite this article: Elizabeth T. Gershoff (2017) School corporal punishment in global perspective: prevalence, outcomes, and efforts at intervention, Psychology, Health & Medicine, 22:sup1, 224-239, DOI: 10.1080/13548506.2016.1271955

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2016.1271955

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 09 Jan 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 22613

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 28 View citing articles
School corporal punishment in global perspective: prevalence, outcomes, and efforts at intervention

Elizabeth T. Gershoff
Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

ABSTRACT
School corporal punishment continues to be a legal means of disciplining children in a third of the world’s countries. Although much is known about parents’ use of corporal punishment, there is less research about school corporal punishment. This article summarizes what is known about the legality and prevalence of school corporal punishment, about the outcomes linked to it, and about interventions to reduce and eliminate school corporal punishment around the world.

Corporal punishment of children has been the focus of increasing concern from researchers and policymakers around the world. The U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child has defined corporal punishment as ‘any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light’ (2007, ¶11) and has called it a form of violence against children. Much of the global concern about corporal punishment has focused on parents’ use of it (Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), yet it is also the case that corporal punishment in schools remains widespread. This article summarizes what is known to date about school corporal punishment around the world.

Definition and forms of school corporal punishment
Schoolchildren of all ages are subject to corporal punishment, although it is more often used in primary school (Clacherty, Donald, & Clacherty, 2005b; Human Rights Watch & the ACLU, 2008; Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998). In practice, school corporal punishment often involves the use of objects (Gershoff, Purcell, & Holas, 2015). Children around the world report that they are hit by their teachers with a variety of objects, including sticks (Egypt: Youssef et al., 1998), straps (Jamaica: Baker-Henningham, Meeks-Gardner, Chang, & Walker, 2009), and wooden boards (U.S.: Pickens County [Alabama] Board of Education, 2015). Children have reported being hit with hands or objects on virtually every part of their bodies, although the hands, arms, head, and buttocks are common targets (Ba-Saddik & Hattab, 2013; Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2006; Human Rights...
Watch & ACLU, 2008; Youssef et al., 1998). Other forms of assault administered as corporal punishment include pinching, pulling ears, pulling hair, slapping the face, and throwing objects (Ba-Saddik & Hattab, 2013; Beazley et al., 2006). Teachers and school personnel also punish children by forcing them to stand in painful positions, to stand in the sun for long periods, to sit in an ‘invisible chair’ for long periods, to hold or carry heavy objects, to dig holes, to kneel on small objects such as stones or rice, to exercise excessively without rest or water, and to ingest noxious substances (e.g. cigarettes) (Ba-Saddik & Hattab, 2013; Beazley et al., 2006; Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010; Hyman, 1995).

School administrators report that they reserve corporal punishment for serious student infractions, such as fighting with fellow students (Medway & Smircic, 1992), yet interviews with students make clear that corporal punishment is used more widely. Children in India, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, the United States, and Zambia have reported being subject to corporal punishment for a range of behaviors, including not doing their homework, coming late to class, bringing cell phones to school, running in the hallway, sleeping in class, answering questions incorrectly, having an unacceptable appearance, using bad language, writing in a text book, failing to pay school fees, making noise in class, and being absent (Beazley et al., 2006; Breen, Daniels, & Tomlinson, 2015; Clacherty, Donald, & Clacherty, 2005a; Clacherty et al., 2005b; Elbla, 2012; Human Rights Watch & ACLU, 2008; Mitchell, 2010; Morrow & Singh, 2014). Students also report that an entire class may be subject to corporal punishment for the misbehavior of a single student or because an entire class or school performs poorly on examinations (Beazley et al., 2006; Pinheiro, 2006).

**Legal status of school corporal punishment around the world**

Corporal punishment is legally prohibited in schools in 128 countries and allowed in 69 (35%) (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children [Global Initiative], 2016g). Table 1 lists each of the countries that allow school corporal punishment. It is banned in all of Europe and most of South America and East Asia. Three industrialized countries are outliers that continue to allow school corporal punishment: Australia, the Republic of South Korea, and the United States. In Australia, school corporal punishment is banned in 5 of its 8 states and territories, while in the United States it is banned from public schools in 31 of 50 states (Global Initiative, 2016g). A sampling of the laws that allow corporal punishment is presented in Table 2.

The United Nations has clearly stated that corporal punishment violates the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC) (United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007), specifically Article 19’s guarantee of protection from all physical and mental violence, Article 37’s protection from cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment, and Article 28’s provision that school discipline should be consistent with children’s ‘human dignity’ (United Nations, 1989).

It is worth noting that if an adult were to be hit with an object such as schoolchildren are, it would be considered assault in any of these countries. The 69 countries that legally permit school corporal punishment, to say nothing of the 149 countries that allow corporal punishment in homes, are not providing children with equal protection under the law, despite their more vulnerable status.
Global prevalence of school corporal punishment

Corporal punishment continues to occur in schools throughout the world, both in countries where it is legal and countries where it is banned, leading to estimates that millions of children are subject to legalized assault at their schools (Covell & Becker, 2011). Table 3 provides estimates of the prevalence of school corporal punishment in 63 countries. Twenty-nine of these countries have legally banned corporal punishment from schools, yet they have rates of corporal punishment ranging from 13% of students in Kazakhstan to fully 97% of students in Cameroon. South Africa banned school corporal punishment when it transitioned to a new government and a new Constitution that valued the rights of children in 1996. However, students have reported that corporal punishment continues to be a regular part of education in South Africa (Payet & Franchi, 2008).

Nine countries in this table have been found to have corporal punishment rates of over 90% of students (Botswana, Cameroon, Jamaica, St. Kitts & Nevis, Republic of Korea, Trinidad & Tobago, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, and Yemen) and 11 have rates of between 70 and 89% (Benin, Dominica, Egypt, Ghana, Grenada, India, Morocco, Myanmar, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, State of Palestine, and Togo). It is extremely troubling that virtually all children in these 20 countries are subject to corporal punishment in schools.
In light of the fact that children are likely to under-report corporal punishment because they are afraid of the repercussions (Morrow & Singh, 2014; Parkes & Heslop, 2013), the corporal punishment rates in Table 1 may be an underestimate of the actual rate in any of these countries. There is also considerable within-country variation that is masked by these statistics. For example, in the United States, corporal punishment is only allowed in 19 states, and thus when the rate for the entire country is calculated it is quite small at 1% of all schoolchildren, although the size of the child population in that country means that this represents a total of 163,333 children subject to corporal punishment in the 2011–2012 school year alone (Gershoff & Font, 2016). However, in the state of Mississippi, 7% of all
### Table 3. Prevalence of school corporal punishment in selected countries, regardless of legality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Legal status</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% of students reporting they were subject to corporal punishment</th>
<th>% of students or teachers reporting others were subject to corporal punishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>88% of girls beaten in schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>92% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>97% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>51% of males and 45% of females</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>28% hit with object, 14% had been pinched or had hair or ears pulled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>80% of boys, 62% of girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>38% of 8 year olds in past week; 12% of 15 year olds in past week</td>
<td>76% of 8 year olds observed in past week; 49% of 15 year olds observed in past week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>71% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>41% of females, 46% of males were punched, kicked, whipped, or beaten with an object in previous 12 months</td>
<td>83% of students report that it occurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>48% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>87% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>40% hit with an object in past two weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>40% hit with an object in past two weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>80% of respondents had seen students hit with a cane, 46% with a horsewhip, 30% with hand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>50% of students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>59% of students beat with object in previous 2 weeks; 20% of students hit with hand in previous 2 weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>88% of girls and 87% of boys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>90% of students in primary school (88% reported caning)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>98% of boys, 91% of girls</td>
<td>98% of boys, 99% of girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>32% of students in previous 2 weeks</td>
<td>67% of students report teachers use corporal punishment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Europe and Central Asia*

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Legal status</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
<th>% of students reporting they were subject to corporal punishment</th>
<th>% of students or teachers reporting others were subject to corporal punishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>23% of students had ear pulled, 18% had hair pulled, 20% were hit with a hand on their hand or fingers, 14% forced to stand or kneel in painful position</td>
<td>30% of teachers had slapped a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13% in past year</td>
<td>57% knew a child who had been beaten by a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13% in past year</td>
<td>57% knew a child who had been beaten by a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>43% in past three months</td>
<td>57% knew a child who had been beaten by a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FYR Macedonia</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>57% knew a child who had been beaten by a teacher</td>
<td>57% knew a child who had been beaten by a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53% of students</td>
<td>53% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78% of 8 year olds in past week; 34% of 15 year olds in past week</td>
<td>93% of 8 year olds observed in past week; 68% of 15 year olds observed in past week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78% of 8 year olds in past week; 34% of 15 year olds in past week</td>
<td>93% of 8 year olds observed in past week; 68% of 15 year olds observed in past week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>57% of students had been subject to severe violence (hitting with object, biting burning); 50% had been subject to mild violence (slapping, pulling hair, pinching, pushing, twisting arms or legs)</td>
<td>48% of teachers used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46% of students in previous month</td>
<td>46% of students in previous month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80% of students</td>
<td>80% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>80% of students</td>
<td>80% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of Palestine</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>90% of students</td>
<td>90% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>90% of students</td>
<td>90% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15% of boys and 9% of girls in previous 6 months</td>
<td>95% of students have seen school corporal punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58% of students (10% beat with an object)</td>
<td>58% of students (10% beat with an object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31% in past month</td>
<td>31% in past month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27% of boys and 9% of girls in previous 6 months</td>
<td>27% of boys and 9% of girls in previous 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.2% of students beaten</td>
<td>8.2% of students beaten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18% of students pinched, 16% spanked with hand or object</td>
<td>18% of students pinched, 16% spanked with hand or object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>98% of students</td>
<td>98% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41% in past year</td>
<td>41% in past year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95% of students have seen school corporal punishment</td>
<td>95% of students have seen school corporal punishment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### North, Central, and South America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>20% of 8 year olds in past week; 1% of 15 year olds in past week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>56% of students flogged at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>86% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>85% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>96% of boys and 89% of girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>30% of 8 year olds in past week; 7% of 15 year olds in past week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts &amp; Nevis</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>92% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>82% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vincent &amp; the Grenadines</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1% of all public school students nationally (7% in Mississippi, 4% in Alabama, 4% in Arkansas, 2% in Oklahoma; all other states 1% or less)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad &amp; Tobago</td>
<td>Banned</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>92% of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>59% of 8 year olds in past week; 13% of 15 year olds in past week; 69% of discipline involves physical punishment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dates refer to year of survey if available or to year of report if not. Source for prevalence data is report cited in section heading, unless otherwise indicated. 

- Global Initiative (2016a)
- Pinheiro (2006)
- Yousef et al. (1998)
- Ogando Portela and Pells (2015)
- United Nation’s Children’s Fund Kenya County Office et al. (2012)
- Save the Children Sweden (2011)
- Clacherty et al. (2005b)
- DeVries et al. (2015)
- Hecker et al. (2014)
- Clacherty et al. (2005a)
- Global Initiative (2016d)
- Global Initiative (2016e, 2016f)
- Global Initiative (2016c)
- Beazley et al. (2006)
- Global Initiative (2016b)
- Bailey, Robinson, and Coore-Desai (2014)
- Baker-Henningham et al. (2009)
- Gershoff and Font (2016)
public school children, or one in every 14, were subject to corporal punishment in that single year (Gershoff & Font, 2016).

**Concerns about school corporal punishment**

Although the majority of research to date on corporal punishment has been focused on parents' use of it (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), there is sufficient data on several potential outcomes of school corporal punishment to engender concern about its continued use around the world. Given the conclusion stated above that school corporal punishment is a form of violence that violates children's human rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007), arguments about its effects on children are, or at least should be, moot. After all, we have not needed research to decide that violence against women should be unlawful. That said, because some policymakers and citizens are more convinced by data on outcomes then by human rights arguments, this brief summary is provided.

**School corporal punishment can interfere with learning**

No children in any country behave well all of the time, and any child's misbehavior can be a detriment to their own learning and a distraction to the learning of his or her peers. It is thus necessary the world over for school personnel to institute some form of guidance and discipline. If it was effective at maintaining appropriate student behavior, school corporal punishment would be expected to predict better learning and achievement among students.

Yet there is in fact no evidence that school corporal punishment enhances or promotes children's learning in the classroom. In a cross-sectional study in Jamaica, school children who received one or two types of school corporal punishment scored lower on mathematics, and children who received 3 more types of corporal punishment at school scored lower on spelling, reading, and mathematics (Baker-Henningham et al., 2009). In a study in Nigeria, children who attended a school that allowed corporal punishment (slapping, pinching, hitting with a stick) had lower receptive vocabulary, lower executive functioning, and lower intrinsic motivation than children who attended a school that did not allow corporal punishment (Talwar, Carlson, & Lee, 2011).

The strongest demonstration of the links between school corporal punishment and children's learning to date has come from UNICEF's Young Lives study of children in four developing countries, namely Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam (Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015). The study followed children over time and linked corporal punishment at age 8 to school performance at age 12, thus eliminating the possibility that children's later school performance could predict their corporal punishment earlier in time. The study also controlled for a range of factors that might predict both whether a child receives corporal punishment and their school performance, namely age of the child, gender of the child, height-for-age, birth order, caregiver's education level, household expenditures, household size, and whether the child lived in an urban locale. Children from each country reported high rates of school corporal punishment (from 20 to 80% of children) when they were 8 years of age, and the more corporal punishment they received at age 8, the lower their math scores were in two samples (Peru and Vietnam) and the lower their vocabulary scores in Peru (Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015). Importantly, in none of the countries did school corporal punishment at age 8 predict better school performance at age 12.
One reason that corporal punishment may interfere with children's learning is that children avoid or dislike school because it is a place where they are in constant fear of being physically harmed by their teachers. In the Young Lives study, 5% of students in Peru, 7% in Vietnam, 9% in Ethiopia, and 25% in India reported that being beaten by teachers was their most important reason for not liking school (Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015). Interviews with students in Barbados, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe have revealed that school corporal punishment was painful, and that it made the adolescents hate their teachers, have difficulty concentrating and learning, perform less well in school, and avoid or even drop out of school for fear of being beaten (Anderson & Payne, 1994; Elbla, 2012; Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010; Gwirayi, 2011; Morrow & Singh, 2014; Naz, Khan, Daraz, Hussain, & Khan, 2011; Youssef et al., 1998).

School corporal punishment poses a significant risk for physical injury

Studies in a range of countries have documented high rates of injury related to school corporal punishment. School children in Zambia reported pain, physical discomfort, nausea, and embarrassment as well as feeling vengeful (Clacherty et al., 2005a). In Egypt, 26% of boys and 18% of girls reported that they had been injured by school corporal punishment, including bumps, contusions, wounds, and fractures (Youssef et al., 1998). A remarkably similar rate of injury was found in the United Republic of Tanzania, where nearly a quarter of the 408 primary school children surveyed said they experienced corporal punishment so severe that they were injured (Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2014). In the United States, schoolchildren have suffered a range of physical injuries that often require medical treatment, including bruises, hematomas, nerve and muscle damage, cuts, and broken bones (e.g. Block, 2013; C. A. ex rel G.A. v. Morgan Co. Bd. of Educ., 2008; Garcia ex rel. Garcia v. Miera, 1987; Hardy, 2013; Ingraham v. Wright, 1971). Over ten years ago, the Society for Adolescent Medicine (2003) estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 students required medical attention as a result of school corporal punishment each year in the U.S. alone.

Although rare, the U.N. has identified numerous cases of children who have died as a result of corporal punishment at school, including a 7-year old boy in Malaysia, a 9-year old boy in South Africa, an 11-year old girl in India, a 13-year-old girl in Sri Lanka, and a 14-year-old boy in the Philippines (Covell & Becker, 2011). Additional cases of children dying as a result of school corporal punishment have been documented in India (Morrow & Singh, 2014) and Nigeria (Chianu, 2000). Any injury to a child from corporal punishment is regrettable and a death at the hands of teachers is particularly tragic, especially given that it was preventable.

School corporal punishment is linked with mental health and behavioral problems

In addition to being physically painful and potentially injurious, school corporal punishment is also often emotionally humiliating for children (Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010). Feelings of humiliation can be heightened when children are punished in front of the class or when the child's reaction to the punishment is broadcast over the school's public address system in administrators' attempts to ‘teach a lesson’ to all of the children in the school (Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010; Human Rights Watch & the ACLU, 2008).
It is thus not surprising that school corporal punishment has been linked with mental and behavioral problems in children. School corporal punishment was the strongest predictor of depression among school children in a study in Hungary, more so than corporal punishment by parents (Csorba et al., 2001). Among a sample of Tanzanian children, school corporal punishment was linked with decreased empathic behavior (Hecker et al., 2014). In Pakistan, school corporal punishment was linked with greater hostility, pessimism, and depression (Naz et al., 2011). In a cross-sectional study in Egypt, children who were corporally punished reported that they were also more disobedient, stubborn, verbally aggressive, and likely to lie than children not corporally punished (Youssef et al., 1998). The Young Lives study found that more frequent school corporal punishment at age 8 predicted less self-efficacy 4 years later in Ethiopia and Peru and lower self-esteem 4 years later in Ethiopia and Vietnam (Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015). These findings support the conclusion that corporal punishment may cause children to experience mental health and behavioral problems.

Although the research on school corporal punishment and children’s mental health and behavior is limited, it should be noted that these findings are consistent with those from research on parents’ use of corporal punishment, namely that it is linked with more mental health problems and more problematic behavior (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). These links have been confirmed across race and ethnic groups in the United States (Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012) and across six different countries (China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand: Gershoff et al., 2010).

**Disparities in school corporal punishment by race, gender, ethnic group, or disability status**

Another source for concern is that certain groups are targeted for more corporal punishment than other groups. Boys, children from ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities are more likely to experience corporal punishment than their peers (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Covell & Becker, 2011; Dunne, Humphreys, & Leach, 2006; Lee, 2015). In the Young lives study, boys were more likely than girls to experience school corporal punishment in each country: Ethiopia: 44% (boys) vs. 31% (girls); India: 83% vs. 73%; Peru: 35% vs. 26%; Vietnam: 28% vs. 11% (Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015). In both Singapore and Zimbabwe, gender discrimination is written into law – only boys can be subject to school corporal punishment in these countries (see Table 2; Makwanya, Moyo, & Nyenya, 2012).

Disparities in school corporal punishment by gender, race, and disability status have been documented in the United States. Using data from all 95,088 public schools in the U.S., Gershoff and Font (2016) found that boys, racially Black children, and children with disabilities were more likely to be corporally punished in school than their peers. These disparities are in contravention of several U.S. federal laws that protect schoolchildren from discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and disability status (United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2015). Disparities in the use of school corporal punishment are concerning because students who perceive they are being treated in a discriminatory fashion are more likely to engage in negative school behaviors, to have low academic achievement, and to have mental health problems (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007).
Costs to society

If countries are not motivated to eliminate school corporal punishment out of respect for children's human rights or concern for their welfare, they may be motivated by potential benefits to their bottom line. Researchers with Plan International estimated the economic costs to society from the continued use of school corporal punishment in India, focusing on costs that accrue from lower achievement, lower earnings, higher physical and mental health needs, and higher reliance on social services (Pereznieto, Harper, Clench, & Coarasa, 2010). They calculated that the costs to society of children dropping out of school as a result of school corporal punishment were between $1.5 billion and $7.4 billion in lost benefits to society each year, which is the equivalent to between .13% and .64% of GDP in India alone (Pereznieto et al., 2010). Multiplied by the 69 countries that still allow school corporal punishment, and the large number of countries that turn a blind eye to the continued use of corporal punishment despite legal bans, the costs of school corporal punishment to global society is staggering.

They way forward: ending school corporal punishment

The data summarized above makes clear that school corporal punishment is consistently linked with harm to children's learning, physical safety, and mental health, and that it is not effective at maintaining discipline and facilitating academic achievement. Ending school corporal punishment will require educating the public about harms of corporal punishment, instituting appropriate sanctions for continued use of corporal punishment by school personnel, monitoring compliance with bans, creating procedures for students, parents, or staff to report use of corporal punishment, and instructing teachers in alternative methods of discipline (Global Initiative, 2016b). Advocacy and public education campaigns that combine the efforts of governmental and non-governmental agencies are needed to raise awareness about the harms of corporal punishment among teachers, parents, and children (Save the Children Sweden, 2011).

The United Nations has called on countries to ban corporal punishment in all settings, including schools, in order to ensure the safety of children and to be in compliance with the CRC (Pinheiro, 2006; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007). According to the Global Initiative (2016a), 30 states were advised to end all corporal punishment by United Nations treaty bodies, and 26 countries were so advised during their Universal Periodic Reviews (Global Initiative, 2016a). Legal bans on school corporal punishment, and ideally on all corporal punishment of children in any setting, would be welcome steps toward ensuring children's safety and well-being in school settings. Yet as demonstrated above and in Table 3, legal bans are not sufficient to completely eliminate school corporal punishment. True behavior change by teachers and school administrators will require education about the harms of corporal punishment and about alternative, positive forms of discipline (Pinheiro, 2006).

There are a limited number of school- and community-level interventions to reduce school corporal punishment, but their results to date are very promising. The most rigorous test of a corporal punishment reduction intervention was the randomized controlled trial evaluation of the Good Schools Toolkit in Uganda (DeVries et al., 2015). The intervention, developed by a Ugandan non-profit organization called Raising Voices, involved
extensive staff training on non-violent disciplinary methods as well as staff coaching from program staff. The Toolkit also involves classroom activities linked to a sequence of 6 steps aimed at reducing teachers’ use of corporal punishment and increasing their use of positive disciplinary methods (see: raisingvoices.org/good-school). Schools that implemented the Good Schools Toolkit saw a 42% reduction in the number of students who reported they had been victims of violence from school staff. There were no effects of the intervention on students’ behavior problems or on their educational performance (DeVries et al., 2015), which importantly refutes arguments that removing corporal punishment will lead to an increase in students’ problem behaviors and decrease their learning at school.

Another promising intervention is ActionAid’s Stop Violence Against Girls in School multilevel intervention designed to reduce violence across multiple settings, including schools, through a combination of advocacy and education about topics such as the importance of gender equity and about the harms of corporal punishment (Parkes & Heslop, 2013). The program was implemented simultaneously in Ghana, Kenya, and Mozambique from 2007 to 2013 and yielded significant results. In all three countries, the percentage of students and teachers who thought teachers should not whip students increased, and the percent of girls who reported experiencing corporal punishment in schools also decreased. For example, in Mozambique, the percentage of girls saying they had been caned in the previous year dropped from 52% to 29%. Additional impacts were found in school participation and achievement. The intervention schools saw increases in girls’ enrollment increase by 14% in Ghana, 17% in Kenya, and 10% in Mozambique over the five years of the evaluation and an accompanying decrease in dropouts among both boys and girls in Ghana and Kenya (Parkes & Heslop, 2013). In qualitative interviews, teachers reported that caning had reduced drastically, but also reported that they had not been instructed in alternative forms of discipline and so were left not clear how to manage students’ behavior (Parkes & Heslop, 2013). Clearly, interventions to reduce corporal punishment will only be effective if they provide teachers instruction in alternative, effective methods.

Similar interventions have been tried elsewhere in the world, although many have yet to be rigorously evaluated. For example, the organization Plan International initiated its Learn Without Fear campaign in 2008 to promote legal bans on corporal punishment in schools and protect children from all forms of violence in school. It trained over 50,000 teachers in non-violent disciplinary methods and worked with teachers’ unions in 20 countries; it also engaged in awareness raising activities through a variety of media that reached over 110 million people (Global Advocacy Team, Plan International, 2012). The organization touts as success the fact that several countries they worked with passed legislation or regulations banning school corporal punishment (Global Advocacy Team, Plan International, 2012), but the impacts on individual children were not assessed.

**Conclusion**

School corporal punishment is a fact of life for millions of children around the world, despite no evidence that it promotes learning and substantial evidence that it instead is linked with physical harm, mental and behavioral health problems, and impaired achievement. It is encouraging that 128 countries have banned corporal punishment, but there is still much work to be done to educate teachers about alternatives to corporal punishment so that they completely abandon its use in schools. Legislative reform, advocacy, and education are
each needed to ensure that school corporal punishment is abandoned once and for all and that children can attend school without fear of violence at the hands of school personnel.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This work was supported by Know Violence in Childhood.

**References**


Garcia ex rel. Garcia v. Miera, 817 F.2d 650, 652–53 (10th Cir. 1987).


