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Spanking Kids Increases Risk Of Sexual Problems As Adults, New Research Shows

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Murray Straus is available to speak with you about his new research findings prior to their release Thursday, Feb. 28, 2008. He can be reached prior to the conference at 603-862-2594 (w), 603-868-1495 (h) and murray.straus@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. -- Children who are spanked or victims of other corporal punishment are more likely to have sexual problems as a teen or adult, according to new research presented today by Murray Straus, co-director of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire.

Widely considered the foremost researcher in his field, Straus presented his new research findings at the American Psychological Association’s Summit on Violence and Abuse in Relationships: Connecting Agendas and Forging New Directions held Feb. 28 and 29 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Bethesda, MD.

Straus analyzed the results of four studies and found that spanking and other corporal punishment by parents is associated with an increased probability of three sexual problems as a teen or adult:

• Verbally and physically coercing a dating partner to have sex.
• Risky sex such as premarital sex without a condom.
• Masochistic sex such as being aroused by being spanked when having sex.

“These results, together with the results of more than 100 other studies, suggest that spanking is one of the roots of relationship violence and mental health problems. Because there is 93 percent agreement between studies that investigated harmful side effects of spanking, and because over 90 percent of U.S. parents spank toddlers, the potential benefits for prevention of sexual and relationship violence is large,” Straus says.

“Furthermore, because other research shows spanking is not more effective than other discipline methods, there is no need to expose children to the harmful effects of spanking. We can help prevent mental health problems and relationship violence from happening by a national health policy recommending never spanking,” he says.

**Coerced Sex**

A survey of more than 14,000 university students in 32 nations found that 29 percent of the male and 21 percent of the female students had verbally coerced sex from another person. Coerced sex involves insisting on sex when the partner does not want to, or threatening to end the relationship if the partner does not have sex.

The percentages of those who physically forced sex were much lower: 1.7 percent of the men and 1.2 percent of the women said they had used physical force, such as holding down the partner or hitting a partner to make them have sex.
“The most important finding of this study is that each increase of one step on a four-step measure of corporal punishment was associated with a 10 percent increase in the probability of verbal sexual coercion by men and a 12 percent increase in sexual coercion by women,” Straus says. “The relation of corporal punishment to physically forcing sex was even stronger. Each increase of one step in corporal punishment was associated with a 33 percent increase in the probability of men forcing sex and a 27 percent increase in the probability of women doing this.”

Risky Sex
In the second study, Straus analyzed the same sample of university students, but focused on whether they had insisted on sex without using a condom. Straus found that 15 percent of the men and 13 percent of the women had insisted on sex without a condom at least once in the past year.

Using the four-step corporal punishment scale, Straus found that of the group with the lowest score on the corporal punishment scale, 12.5 percent had insisted on unprotected sex. In contrast, 25 percent of students in the highest corporal punishment group engaged in this type of risky sex.

The third study analyzed data on 440 students in a New Hampshire high school. The students were divided into five groups, ranging from those who were never spanked to those whose parents used corporal punishment even when they were 13 years old and older. The study evaluated eight indicators of risky sex, such as more than one sex partner.

Straus found that students who had experienced corporal punishment had engaged in more risky sexual behavior than students who had not been spanked. From this study, Straus concludes that corporal punishment weakens the bond between the child and the parents. He believes that this alienation from parents may make teenagers less likely to avoid sex and less likely to follow safe sex practices.

Masochistic Sex
In the fourth study, Straus asked 207 students at three colleges about whether they had ever been sexually aroused by masochistic sex: imagining that they were being tied up when having sex, engaging in rough sex, or by spanking, and if they had been sexually aroused by actually doing these three things.

"The core idea of this study is that being spanked by loving parents confuses love with violence, which increases the probability that violence will be part of making love," Straus says.

The study found that 75 percent of students who had been spanked a lot by their parents were sexually aroused by masochistic sex. In contrast, 40 percent of students who had never been spanked were interested in masochistic sex.

"What is new about this study is a scientific test of the idea that being spanked as a child inclines people to want to be spanked when having sex, and that this is especially likely to be true when there is a combination of lots of spanking and lots of love," Straus says.

Reducing Spanking
To reduce the use of corporal punishment, Straus recommends that the American Psychological Association, the U.S. Children’s Bureau, and other organizations publicize a recommendation that parents should never spank.

“However, to make this work, we need to start by informing professionals who advise parents about the evidence-base for that policy. They need this information to be able to give appropriate information and help to parents about replacing spanking with positive discipline to correct misbehavior,” he says.
Since 1975, the Family Research Laboratory has devoted itself primarily to understanding family violence and the impact of violence in families. As public and professional interest in family violence has grown, so has the need for more reliable knowledge. The lab has tried to fill that need in a variety of ways: through comprehensive literature reviews, new theories, and methodologically sound studies. Researchers at the lab pioneered many of the techniques that have enabled social scientists to estimate directly the scope of family violence.

**Straus is the co-director of the Family Research Laboratory and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire. He has studied spanking by large and representative samples of American parents since 1969. He is the author of "Beating The Devil Out Of Them: Corporal Punishment In American Families And Its Effects On Children." He has been president of three scientific societies including the National Council On Family Relations, and an advisor to the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Much of his research on spanking can be downloaded from [http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2](http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2).**