



Spare the Rod?: College Students' Experiences with and Perceptions of Corporal Punishment

Christina Policastro¹ · Zachary Rush¹ · Tammy S. Garland¹ · Courtney A. Crittenden¹

Accepted: 31 January 2024
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Abstract

Corporal punishment (e.g., spanking) remains a highly debated yet common form of discipline in the United States. A body of research exists investigating the prevalence and effects of corporal punishment; however, less attention has been devoted to factors influencing individual perceptions of corporal punishment. The current study explores college students' perceptions of corporal punishment with a specific focus on students' experiences with physical discipline and factors that may influence students' intentions to use physical discipline with their own children. Relying on a convenience sampling methodology, the current research is based on a sample of 318 students, who participated in a pen-and-paper survey. Findings reveal that most students experienced corporal punishment (86.8%) and roughly three-quarters intend to use physical discipline with their children. Moreover, positive attitudes towards physical forms of punishment were positively associated with intentions to use corporal punishment ($OR = 1.494$; $***p < 0.001$). Despite most participants reporting experiences with corporal punishment and intending to use physical discipline with their children, many felt better disciplinary methods were available. Given that attitudes were correlated with intention to use, educational programs and curricular endeavors to inform individuals of the negative impact of corporal punishment, as well as alternative non-physical discipline strategies are recommended as ways to reduce reliance on physical forms of discipline.

Keywords Corporal punishment · Spanking · Child maltreatment · Child abuse

Highlights

- Most college students sampled reported personal experience with physical discipline as children (86.8%).
- Most college students intend to use corporal punishment (75.2%) as a discipline strategy with their children.
- Most participants (71%) believed there were better ways to punish a child than using corporal punishment.
- Attitudes towards corporal punishment were the only variables associated with intention to use physical discipline in multivariate models.

Corporal punishment, most notably spanking, is arguably one of the most controversial, yet widely implemented child discipline strategies employed by parents in the United States (U.S.). Studies have demonstrated that spanking is associated with a host of harmful consequences including, but not limited to depression, delinquency, adult offending, aggression, and weak parent/child bonding (Berlin et al.,

2009; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2010; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Kandel, 1990; Pagani et al., 2004; Simons et al., 2013; Straus & Paschall, 2009). As a result of such research, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released a policy statement in 2018 advocating against the use of physical punishment strategies and encouraged physicians to tell parents/caregivers they should not spank and/or hit children as a means of discipline (Sege et al., 2018). While its use has declined over the past several years, spanking remains a relatively common practice in the U.S. despite empirical evidence of its harmful effects. Finkelhor and colleagues (2019) found that more than 1 in 3 (37%) caregivers in their nationally representative sample reported spanking their children (ages 0 to

✉ Christina Policastro
christina-policastro@utc.edu

¹ Department of Social, Cultural, & Justice Studies, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN 37403, USA

17). Moreover, data from the 2018 administration of the General Social Survey showed that roughly 66% of participants agreed/strongly agreed that it is “sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking” (Smith et al., 2018, n.p.).

The existing literature on perceptions of corporal punishment is limited. Research recognizing who favors corporal punishment and discerning why they favor spanking and similar discipline is integral to understanding the processes underlying physical punishment. Such studies identify, first, who needs to be made aware of the consequences of corporal punishment and, second, the reason(s) why certain groups employ physical discipline. To add to the extant literature, the current research explores college students’ experiences with and perceptions of corporal punishment. It is important to examine the experiences and perceptions of college students because research has linked higher educational attainment to less favorable attitudes toward physical punishment strategies (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Flynn, 1996; Jackson et al., 1999; Straus & Mathur, 1996) and potentially to less use of corporal punishment. Moreover, national data indicates that Generation Z, individuals born after 1996, are more likely to complete high school and enroll in college compared to both Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation X (born 1965–1980) (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). College students are traditionally within the late adolescent stage of the life course (i.e., ages 18 to 24), and many will transition into the role of parent as they progress into adulthood although it appears this transition is occurring later and later with every generation. The median age of first-time mothers in the U.S. has consistently risen over the past 10 years with the average age of first-time moms reaching 27 years old in 2021 (Schaeffer & Aragao, 2023). National data also indicates that women are postponing motherhood to pursue higher education and secure workforce positions (Livingston, 2018). Nevertheless, the rate of motherhood among highly educated women is increasing (Geiger et al., 2019). The limited research on fathers also indicates that the average paternal age has increased over time (Khandwala et al., 2017), and there is also evidence that a greater percentage of fathers are staying home with their children compared to past decades (Fry, 2023). Thus, it is imperative that research explores contemporary college students’ experiences with and attitudes toward physical discipline.

Defining Corporal Punishment and Prevalence

The term “corporal punishment” is often used to refer to spanking, however, physical discipline can take on many forms and researchers often disagree on what behaviors are considered corporal punishment versus abuse (see Gershoff,

2002). Straus and Donnelly (2001) defined corporal punishment as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (pg. 4). This broad definition can include spanking with a closed hand, open hand, and/or an object, as well as other forms of physical punishment like pinching or washing out a child’s mouth with soap. Most research has focused solely on spanking to determine the prevalence of corporal punishment. Studies identify that spanking is associated with the age of the child and that spanking generally peaks in the toddler age group and declines as children age (see Finkelhor et al., 2019; Straus & Stewart, 1999).

In one of the earliest nationally representative studies, over one-third of parents reported that they had employed some form of corporal punishment to discipline their infants and 94% reported they used corporal punishment to discipline their toddlers (ages 4 to 5) (Straus & Stewart, 1999). The percentage of parents using corporal punishment by the time their children were 14 declined to roughly 40% and approximately 20% by the time children were 17 (Straus & Stewart, 1999). In a more recent study relying on data from a nationally representative sample in 2014, Finkelhor and colleagues (2019) found a similar trend. They found that parents’ use of spanking increased sharply at age 2, peaked between ages 3 and 4, remained prevalent until age 7 then began to steadily decline until age 17. Overall, 49% of parents of children ages 0 to 9 in their sample reported spanking their child in the past year and nearly a quarter (23%) of youth between 10 and 17 self-reported that they were spanked in the past year (Finkelhor et al., 2019). In terms of gender differences in corporal punishment experiences, the literature is mixed. Some studies indicate that girls are less likely to be subjected to corporal punishment compared to boys (Day et al., 1998; Dietz, 2000; Giles-Sims et al., 1995; Finkelhor et al., 2019), while others find no gender differences (Regalado et al., 2004; Taillieu et al., 2014).

Trends in Use and Approval of Corporal Punishment

In addition to identifying overarching trends in the use of physical punishment, the literature has identified key demographic and geographic differences in the use and approval of spanking. Research suggests that regional location influences the use of corporal punishment with individuals in the Southern region of the U.S. being more likely to approve of physical discipline (Flynn, 1994; Gershoff & Font, 2016), as well as more likely to spank their children compared to other regions in the U.S. (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Gershoff, 2002; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Flynn (1996) proposed that regional differences may stem from differences in education with his study finding higher levels of parental education being associated with the

Northeast compared to the South. Overall, studies suggest that higher levels of education are associated with less favorable attitudes towards corporal punishment, as well as less use of physical discipline (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Flynn, 1996; Jackson et al., 1999; Straus & Mathur, 1996). This may be attributable to increased familiarity with the consequences of corporal punishment, which accompanies higher education (Finkelhor et al., 2019).

Racial composition may also partially explain regional differences in the use of corporal punishment. The black population is most highly concentrated in the South (Tamir, 2021), and research has shown that black individuals are more likely than white individuals and non-white Hispanic persons to both favor and employ corporal punishment (e.g., Berlin et al., 2009; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Dietz, 2000; Jambunathan et al., 2000; Lorber et al., 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2011; Pinderhughes et al., 2000; Wissow, 2001). These differences are likely associated with socioeconomic status (SES) and being previously punished with corporal punishment. More specifically, black persons are disproportionately represented in lower socioeconomic groups (Vittrup & Holden, 2010), and various studies contend that individuals who belong to lower socioeconomic groups more often approve of and employ corporal punishment when disciplining children compared to higher socioeconomic groups (Dietz, 2000; Friedson, 2016; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Pinderhughes et al., 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Dietz (2000) argues the association between low SES and spanking is a symptom of increased stress, resulting from financial pressures, that augments parents' sensitivity to even the most trivial of their children's incivilities.

Religious influences, most notably conservative Protestantism, could also contribute to differences in the use and approval of corporal punishment across regions and races. Conservative Protestantism has been tied to increased use (Flynn, 1996; Wiehe, 1990), as well as approval of physical discipline (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Grasmick et al., 1991; Grasmick et al., 1992; Hoffman et al., 2017; Wiehe, 1990) and it is prevalent within the region of the Southern U.S. known as the "Bible Belt." The location of the "Bible Belt" is debated in the literature but is generally considered to span from Northern Texas to the Western region of North Carolina. The center of the "Bible Belt" or its "buckle" is traditionally viewed as falling in Eastern Tennessee (Brunn et al., 2011). There are several reasons that religious groups, specifically conservative Protestantism, may be linked to attitudes about physical punishment. First, conservative denominations within Protestantism often argue that the Bible is inerrant, dictates how its followers should live, and should be read literally (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009; Wiehe, 1990). The Bible contains multiple passages related to physical discipline and much of this content praises and condones parental use of

physical punishment when disciplining children (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009). For instance, Proverbs 23:13-14 (NIV) reads "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod and save them from death." It is important to note that not all Christians nor Protestant denominations agree on the interpretation of the Bible. For instance, Wiehe (1990) reports that Southern and Independent Baptist, Church of God, Holiness, Nazarene, and Pentecostal followers more often literally interpret the Bible when compared to Roman Catholics, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, which may explain fundamentalist evangelicals' increased use and acceptance of corporal punishment as compared to other Christian denominations.

Impact of Personal Experience on Perceptions of Corporal Punishment

Experiences with corporal punishment are especially relevant to individual perceptions of the acceptability and effects of physical discipline as the influence of personal experience and perception on future use of corporal punishment are likely related. That is, individuals who experience corporal punishment are likely to approve of its usage, and individuals who approve of its usage may be likely to practice this form of discipline. Unsurprisingly, research demonstrates that individuals who were subject to corporal punishment as children are more likely to favor the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Gagne et al., 2007; Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Witt et al., 2017). Scholars have suggested that individuals who favor corporal punishment are likely to use this practice with their own children and/or approve of its use with children more broadly (Flynn, 1998). For example, Simon and Wurtele (2010) found that 87% of sampled children who were commonly spanked supported corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure for punishing a brother/sister, compared to 20% of children who never experienced corporal punishment. These findings may best be explained by what academics refer to as the "cycle of violence" theory. In general, the cycle of violence theory asserts children who have experienced repetitive violence are at a greater risk of becoming violent themselves (Witt et al., 2017). Straus and Donnelly (2001) argue that when parents employ corporal punishment, they are teaching their children that spanking, slapping, and/or hitting loved ones (e.g., children) who "do wrong" is acceptable and appropriate.

Current Study

Despite a growing body of research on the use and approval of spanking (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Finkelhor et al.

2019; Gagne et al., 2007; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2017), as well as a variety of studies examining the effects of corporal punishment (Berlin et al., 2009; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2010; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Kandel, 1990; Pagani et al., 2004; Simons et al., 2013; Straus & Paschall, 2009), the existing literature on corporal punishment is somewhat limited and some is quite dated. Therefore, we employ recent data from a college student sample to add to the extant literature and explore the following research questions:

1. How prevalent was corporal punishment in college students' childhoods? Specifically, what percentage of college students report that physical discipline was used in their homes as a child and what forms of corporal punishment were employed by their parents/guardians?
2. Do college students believe corporal punishment is an acceptable and efficient means of disciplining children?
3. Do college students use or intend to use corporal punishment to discipline their own children? Moreover, what characteristics influence their intention to use physical discipline with their own children?

Method

Data and Sample

The data for the current research is based on a homogenous convenience sample, or one where at least one socio-demographic characteristic is similar (Jager et al., 2017) which for this study was education level (i.e., some college), of 318 undergraduate students attending a mid-sized southern university during the fall of 2017. The project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all participants provided informed consent prior to survey completion via a form requesting their signature should they consent. The research team reached out to professors who taught courses in social science and asked them to permit their students to participate in a pencil-paper survey during their regularly scheduled course time, a technique that has been justified when exploring a variety of attitudinal measures (see Dierenfeldt et al., 2021). Most classes recruited were Criminal Justice courses, however, several of the courses were broad, introductory-level and general-education courses that enroll majors from across the university. All students in the sampled courses were invited to participate and students who were enrolled in more than one class sampled were instructed to only participate once

Table 1 Sample demographics

	<i>n</i>	%	\bar{x}	<i>s</i>	Median	Range
Sex						
Male	108	34.2	–	–	–	–
Female	208	65.8	–	–	–	–
Race						
White	246	79.6	–	–	–	–
Non-white	63	20.4	–	–	–	–
Sexual Orientation						
Heterosexual	293	92.4	–	–	–	–
Other	24	7.6	–	–	–	–
Political Affiliation						
Republican	130	42.2	–	–	–	–
Other	178	57.8	–	–	–	–
Protestant						
Yes	226	71.7	–	–	–	–
No	89	28.3	–	–	–	–
Criminal Justice Major						
Yes	113	36.2	–	–	–	–
No	199	63.8	–	–	–	–
Age	–	–	19.99	3.55	19.00	18–52

in the study. The survey instrument incorporated a variety of measures including items assessing participants' demographics and experiences with corporal punishment, as well as their attitudes towards corporal punishment as a discipline strategy. See Table 1 for sample characteristics. The sample demographics in terms of racial composition were very similar to the university from which it was drawn. Females, however, were slightly overrepresented in the sample (65.8%) compared to the university's gender composition (56% female undergraduates). An overrepresentation of women in convenience sampling is not uncommon when examining attitudes of college students (see Crittenden et al., 2021).

Measures

Corporal punishment experience items

To ensure participants were conceptualizing corporal punishment as intended, the survey included Straus and Donnelly's (2001) definition of corporal punishment as a reference. This definition was provided before participants were asked any questions related to corporal punishment. Participants were also presented with a few examples of physical discipline strategies to illustrate this form of discipline, as well as instructed to consider only physical discipline used by parents/guardians when answering questions. More specifically, participants were provided with the following passage:

“For this survey, “Corporal punishment,” is considered to be physical force resulting in pain or discomfort, but not significant injury, and is meant to alter a child’s unfavorable behavioral patterns (Straus & Donnelly, 2001, p. 4). For example, punishments such as spanking of the buttocks and legs or a slapping of the hands would be considered corporal punishment. For this survey, we are only interested in corporal punishment used by parents and/or guardians of children.”

A single item was used to gauge participants’ *personal experience with corporal punishment*. Each participant was asked: Did your parent(s)/guardian(s) ever use corporal punishment to discipline you when you were growing up? Responses were coded as “yes” (1) and “no” (0). If participants answered “yes” to this question, they were then prompted to indicate which *forms of corporal punishment their parents employed* during their childhood. The survey included the following for participants to select: spanking of the buttocks or legs, slapping of the hands, slapping of the face, shoving, excessive exercise drills (e.g., running long distances), subjection to painful body positions, subjection to foul odors (e.g., vinegar), subjection to foul tastes (e.g., lemon juice in the mouth), pinching, shaking, and a category of “other” where participants could write in other forms not previously listed. Participants who indicated they had been subject to corporal punishment were also asked if their *parent(s)/guardian(s) used an object(s) when administering punishment* (responses coded “yes” (1) and “no” (0)). Participants who indicated their parent/guardian used an object when enacting punishment were asked to indicate the type of objects employed. Response categories included: belt, paddle, hairbrush, switch (e.g., stick from a tree), fly swatter, spoon/spatula, and an “other” category for participants to indicate other objects that were not listed. The response categories for forms of punishment and types of objects were based on information gleaned from existing studies of corporal punishment (see Straus & Donnelly, 2001).

Finally, participants were also asked whether they *intend to use corporal punishment* with their own children. More specifically, they were asked: If you have or were to have children/dependents in the future, would you ever use corporal punishment? (yes = 1; no = 0). If respondents answered in the affirmative, they were then asked to indicate which forms of punishment they plan to use with the same forms listed as were available for their past experiences with corporal punishment. Most participants indicated that they did not have any children or dependents ($n = 306$). Only eight participants reported currently having children/dependents, thus the study focuses on students’ intentions to use corporal punishment in the future. The participants who

currently had children were included in subsequent analyses as the question posed referenced both currently having children or if the participant were to have children. Supplementary analyses excluding the participants with children ($n = 8$) remained consistent with the models including participants with children.

Attitudes towards corporal punishment items

Based on a review of the existing literature, items were created and/or adapted from existing measures to gauge college students’ overall attitudes towards all forms of physical discipline, not just spanking. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several statements related to their perception of corporal punishment’s acceptability, effectiveness, and effects. Three items were included to examine views of the *acceptability of corporal punishment* for three different age groups (i.e., less than two years old, ages two to 10, ages 13 to 17). All three items contained the same wording yet changed the age group referenced. For instance, for young children, the item stated: “Corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline for very young children (less than 2 years old) who misbehave.” Similarly, three items were included to measure the *perceived effectiveness of corporal punishment* as a discipline strategy for the same three age groups. For example, the following item was included: “Corporal punishment is an effective form of discipline for young children (ages 2–12) who misbehave.” Participants were asked to rank their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). These six items were used to create a summative scale that tapped into “*positive corporal punishment attitudes*” with higher scores indicating more positive views on the acceptability and effectiveness of corporal punishment as a disciplinary method (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.73).

Two additional items were incorporated to tap into college students’ views on other discipline strategies and perceptions of the effects of corporal punishment. First, the survey included an item adapted from an existing item employed by Gershoff and colleagues (2016): “There are better ways to punish a child than using corporal punishment.” Participants were also asked to rate their agreement with the statement: “Corporal punishment results in emotional harm (e.g., low self-esteem, depression, anxiety) to children and adolescents who experience this form of discipline.” Responses to these two items were on a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Participants’ responses were recoded to reflect whether participants strongly agreed/agreed (1) or strongly disagreed/disagreed (0) with each of these items.

Demographic items

We also incorporated several measures of key demographic characteristics relevant to experiences and perceptions of corporal punishment. Sex, race, age, and Protestant religious affiliation were included since these variables have been tied to the acceptance and use of corporal punishment within the broader literature. We also explored the impact of political affiliation, sexuality, and Criminal Justice major status. These variables have not been thoroughly explored in the corporal punishment literature. Studies have linked these variables to individual perceptions and attitudes towards other topics like rape myth acceptance (e.g., Hancock et al., 2021), bullying (e.g., Garland et al., 2017), drug policy (e.g., Garland et al., 2012), and approval of police use of force (e.g., Dierenfeldt et al., 2023). Therefore, these measures were included to determine if they have an impact on the intention to use physical forms of discipline.

Sex was coded as male (0) and female (1). Race was coded as white (0) and non-white (1). Age was measured as a continuous variable in years. Each participant was asked to indicate their *political affiliation* based on the following response categories: republican, democrat, independent, and other. To examine the impact of conservative political affiliation, the responses were recoded to reflect republican (1) and other political affiliations (0). *Sexuality* was based on a single item asking participants to report their sexual orientation. Due to low variation, responses were collapsed into heterosexual (coded “0”) and non-heterosexual (including bisexual, homosexual, pansexual, asexual, and a category of “other”; coded as “1”). Considering findings in the literature that conservative Protestants are often more favorable of physical discipline (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Grasmick, Bursick, & Kimpel, 1991; Grasmick et al., 1992; Hoffman et al., 2017; Wiehe, 1990), the study also included a measure to examine the impact of being Protestant. Participants were asked to identify their religious affiliation and responses were coded to indicate whether participants were *Protestant* (coded as “1”) or not (coded as “0”). Most of the sample indicated they were Protestant ($n = 226$; See Table 1).

Analytic Plan

The current study proceeded in steps. First, univariate statistics were estimated to examine the distribution of variables and the characteristics of the sample. These findings are presented in detail to describe the experiences and overall attitudes of college students regarding corporal punishment. Second, bivariate statistics (i.e., chi-square analyses and independent sample t-tests) were estimated to explore the relationships between variables used to predict

intentions to use corporal punishment. Finally, a multivariate logistic regression model was estimated to investigate the characteristics that influence college students' intentions to use corporal punishment with their own children.

Results

Corporal Punishment Experiences

Overall, nearly 87% of the sample reported that their parents/guardians used corporal punishment to discipline them when they were growing up (see Table 2). The most common form of corporal punishment reported by participants was spanking of the buttocks/legs with nearly 98% of individuals who reported experiencing corporal punishment indicating they had been spanked. The next most common form of physical discipline was slapping of hands with 49.3% of individuals who were physically disciplined reporting this form of corporal punishment. Participants were able to select all forms of punishment employed by their parents/guardians. Therefore, an item was created that summed all types of corporal punishment to examine the prevalence of multiple forms of physical discipline. The mean score on this summative item for the sample was 2.38 ($s = 1.54$; range: 1–11). Most individuals who reported experiencing corporal punishment (77.1%) also reported that their parent/guardian used an object while administering punishment. The most common object reported by participants was a belt (85.8%) followed by a spatula/spoon (40.1%). Like the types of punishment, participants were able to select all objects employed by their parents/guardians, and a summative item was created to examine the prevalence of multiple objects employed for corporal punishment. The mean on this item was 2.45 ($s = 1.55$; range: 1–14).

Attitudes Towards Corporal Punishment

Most of the sample indicated that they intended to use corporal punishment with their own children (75.2%). However, despite finding that most of the sample plan to use physical discipline, over 71% of participants indicated they believed there were better ways to punish a child rather than using corporal punishment. Nevertheless, most participants (64.2%) disagreed with the statement, “Corporal punishment results in emotional harm (e.g., low self-esteem, depression, anxiety) to children and adolescents who experience this form of discipline.” The sample's mean score on the positive attitudes towards corporal punishment scale was 14.34 indicating the sample held fairly positive attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment ($s = 3.33$; range: 5–24). An examination of each item used to create

Table 2 Corporal punishment experiences and attitudes

	<i>n</i>	%	\bar{x}	<i>s</i>	Range
Punished with Corporal Punishment					
Yes	276	86.8	–	–	–
No	42	13.2	–	–	–
Type of Corporal Punishment ^a					
Spanking of buttocks/legs	270	97.8	–	–	–
Slapping of hands	136	49.3	–	–	–
Slapping of face	53	19.2	–	–	–
Shoving	25	9.1	–	–	–
Excessive exercise drills	23	8.3	–	–	–
Subjection to painful body positions	10	3.6	–	–	–
Subjection to foul odors	5	1.8	–	–	–
Subjection to foul tastes	60	21.7	–	–	–
Pinching	51	18.5	–	–	–
Shaking	14	5.1	–	–	–
Other	11	3.9	–	–	–
Parents/guardians Employed Object During Corporal Punishment					
Yes	212	77.1	–	–	–
No	63	22.9	–	–	–
Type of Object ^b					
Belt	182	85.8	–	–	–
Paddle	66	31.1	–	–	–
Hairbrush	49	23.1	–	–	–
Switch	82	38.7	–	–	–
Fly swatter	55	25.9	–	–	–
Spatula/spoon	85	40.1	–	–	–
Other	16	7.5	–	–	–
Intend to use corporal punishment with own children.					
Yes	239	75.2	–	–	–
No	79	24.8	–	–	–
There are better ways to punish a child than using corporal punishment.					
Strongly agree/agree	219	71.1	–	–	–
Strongly disagree/disagree	89	28.9	–	–	–
Corporal punishment results in emotional harm.					
Strongly agree/agree	111	35.8	–	–	–
Strongly disagree/disagree	199	64.2	–	–	–
Positive Attitudes Towards Corporal Punishment Scale	–	–	14.34	3.33	5–24

^a*n* and % are based on individuals who responded “yes” to experiencing corporal punishment and “yes” to specific form of corporal punishment.

^b*n* and % are based on individuals who responded “yes” to parents employing an object during corporal punishment and then “yes” to specific objects.

the scale indicates that views on acceptability and effectiveness vary across age category with participants generally viewing corporal punishment as most acceptable and

effective for children in the 2–12 age range (see appendix A for a breakdown of acceptability and effectiveness items). Almost 83% agreed/strongly agreed that corporal punishment was acceptable for children 2 to 12 and approximately 82% indicated that this form of discipline was effective for children in this age range. Most participants (81.4%) indicated that they felt corporal punishment was unacceptable for children under two and nearly 85% reported that they did not feel corporal punishment was effective for this age group. The sample was more divided in their views on corporal punishment’s acceptability and effectiveness with adolescents (ages 13–18). Roughly 53% viewed corporal punishment as acceptable for adolescents and nearly 46% felt this form of discipline was effective for adolescents.

Factors Influencing Intentions to Use Corporal Punishment

Bivariate analyses revealed that several attitudinal and demographic variables were associated with intentions to use corporal punishment. For reference, throughout the bivariate results, the following are used to denote significance values: * < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, and *** *p* < 0.001. With regard to attitudes, a significantly larger percentage (96.6%) of participants who indicated they did not feel there was a better way to punish than using corporal punishment reported they planned to use corporal punishment when compared to participants who indicated they felt there were better ways to punish (65.8%) ($\chi^2 = 31.901^{***}$; Phi = -0.322^{***}). Similarly, a greater percentage of participants (87.9%) who indicated they felt corporal punishment did not result in emotional harm reported that they planned to use this form of discipline compared to individuals who felt that corporal punishment resulted in harm (51.4%) ($\chi^2 = 50.657^{***}$; Phi = -0.404^{***}). Intending to use corporal punishment was also associated with higher scores, on average, on the positive attitudes towards corporal punishment scale ($\bar{x} = 15.28$; *s* = 2.83) compared to individuals who did not intend to use physical discipline ($\bar{x} = 11.50$; *s* = 3.15) (*t* = -9.945^{***} ; Cohens *d* = -0.213). When examining sex, a larger percentage of men (84.3%) compared to women (70.2%) reported they intended to use corporal punishment with their own children ($\chi^2 = 7.502^{**}$; Phi = -0.154^{**}). Bivariate analyses also revealed that individuals who intend to use corporal punishment with their own children were on average older ($\bar{x} = 20.18$; *s* = 3.96) compared to those who do not intend to use corporal punishment ($\bar{x} = 19.43$; *s* = 1.69) (*t* = -2.362^* ; Cohens *d* = -1.298).

Moving to the multivariate logistic regression model (see Table 3), three variables were significantly associated with intentions to use corporal punishment. First, the odds of individuals who reported there was a better way to punish than using physical discipline intending to use corporal

Table 3 Logistic regression predicting intentions to use corporal punishment

	b (SE)	OR
Demographic Variables		
Age	0.169 (0.107)	1.184
Sex (1 = female)	-0.181 (0.452)	0.834
Race (1 = non-white)	-0.135 (0.517)	0.874
Sexual Orientation (1 = LGB)	-0.241 (0.686)	0.786
Political Affiliation (1 = Republican)	0.033 (0.398)	1.033
Protestant (1 = Yes)	-0.084 (0.417)	0.919
Criminal Justice Major (1 = yes)	-0.091 (0.378)	0.913
Attitudinal Variables		
There are better ways to punish (1 = yes)	-1.895 (0.837)	0.150*
Corporal punishment results in emotional harm (1 = yes)	-1.472 (0.374)	0.229***
Positive Corporal Punishment Attitudes Scale	0.401 (0.077)	1.494***
Cox & Snell Pseudo- r^2	0.345	
Nagelkerke Pseudo- r^2	0.509	
-2 Log-Likelihood	196.27	

* < 0.05, *** p < 0.001.

punishment were 0.15 times the odds of individuals who reported they did not feel there was a better way to punish, holding all else constant. Moreover, the odds of individuals who felt corporal punishment resulted in emotional harm intending to use this form of discipline in the future were 0.229 times the odds of individuals who did not believe corporal punishment resulted in emotional harm. Finally, the positive attitudes towards corporal punishment scale was significantly associated with a higher odds of intending to use corporal punishment in the future. More specifically, for every one-unit increase on the positive attitudes towards corporal punishment scale the odds of intending to use corporal punishment are multiplied by 1.494, holding all else constant. It is important to note that experience with corporal punishment was not included in the multivariate models as most of the sample experienced this form of discipline and intended to use it with their children. Overall, 83.7% ($n = 231$) of participants who experienced corporal punishment reported they intended to use this form of discipline with their children and 19% ($n = 8$) of those who did not experience corporal punishment reported they intended to corporally punish their children. This led to specification issues when including this variable in the model.

Discussion

The current study adds to the existing literature by providing insight into college students' experiences with and intentions

to use corporal punishment. Findings demonstrated that most of the sample experienced corporal punishment as children (86.8%) and intended to use this form of discipline with their own children (75.2%). Although the prevalence of corporal punishment experiences within this sample is greater compared to estimates derived from nationally-representative samples (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2019), these findings are likely due to the location of the study (i.e., the Southern region of the U.S.). Overall, these findings are consistent with prior studies indicating that physical punishment is a common, and often accepted, practice in the United States (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2018; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Additionally, the current study highlights the primary forms of discipline experienced by contemporary college students with spanking being the predominant means of physical discipline reported by the sample and the use of objects, mostly belts, switches, and/or spatulas/spoons being prevalent as well. Regardless of these findings, over 71% of participants felt that there were better ways to punish a child rather than using physical forms of discipline. This seems to suggest that participants may be aware of the negative impacts of spanking identified in the extant literature and/or that their personal experiences have led them to recognize that more effective means of discipline may exist.

Moreover, the multivariate model results revealed that only attitudinal variables (i.e., belief in a better way to punish, belief that corporal punishment resulted in emotional harm, and the positive corporal punishment attitude scale) were significantly associated with intentions to use corporal punishment. As would be expected, negative perceptions of corporal punishment decreased the odds that participants intended to use physical discipline with their future children, while more positive attitudes increased the odds of intending to use corporal punishment. These findings are somewhat inconsistent with the current literature in that demographic variables are commonly associated with the use and approval of spanking. It is important to note that the current study focused on "intention" to use spanking among a sample of university students who are not yet parents and/or may never have children. Thus, the current study's findings may be tied to the measure of focus (i.e., intention rather than actual usage and approval).

Though this study adds to the existing literature, several limitations must be considered when interpreting the current findings. First, the sample is a homogenous convenience sample from a single, southern university, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Homogenous convenience samples are ones where the sample share at least one socio-demographic characteristic (Jager et al., 2017). For our sample, education levels and age were quite homogenous. While homogenous convenience samples have been argued to be more generalizable than conventional convenience samples (Jager et al., 2017), there is still an issue of

generalizability. Our analyses of the data indicate that the sample is generally representative of the university from which it was drawn, still, the findings cannot be readily extended to students enrolled at other universities and/or the general population of the U.S. As corporal punishment is more acceptable in the South, additional studies are needed to determine if these findings are replicated across diverse samples from multiple regions in the U.S. Additionally, over one-third of the sample were criminal justice majors, which may have affected the current findings. While research often indicates that criminal justice students are often more punitive compared to students in other disciplines, one must consider that they are also exposed to the realities and evolving definitions of harm as criminal justice programs often offer courses on family violence, juvenile delinquency, and other victim-based courses (see Hancock et al., 2021). Future research should continue to explore perceptions of and intention to use corporal punishment among students across a variety of disciplines. Moreover, the current study only examined future intent to use physical discipline, which may not accurately reflect participants' actual discipline strategies. Scholars should attempt to employ longitudinal research designs to determine how attitudes may shift over time, how partners influence discipline strategies, and if students remain consistent in their intentions and actual discipline practices.

Despite these limitations, there are potential policy implications that can be gleaned from the current findings. Although the majority of the sample reported experiencing corporal punishment and intend to use corporal punishment as parents, a similarly large percentage felt there were better ways to discipline a child than spanking and other reported physical discipline. This finding is not surprising as the literature has found higher levels of education have not only been linked to less favorable attitudes towards corporal punishment but the use of physical discipline as a corrective measure (Finkelhor et al., 2019; Flynn, 1996; Jackson et al., 1999; Straus & Mathur, 1996). While we were not able to determine why students were more open to alternative disciplinary measures even if they intended to utilize corporal punishment as a parent, research has consistently indicated that increased familiarity with the consequences of corporal punishment may result in parents using alternative punishments (Finkelhor et al., 2019). This may be particularly true for not only university students broadly but more specifically students within majors such as criminal justice that typically emphasize victim-related issues, including trauma informed practices. Future research should endeavor to disentangle this link. Qualitative research may be especially amenable to exploring why those who indicate that they know there are better options than physical discipline are still supportive of such methods.

While corporal punishment, primarily spanking, is generally considered an acceptable corrective action, many of

the other corporal punishments included in this study were not widely used. The use and acceptability of spanking rather than other forms of corporal punishment is consistent with other studies that have noted that only approximately one-fourth of survey participants were physically punished by another method of corporal punishment across multiple generations (The Harris, 2013). Even conservative and/or religious organizations such as Focus on the Family, who draw on Biblical interpretations of discipline, caution against some of the other forms of physical punishment rather than spanking (Pingleton, 2014). Although the view of corporal punishment as an acceptable form of discipline may be based on the participant's own experiences, religious background, and education, the acceptability of such punishments are also codified under state law which may impact individual perceptions. Thus, while spanking is clearly legal, within certain parameters in most states, other forms of physical discipline often fall within a gray area.

Again, while spanking may be considered acceptable and most of the sample noted that they intended to use such punishments, most acknowledged that there were better disciplinary methods available. Although the use of corporal punishment is rooted in our cultural, religious, and legal traditions (see Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Gershoff, 2010; Klevens et al., 2019), this acknowledgment that there are better alternatives to physically punishing a child indicates that there has been a shift in our attitudes, at least among university students, toward corporal punishment. In the current research, we were unable to determine what alternatives were available and if they felt confident administering alternative discipline strategies. This would be a promising avenue for future research. As the literature clearly notes that physical discipline is not only ineffective but may also lead to emotional harm (e.g., Sege et al., 2018), the widespread acceptability of these practices by the general population as not only a disciplinary measure but the primary corrective method may remain as a result of the lack of education and understanding of alternative discipline methods. Education is important as some parents (and prospective parents) may use corporal punishment because they are not aware of the negative consequences associated with such forms of discipline and/or are unaware of alternatives to physical punishment that are more beneficial in the long-term (Klevens et al., 2019).

Our findings regarding the unacceptability of many forms of corporal punishment beyond spanking may suggest that individuals are amenable to education efforts that communicate more effective, alternative parenting strategies to physical forms of punishment. Considering that this study focused on college students, negative consequences of corporal punishment could be addressed via integration of information concerning the effects of spanking and other physical discipline, as well as attention to effective parenting

strategies into course curriculum across the university. Curriculum changes have been implemented to address issues surrounding other controversial cultural norms, as well as to impact perceptions of violence against women, rape myth acceptance, and perceptions of individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ (see Coker et al., 2011; Fradella et al., 2009; MacGowan, 1997; Weisz & Black, 2010). For instance, when discussing ways to incorporate issues of sexuality into criminal justice courses, Fradella and colleagues (2009) highlight that such issues could be incorporated into existing diversity classes—the type of course most readily adaptable courses for the topic. Classes that discuss child maltreatment and abuse such as Family Violence, Victimology, Juvenile Delinquency, and other such courses might be a ready platform for education on corporal punishment and alternative forms of discipline. Although previous curricular and programming endeavors have been effective on educating students on such issues (see Coker et al., 2011; MacGowan, 1997; Weisz & Black, 2010), limited efforts have targeted students outside of the classroom, particularly those who are currently parents. While some programs exist (e.g., University of California, Berkeley), little effort has been made to provide student-parents with the tools and resources to promote skills focused on healthy child development. As this population is already open to research-based initiatives, this is a lost opportunity to provide positive parenting strategies (McConchie, 2021). Moreover, as education has proven to increase a person's awareness and acceptability of the inherent dangers of using corporal punishment, including spanking, universities should engage the larger community through seminars, trainings, and other educational endeavors to ensure families understand that corporal punishment is not the only option available to discipline a child.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Informed consent The project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all participants provided informed consent prior to survey completion via a signed form that was approved by the institution's IRB.

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Appendix A. Positive Corporal Punishment Attitudes Scale Items

	n	%
Corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline for very young children (less than 2 years old) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	135	42.9
Disagree	121	38.4
Agree	53	16.8
Strongly Agree	6	1.9
Corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline for young children (ages 2–12) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	13	4.1
Disagree	41	13.0
Agree	185	58.7
Strongly Agree	76	24.1
Corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline for adolescents (ages 13 to 18) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	52	16.5
Disagree	97	30.7
Agree	103	32.6
Strongly Agree	64	20.3
Corporal punishment is an effective form of discipline for young children (less than 2 years old) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	146	47.1
Disagree	117	37.7
Agree	41	13.2
Strongly Agree	6	1.9
Corporal punishment is an effective form of discipline for adolescents (ages 2 to 12) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	17	5.4
Disagree	39	12.4
Agree	194	61.8
Strongly Agree	64	20.4
Corporal punishment is an effective form of discipline for adolescents (ages 13 to 18) who misbehave.		
Strongly disagree	60	19.4
Disagree	109	35.2
Agree	94	30.3
Strongly Agree	47	15.2

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