

Laying down the wooden spoon: The evidence behind spanking

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In 2018, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) as well as [Prevent Child Abuse America](#) took a strong stance against the use of physical discipline on children, calling for the abolition of physical punishment (PP).

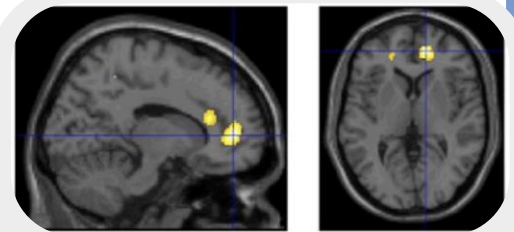
PP, also known as spanking, slapping, popping, whooping, or smacking is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as "the intentional use of physical force against a child that results in or has the potential to result in physical injury" and is often used with the desire to modify a child's behavior^{1,2}.

The use of PP among children is [banned in 65 nations](#) beginning in 1979 with Sweden and includes other countries such as Japan, Colombia, and Greece.

PP is legal in every state in the United States, and there are 16 states, such as Georgia, that even permit the use of PP in schools. Mandated reporter laws in Georgia specifically uphold the right of caregivers to use PP if it causes no bodily injury³. However, the evidence is clear that PP does in fact physiologically harm children immediately with repercussions throughout their life.

Evidence from decades of research confirms the detrimental effects of PP, and it has recently been [considered an adverse childhood experience](#) (ACE) by the CDC since its impact is similar to that of other ACES such as physical abuse^{4,5,6}.

Studies have also demonstrated that there are long-term impacts for adults who report being spanked as a child, including an increased percentage of suicide attempts, moderate to heavy drinking and substance abuse, and violence in romantic relationships^{2,9}. Moreover, exposure to frequent and harsher PP reduces gray matter volume by 14-19% in the prefrontal cortex of a child's brain¹⁰. When this area of the brain is altered, a child may struggle to regulate their own emotions and behaviors and to interpret the behaviors of others.



A 19.1% lower average of grey matter volume was found in the medial prefrontal cortexes (marked in yellow) of the PP subjects compared to healthy controls. ([Tomoda et al., 2009](#))

Despite the consequential outcomes of PP, the continued use of PP is greatly influenced by perceived social norms and the belief there is an overall benefit to the child (e.g. increase in parental respect, decrease in misbehaviors)^{11,12}. Contrary to these beliefs, research has shown parents who spank report the same or higher frequencies of misbehaviors by children and that spanking is damaging to the parent-child relationship^{6,12,13}.

The use of PP is also likely to be intergenerational, as individuals who were physically punished as children are more likely to endorse and use PP as adults⁸.

Although discipline is an integral part of child-rearing, complexities deriving from cultural norms, personal experiences, and beliefs make it challenging to discuss, let alone address directly with programming^{6,12,14}.

Given the potential negative impact of PP, it is important to understand the current social norms and practices to better inform education efforts.

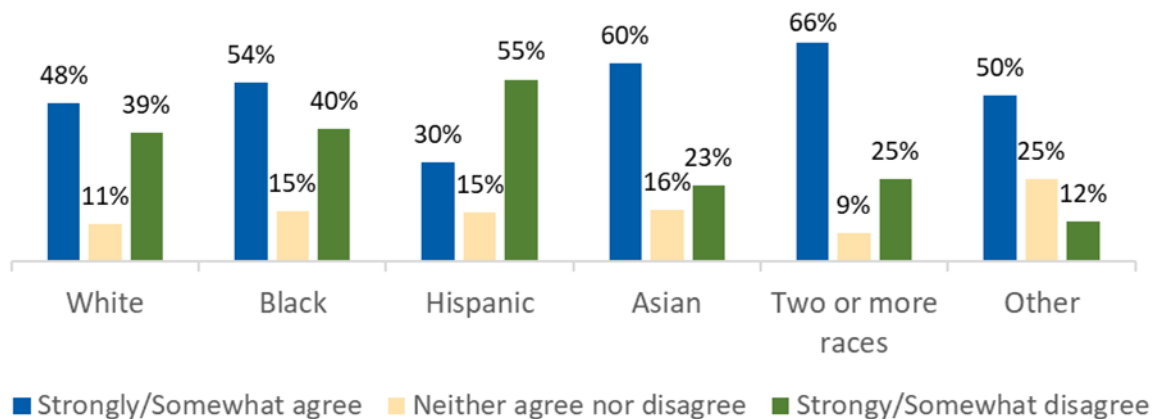
Prevent Child Abuse Georgia Surveys Georgians' Attitudes and Use of Physical Punishment

In 2020, Prevent Child Abuse America conducted a national survey using random sampling and weighted measures to assess the current behaviors, attitudes, and norms associated with the use of PP. Within the national sample, Prevent Child Abuse (PCA) Georgia analyzed responses from 507 adult Georgians and constituted the following key findings based on their responses.

Key Finding 1. Social Norms and Attitudes Toward Physical Punishment Remain High

- When asked about their own experiences with PP, 81% of Georgians reported experiencing some form and frequency of PP during their childhood.
- Most respondents believe that PP instills discipline, and moral and social conduct.
- Half (50%) of Georgians strongly or somewhat agreed that “it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spank” compared to 45% of respondents from the national sample.

Table 1. Georgian Adults' Response to “I believe sometimes it is necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spank” by Ethnicity (N=507)



Even when broken down by ethnicity, as seen in Table 1, the majority of Georgian’s believe it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spank, except for Hispanic respondents who had the lowest approval of spanking. This demonstrates how normalized and accepted the use of spanking is across various cultures in Georgia.

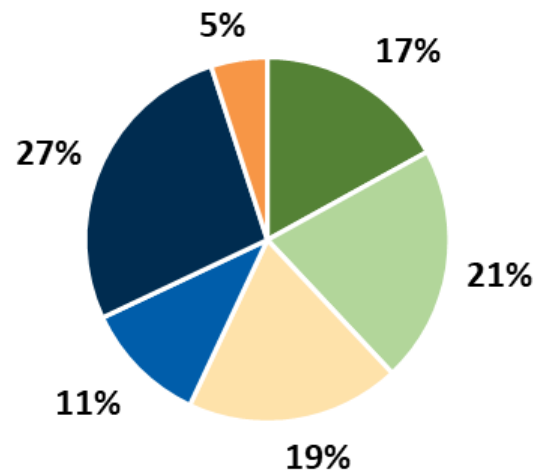
Key Finding 2. Although the Use of Physical Punishment is on the Decline, Current and Future Use Persists

- Of Georgians with children, 35% reported using PP at least monthly compared to 31% of respondents from the national survey.
- Of caregivers who spank, 46% “don’t feel okay about it.”
- Among Georgian’s who weren’t yet parents but planned to have children (Table 2):
 - 38% **did not intend** to spank their child,
 - 19% felt neutral, and
 - 38% **intended** to spank their child compared to 28% from the national survey.
- However, 61% of future parents said they would use spanking as a last resort.

Table 2. Future Parents' Intentions to Use Spanking as a Form of Discipline (n=206)

Survey Question: When I become a parent, I intend to use spanking as a form of discipline.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Prefer not to say



Key Finding 3. Georgians Uphold the Right of the Parent to Use Physical Punishment but Do Not Support It’s Use in Schools

- Only 21% of Georgians surveyed would not support a law prohibiting personnel from paddling or spanking children in educational settings.
- Over half (54%) of Georgians surveyed said they would not support a law prohibiting all spanking that occurs, even amongst parents.
- The majority (66%) of respondents believed it is a parent’s right to spank their children if they think it necessary.

Big News for Prevention Efforts

The results from this survey demonstrate promising trends in the reduction of PP. In the 1980's, 77% of caregivers reported using PP compared to 35% of Georgian caregivers surveyed in 2020. However, PP is still broadly used, believed to be of benefit to the child, and viewed as an acceptable practice and right of a parent.

Considering nearly half of the caregivers who use PP "don't feel okay about it," this is an opportune time for **prevention efforts** that provide education and promote positive parenting practices.

- **PCA Georgia [offers training](#) to equip family-serving professionals with the skills and tools needed to have difficult conversations surrounding the use of PP.** Family-serving professionals report having difficulty discussing PP with caregivers due to favorable social norms and intergenerational and religious practices^{15,16}. Messaging research shows that education and programming directed at parents should include the consequences associated with PP, research showing PP to be ineffective, and recommended alternative discipline methods¹⁷. Strong communication skills that support not shame, are necessary to motivate behavior change in families¹⁸.
- **Organizations can change social norms and create safe spaces for families by implementing [No Hit Zones](#).** No Hit Zones are a national initiative that helps organizations develop policies and practices to stop PP from occurring at their offices. For example, in waiting rooms at pediatrician's offices or child advocacy centers. It provides signage, policies, and resources for staff to address the use of PP when they see it occur and provide supportive parent education. The advice of trusted providers, such as pediatricians or home visitors is shown to influence parental attitudes toward PP, a critical factor in changing behavior¹⁹.
- **PCA Georgia is encouraging everyone to lay down the wooden spoon in favor of positive discipline strategies that support the healthy development of children.** Bans or laws aren't needed to change people's use and attitudes toward PP. In fact, engaging parents through trusted professionals is a more family-centered and effective approach. Georgia's higher rates of approval and use of PP in comparison to [Prevent Child Abuse America's national survey](#) highlight the greater need for awareness and education in our state.

Our Work is
Rooted in Science



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