Parenting Paradigm Shift

A Review of

*The Primordial Violence: Spanking Children, Psychological Development, Violence, and Crime*

by Murray A. Straus, Emily M. Douglas, and Rose Anne Medeiros


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Reviewed by

Clifton R. Emery

*The Primordial Violence: Spanking Children, Psychological Development, Violence, and Crime* stands at the crux of a Kuhnian (Kuhn, 1962/2012) paradigm shift in parenting and socialization of children. On one side stand tradition, law, history, the medical and clerical professions, and the vast majority of parents representing the view that spanking children is at least sometimes necessary. On the other side stand Murray Straus and his coauthors, Emily Douglas and Rose Anne Medeiros, with a mountain of research showing that spanking is associated with numerous negative developmental outcomes for children.

The book is divided into 21 chapters grouped in five sections: Prevalence and Social Causes of Spanking, Spanking and Child Behavior Problems, Spanking and Human Capital, Spanking and Crime, and Social Change and Trends in Spanking. Much, but not all, of the research cited is plagued with the usual limitations and methodological errors found in social science research. Indeed, the authors make a sizeable number of methodological errors that I find annoying as a statistician. For example, they repeatedly insist on the strength of regression models of longitudinal data that control for the dependent variable at Time 1. As Johnson (2005) showed, such models can bias estimates due to endogeneity in the error term. The appropriate way to control for selection effects in this type of data is with fixed-effects regression models (Johnson, 2005). Neither am I fond of the use of statistics on convenience data because such samples are not random and statistics is the study of randomness. The authors also repeatedly insist on interpreting logistic regression results in terms of probabilities rather than (correctly) in terms of odds. Causal language also creeps into descriptions of many of the associations found in research. Substantively, one area that the book could have covered in greater detail is the likelihood that spanking may be a gateway to other forms of physical abuse.

However, the cumulative effect of this volume is to drown my annoyance in respect. For any one of the studies discussed in this volume, the methodological limitations inherent in the approach leave plausible alternate explanations open. As the research presented from representative random samples of populations, longitudinal data, randomized experiments,
random clinical trials of parenting interventions, and social and policy change mounts, the plausibility of alternate explanations fades. It seems extremely unlikely that so many independent studies using various methods would point in the same direction if spanking were not affecting child well-being. In light of the evidence presented, ongoing arguments to save spanking are in the long run likely to go the way of the epicyclical claims of those who argued against Kepler’s elliptical theory of planetary motion.

The book addresses the global prevalence and causes of spanking; the relationships between spanking and various forms of child well-being, human capital, and crime; and how the societies of Western countries have changed, and are likely to change, with regard to spanking over time. The value of this volume lies in its relatively comprehensive overview of the research in this area and in the presentation of findings that may be used to motivate grass-roots support for policy change. It may be the case that nearly all parents in the United States spank their children as young toddlers. However, nearly all, if not all, of these parents would doubtless also like their children to have higher IQs, better odds of graduating from high school and college, and better odds of staying out of prison.

Straus and his colleagues argue that spanking should be banned. I am inclined to agree tentatively, but with strong caution. The law of unanticipated consequences (Merton, 1936) could come into play if legal changes are not accompanied by supporting public education. For example, Iyengar (2009) found that mandatory arrest policies were associated with increased intimate partner violence homicides. In a similar manner, it is possible that policies punishing or stigmatizing parents who spank or policy changes implemented without substantial accompanying public education could be counterproductive. More injurious and potentially lethal forms of child abuse could occur if, in the presence of stigma and the absence of knowledge of alternative forms of discipline, a parent holds off on any form of discipline until the child is much more out of control and the parent is much angrier and then resorts to corporal punishment anyway.

Hence, although I agree with Straus and his colleagues about eventually regulating spanking and eliminating all corporal punishment, I believe shortcuts are dangerous. Such an approach must be accompanied by a public education campaign similar to that used in Sweden. Ideally, this would include at a minimum a media campaign, targeted programming for high-risk families, and a mandatory one-semester course in parenting for all high school students. This volume is a must-read for psychologists, educators, child welfare professionals, and anyone responsible for taking care of children.

References

