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# Investigating Denial of the Harmful Effects of Corporal Punishment in a Religious Context

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INVESTIGATING DENIAL OF THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT  
IN A RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

by

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science in Education degree.

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Approved by:

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TITLE: INVESTIGATING THE DENIAL OF THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN A RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Stacy Thompson

Corporal punishment continues to be a controversial topic. Many people who experienced spanking as children feel that they were not harmed by the corporal punishment and go on to believe that using corporal punishment on their children will not harm them, especially if it is administered calmly. This study looked at the attitudes of 203 parents in the context of religion using Holden's "Attitudes Toward Spanking a Child" questionnaire. The results of this study showed that parents that said religion guided their parenting were more likely to view corporal punishment positively and were more likely to believe that corporal punishment is not harmful to their children. The results also showed that calm spanking creates a positive view of corporal punishment, thus leading to a greater likelihood of denying that spanking is harmful to children.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
CHAPTER 3 METHODS .....	24
CHAPTER 4 RESULTS.....	29
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION .....	33
REFERENCES.....	38
APPENDICES	
APPENDIX A .....	43
APPENDIX B.....	49
VITA .....	55

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A sizable segment of today's society still accepts and promotes a form of violence towards children. This form of violence toward children is called corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is defined as inflicting pain on a child's body, usually the hand or the bottom, with an open hand or object in order to stop misbehavior (Gershoff, 2002). For this study, the definition of corporal punishment/spanking is "Spanking refers to that subset of the broader category of physical punishment that is within the normal range and is 'a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an opened hand to the extremities or buttocks'" (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853). This is seen by many as an acceptable form of "discipline" despite the true meaning of discipline being to teach. Sadly, 90% of all children in the United States are spanked at some point in their lives (Gershoff, 2013). "The prevalence of spanking in the United States is even greater, with two thirds of young children being spanked by their parents (65% of 19- to 35-month-olds; Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004), and most teenagers (85%) reporting that they were slapped or spanked by their mothers at some point (Bender et al., 2007)" (Gershoff, 2013, p. 133).

There are many euphemisms used to describe corporal punishment including spanking, whipping, smacking, tapping, and swatting. The most common euphemism in the United States is spanking, which will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis with corporal punishment. Interestingly, the term hitting is never used among supporters to describe corporal punishment. This need for euphemisms to describe corporal punishment seems to help society remain in denial regarding this form of violence towards children.

There are two types of corporal punishment. The first type of corporal punishment is known as normative corporal punishment or spanking (Gershoff, 2002; Baumrind, 2010). This type of spanking causes pain to children without causing visible injury. “Behaviors that do not result in significant physical injury (e.g., spank, slap) are considered corporal punishment, whereas behaviors that risk injury (e.g., punching, kicking, burning) are considered physical abuse” (Gershoff, 2002, p. 540). As stated by Gershoff, the second type of corporal punishment is called non-normative corporal punishment (spanking) and is considered physical abuse. However, some children are definitely physically abused by their parents even if it doesn’t always fit into the above definition. It should also be noted that just because a normative spanking does not cause significant injury to a child, the spanking must cause enough pain in order to be effective. Thus, a reddening of the skin almost always occurs, signaling that the body believes injury is occurring. Race can affect this because a light-skinned child’s skin will become red before a dark-skinned child’s will. Therefore, this child must endure more pain before it is recognized as abuse due to his/her darker skin color.

There is a continuum of violence towards children that begins with a light slap and ends with death due to severe beatings. The fact that scholars use terms such as “normative” and “non-normative” to describe different intensities of corporal punishment on children seems to indicate denial of the use of violence on children even among scholars. The term “normative” creates a sense that using mild to moderate violence to correct and control children’s behaviors as long as it meets a certain set of guidelines, definitions, and rules is acceptable and normal. What’s more is that the line separating normative spanking and physical abuse is different for everyone, including scholars, researchers, legal experts, Christian pro-spanking advocates, and parents. There is no consensus on where this line ought to be drawn. “..., a consensus on where

to draw the line between acceptable corporal punishment and dangerous physical abuse is noticeably absent in the United States” (Gershoff, 2002, p. 540). In addition, there is much criticism regarding the research on corporal punishment as a great number of people believe that normative and non-normative spanking get lumped together in research studies, thus skewing the results of whether or not normative spanking is emotionally harmful to children (Baumrind, 1996a; Gershoff, 2002; & Larzelere, 2000).

Another factor that may influence this acceptance of using mild to moderate forms of violence to correct and control children’s behavior is religion. A great number of Christians, in particular, tend to take the rod verses in the book of Proverbs in the Bible literally. These verses, all taken from the 2011 New International Version of The Holy Bible, include:

“Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them” (Proverbs 13:24).

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far away” (Proverbs 22:15).

“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” (Proverbs 23:13-14).

“A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother” (Proverbs 29:15).

The Christians that believe these verses ought to be taken literally, despite a number of Biblical scholars that have studied the original Hebrew meanings of these verses and concluded that they were never intended to be taken literally, are more likely to spank their children.

“Conservative Protestant parents likely anticipate feeling little guilt if they use corporal punishment because of their religion supported belief in the necessity and effectiveness of

corporal punishment” (Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999, p. 318). In addition, conservative Christians tend to engage in adversarial parenting in which any type of disobedience or defiant behavior is met with swift punishment as children are viewed mostly as “little sinners.”

Gershoff, Miller, and Holden (1999) state:

“Conservative Protestants were more likely to use corporal punishment and less likely to use reasoning if their children openly defied them. This is consistent with the recommendations by some religious authors that willful disobedience warrants a strong reaction from parents (e.g., Dobson, 1970; Fugate, 1980). Conservative Protestant parents were more likely than all other parents to respond to children’s escalated disobedience with corporal punishment, appearing to view escalated disobedience as a dangerous challenge to their parental authority that must be quelled as swiftly and strongly as possible” (p. 318).

It seems that even non-religious parents have picked up on some of these religious teachings and practice them as a customary part of parenting. Society may also tend to place pressure on parents to use corporal punishment to keep their children in line. The ecological theory helps to explain this. Grogan-Kaylor and Otis (2007) state:

“Parenting does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, parents’ actions are often viewed and judged by others around them—neighbors, friends, and community members. Reactions in these settings, as well as the parents’ own observations of others’ actions, provide information that may or may not support the use of corporal punishment. Through their reciprocal relationships, parents may come to view corporal punishment as the preferred method of discipline, as inappropriate only under certain circumstances, or as inappropriate regardless of the circumstances of the child’s actions” (p. 318).

And as Chapter Two of this thesis explains, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory shows that children will imitate what the adults around them do. Therefore, if children grow up believing that spanking is a standard part of parenting, they are more likely to use corporal punishment with their children. After all, even if these parents feel that spanking did do harm to them, it can still be very difficult for them to admit that their parents did something wrong to them, or that they may be harming their children. This can be especially true if religion also tells these parents that they must spank their children in order to obey God (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007). The United States is one of the only countries in the world that has yet to ban normative corporal punishment as most American parents still believe that it is their right to raise their children as they feel best (Gershoff, 2013; Bitensky, 1998).

The purpose of this thesis is to explore whether or not denial is a factor in the continuance of spanking children. Denial is difficult to specifically measure, therefore, in order to answer the question, does religion facilitate denial of the harmful effect of corporal punishment, the three research questions addressed were: does religion guide parental discipline strategies? Was spanking done in obedience to God? And, was spanking done calmly, angrily, or both? Each of the answers of these questions was compared to parental attitudes of spanking. The goal was to see if each of these three questions influenced how parents felt about corporal punishment. Positive parental attitudes based on the three questions mean that parents are more likely to deny that corporal punishment is harmful to children. Parents are not likely to admit that they have denied and repressed their painful experiences with corporal punishment, especially if it was done in the name of God and calmly. Therefore, the best way to begin to measure denial is to take each independent variable (religion guiding discipline, spanking done in obedience to God, and spanking done calmly, angrily, or both) and compare them to the

dependent variable (parental attitudes toward spanking) in order to see if the independent variables influenced the dependent variable.

The following definitions are used throughout this study:

1. Corporal punishment (spanking): “Spanking refers to that subset of the broader category of physical punishment that is within the normal range and is ‘a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an opened hand to the extremities or buttocks’” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853).
2. Discipline: “Webster’s Dictionary describes discipline as ‘training that corrects, molds, or perfects.’ I believe the best and most long-lasting training comes from within. Discipline is first learned externally, based on parental, and then societal expectations” (Gerber & Johnson, 1998, p. 204).
3. Abuse: “Any assault, whether verbal, sexual, or physical, or any deprivation of basic health and welfare necessities—regardless of severity, parental intention, or observable effects on the child” (Quinn, 1988, p. 18).
4. Denial: A strong coping mechanism to traumatic events (Bonanno, 2004). “Refusal to recognize or acknowledge” (Dictionary.com).
5. Religion: Religion includes, but is not limited to solely Christian beliefs.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of corporal punishment is still a hotly debated subject. Corporal punishment and spanking are one and the same. Corporal punishment and spanking are hitting children anywhere on the body with an open hand or an object. “Spanking refers to that subset of the broader category of physical punishment that is within the normal range and is ‘a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an opened hand to the extremities or buttocks’” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853). This is the definition used for this study.

However, non-normative corporal punishment visibly injures children. Just because a spanking may not leave physical marks does not mean that it does not harm children emotionally. Emotional harm is often difficult to see as many children learn to quickly deny and repress any negative feelings they have regarding being spanked. All spanking is harmful to children (Gershoff, 2013; Straus, 2006).

Denial begins at a young age when the physical punishment begins, whether it’s “lovingly” done or done in anger, because children are taught that physical punishment is something parents do to children, and that it is for the children’s own good. When children grow up being physically punished, they assume that all children are treated this way (Miller, 1994). Spanking becomes a customary part of childhood until the children become old enough to find out that not all children are spanked. Instead of admitting their parents were wrong, some children have internalized the painful message that they deserved to be hit and that it was for their own good; then they use denial to deal with their pain (Miller, 1994). Denial of pain is a well-known grieving mechanism after any type of painful event (Bonanno, 2004). Of course,

guilt and shame also factor into denial. This is often compounded when the child sees that society accepts the hitting of children, and when he/she is taught that God also “accepts” or even “commands” that children be hit in His Name and in the name of “discipline.” Bottoms, et al. (2003) conducted psychological tests on two groups of participants to see if it was indeed more harmful to use physical punishment within a religious or non-religious context. One group experienced physical punishment/abuse in the name of religion. The other group experienced their physical punishment/abuse in a non-religious context. The results were clear. The participants who had experienced physical punishment/abuse in the Name of God had higher rates of anxiety, depression, guilt, and other emotional problems. To have the belief that God wants one to be hurt or to suffer every time one makes a mistake is detrimental to one’s spiritual and emotional health. Being brought up with this idea often causes children to internalize the idea of God requiring them to spank their own children in order to avoid Hell for themselves and their children.

Miller (1994), author of *For Your Own Good*, explains how denial can begin to develop in children when force and coercion are used with them from a young age. Miller (1994) states:

“We justifiably resist new exhortations if moral demands were frequently imposed upon us at too young an age. Love of one’s neighbor, altruism, willingness to sacrifice—how splendid these words sound and yet what cruelty can be hidden in them simply because they are forced upon a child at a time when the prerequisites for altruism cannot possibly be present. Coercion often nips the development of these prerequisites in the bud and what then remains is a lifelong condition of strain. This is like soil too hard for anything to grow in, and the only hope at all of forcibly producing the love demanded of one as a child lies

in the upbringing given one's own children, from whom one then demands love in the same merciless fashion" (p. 8-9).

This literature review discusses beliefs among Christians and non-Christians on child rearing, the effects of discipline and corporal punishment on children and parents, and regional attitudes regarding the use of corporal punishment. Belsky's (1984) "Determinants of Parenting" guides this study as the majority of people parent how they were parented unless they choose to work against it and change the way they treat their children. Parenting has many influences such as cultural customs, religion, social networks, stress, education, career choice, family structure, financial stability, and childhood background.

### **Theoretical Context**

Bandura's (1962) "Social Cognitive Theory" is the theoretical context for this thesis. Social Cognitive Theory shows that children learn many things through simply observing and interacting with others. Imitation begins in early infancy. Bandura found through his experiments that children who observed aggressive behavior, especially if the aggression was rewarded, were very likely to repeat the aggressive behavior. It is clear from this theory "that learning does not depend solely on direct instruction" (Puckett, Black, Wittman, & Petersen, 2009, p. 14-15).

Children watch everything the adults around them do. They also learn from experiences they have with their parents and caregivers. "Bandura proposed that human beings are not simply passive recipients of information and experience, but use sophisticated cognitive abilities to draw on past experiences to think about the consequences of their behavior and anticipate future possibilities" (Puckett, Black, Wittman, & Petersen, 2009, p. 167). This explains why so many children who were spanked grow up to spank their own children. They have learned that spanking usually gets immediate compliance from children. And as previously stated, they learn

that using violence towards children is socially acceptable in many cultures in the United States. This may help to also explain why so many people are able to deny the risks of emotional harm of corporal punishment in children and adults due to not being able to easily observe these negative effects. This theory helps to explain why corporal punishment has been used for thousands of years and continues to be deeply ingrained in many people today.

### **History of punishment**

Corporal punishment has been used for thousands of centuries. The first law in the United States that provided any protection for children was used in 1874 to get Mary Ellen away from her parents who treated her as a slave (Jalongo, 2006). Since then corporal punishment has been banned in schools in all but 22 states within the United States. New Mexico is the latest to ban corporal punishment in its schools in 2011. While parental corporal punishment is still legal in the United States as long as it does not leave marks on the child, Sweden and eight other countries have banned all use of corporal punishment with children (Straus, 1999). The United States, South Sudan, and, Somalia are the only countries that have not joined the U.N. Convention of Children's Rights due to the requirement of banning corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2013).

Durrant (1999) looked at public support for corporal punishment, reports of child abuse, interventions by social service agencies, and child abuse mortality after Sweden banned all corporal punishment. His study found that overall social approval for corporal punishment has decreased throughout Sweden. And the ban has significantly influenced all the other aspects of child abuse positively in that all forms of child abuse have dropped in frequency. Straus (2000) also found that educating the greater society on the negative effects of corporal punishment

reduces child abuse and maltreatment. He found that teaching alternative discipline strategies is key in child abuse prevention.

In 2000, Germany passed a ban on the use of all corporal punishment on children. Bussmann (2004) found that the ban has had a significant positive impact on children's welfare. Her study also found that the ban on corporal punishment has decreased family violence. In addition, Gershoff & Bitensky (2007) discuss the fact that in many countries corporal punishment is now a human rights violation. Yet, in the United States, corporal punishment is still highly debated even among scholars. The authors suggest that a major change in public attitude regarding corporal punishment needs to occur for a ban to happen.

Bitensky (1998) also argues that corporal punishment is "subabuse" meaning that even if it does not injure a child's body, it has been found to emotionally harm children. Due to this, she argues that the United States should ban all corporal punishment both in schools as well as in the home. She believes this should be viewed as a human rights issue in the social and political arena.

It appears that banning the use of all types of corporal punishment reduces the incidences of child abuse. Education of the public on child development and alternative discipline strategies also seems to have a very positive impact on societies where corporal punishment of children is unacceptable. The United States, South Sudan, and Somalia are the only countries that have yet to take a firm stand against corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2013).

### **The Effects of Discipline vs. Corporal Punishment**

The use of corporal punishment with children has been found to put children at a higher risk for emotional problems even if non-injurious, normative spanking is done (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2013; Straus, 2006; Straus & Mouradian, 1998; Straus & Stewart 1999; Turner &

Muller, 2004). There are a few studies done by Gunnoe (1997) and Baumrind (2010) that claim normative spanking is not harmful. However, the majority of studies done on corporal punishment show a great deal of harmful effects on children (Gershoff, 2013; Straus, 2006; Straus & Mouradian, 1998; Straus & Stewart 1999). The following details the research on the risks related to discipline and corporal punishment for children as well as their parents.

Discipline shall be defined as teaching and guiding through positive strategies such as modeling, creating a safe, child-friendly environment, redirection, providing appropriate alternatives for unwanted behaviors, validating the child's emotions, and using natural and logical consequences (Gerber & Johnson, 1998).

#### *Effects on Children*

Kadzin & Benjet (2003) found that non-punitive discipline has no negative effects on children. They also discuss the different findings regarding the effects of corporal punishment on children and the possible issues with different studies, i.e. different definitions of what corporal punishment is and is not. For example, most people would agree that if a spanking does not leave a mark on the child's body, then that is acceptable. But some accept marks on the child's body. James Dobson (1996) states, "For example, a dime sized bruise on the buttocks of a fair-skinned child may or may not indicate an abusive situation. It all depends. In an otherwise secure and loving home, that bruise may have no greater psychological impact than a skinned knee or a stubbed toe. Again the issue is not the small abrasion; it is the meaning behind it" (p. 25). This can affect the study's results if spanking is not clearly defined. What is clear is that positive discipline shows no risk of harming children.

Straus and Mouradian (1998) found that whether corporal punishment was done impulsively or non-impulsively, children still had higher levels of antisocial behaviors including

lack of empathy. It is this lack of empathy that causes children and adults to act aggressively towards others. Without empathy, it is easier to inflict pain on another human being. In another study, Straus & Stewart (1999) studied six types of corporal punishments ranging from mild to severe. The overall prevalence rate for any of the six types of corporal punishment used was 34% for infants and 94% for three to four-year-olds. They found that any type of corporal punishment increases the risks of negative outcomes.

Butt & Hearn (1998) discussed the sexualization of spanking. Some children will dissociate during spankings in order to turn pain into pleasure due to the buttocks being close to the genitalia. Money (1987) also studied how lovemaps are formed. Lovemaps are how the brain determines what is sexually pleasurable. Because the centers of the brain that process pain and pleasure are so close together, the developing brain can cross wires during spankings. Thus, this can lead some children to grow up and struggle with sadomasochistic tendencies.

Gershoff (2002) looked at eleven major behaviors—both positive and negative—associated with the use of corporal punishment. She separates physical abuse from corporal punishment by saying a spank or slap that does not cause injury is corporal punishment. If the slap or spank leaves a mark on the child's body, then it is considered physical abuse. She concludes through her meta-analysis that while spanking may produce the positive effect of immediate compliance in children, the negative effects outweighed the positive. Children who are spanked showed a greater incidence of anti-social behaviors, anxiety, depression, and aggression. A similar study conducted by Turner & Muller (2004) sampled 649 college students from New England regarding depression and other long-term effects from non-abusive corporal punishment. Forty percent of students had been spanked by age 13. Parental anger during corporal punishment was an indicator of depression as a long-term effect of corporal punishment.

However, a couple of studies claim that normative spanking is not harmful to children if done “lovingly.” Baumrind, Larzelere, and Owens (2010) found that adolescents from authoritative households with normative spanking fared better than adolescents from authoritarian households with severe corporal punishment as well as adolescents from permissive households where they were not spanked but also not disciplined. This sample was taken from Baumrind’s Family Socialization and Developmental Competence longitudinal study. Only 87 families were studied. The sample size for this study was small; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized. In a similar study, Gunnoe & Mariner (1997) found that spanking predicted fewer fights in black children between the ages of four to seven years. But they also found spanking increased fights for white children between the ages of eight to eleven years.

The research shows mostly negative outcomes for children who are spanked. The only positive outcome for spanking is immediate compliance, but this does not teach children how to use critical thinking or conflict resolution. There is an external locus of control rather than an internal one. Instead, it teaches children to use force to obtain cooperation from others and that it is acceptable to inflict pain on other people, especially if they are younger and weaker. Corporal punishment leads to emotional and behavioral negative effects even if they are mild (Paolucci & Violato, 2004).

#### *On Parents*

Due to either being spanked themselves or outside influences, many parents spank their children, especially when children are young, as young children cannot control their impulses. Yet, the research tends to show that the use of corporal punishment also affects parents negatively (Dietz, 2000; Straus, 2000). The following illustrates this finding in the literature.

Straus (2000) found that corporal punishment leads to a higher risk of physical abuse of children. The more corporal punishment parents experienced as children, the higher the probability these parents will go beyond the legal corporal punishment with their own children. A lack of empathy makes it easier for parents to spank and cross the imaginary line into abuse. Dietz (2000) also found that parents with low income and educational attainment were more likely to use severe corporal punishment with their children. The author also found that parents that grew up being socialized into violence were more likely to use severe corporal punishment with their children. The Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale was used for this study.

Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas, Taylor, & Price (2004) studied 1,116 twins to see how the children's behavior affected their parents' use of normative and non-normative corporal punishment with the children. Non-normative corporal punishment was distinguished from normative corporal punishment by whether or not it caused physical injury to the children. They found that anti-social behaviors elicited more corporal punishment from parents, and this led to even more anti-social behaviors in children. Therefore, this is a negative cycle.

Wissow (2001) looked at 2,017 parents of children under the age of three. Parents who used harsher corporal punishment had higher rates of depression and lower rates of nurturing behaviors than parents with average or low to zero rates of using corporal punishment with their children. There seemed to be a correlation between high rates of corporal punishment and the mental status of parents.

Another study looked at how parents who tended to be abusive with their children reacted to videos of infants crying and smiling versus non-abusive parents. Frodi and Lamb (1980) found that abusers are typically more annoyed and less sympathetic to crying than nonabusers are. Also, when the infant was smiling and cooing, the abusers were less attentive than nonabusers.

Abusers did not want to interact with the infant as much as nonabusers did. “Instead of relaxing in response to the smiling infant like the non-abusers did, however, the abusers responded with physiological arousal-making it difficult to distinguish between their responses to the cry and smile signals on physiological measures” (Frodi & Lamb, 1980, p. 240).

Since corporal punishment tends to elicit anti-social behavior in children, this creates a negative cycle. Parents who spank their children demonstrate the fewest nurturing behaviors towards their children (Straus, 2006) compared to parents who use positive discipline strategies. This may be due to the fact that corporal punishment lowers the amount of empathy children and adults have towards others. After all, one must suppress one’s empathy in order to purposely inflict pain onto someone else. Parents who use harsher corporal punishment with their children are more likely to cross the imaginary line of physical abuse.

### **Christians’ vs. Non-Christians’ Use of Corporal Punishment**

It seems that religious beliefs do tend to influence parents’ use of corporal punishment, especially amongst Conservative and Fundamentalist Christians. However, the research also shows that non-Christian, secular, parents tend to spank their children as much as do Christians (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007). The age-old adage, “Spare the rod and spoil the child” is well-known throughout the secular and Christian cultures with many believing that it comes straight from the Bible when, in fact, it does not. “The aphorism is from Samuel Butler’s poem ‘Hudibras’ (1664). See Ian Gibson, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 49” (Greven, 1992, p. 227).

Another theme that runs deep throughout Christianity is Original Sin. Many Christians believe that everyone born after the fall of Adam and Eve has a sinful nature. This leads many Christians to use corporal punishment with their children in order to try and rid their children of

sin. They seem to truly believe that “beating the devil out of them” will somehow save them from Hell. This is often based on Proverbs 23:13-14, which states, “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell” (King James Version). Christian pro-spankers throughout history have taken these verses quite literally. And some of these ideas have crept into the secular culture.

On the other side of this is the belief that children are born “good” and as “blank slates.” John B. Watson and John Locke held these beliefs. However, they believed that children should not be coddled. Watson warned that motherly affection toward children was dangerous and that children should be treated as young adults (Watson, 1928).

Ellison & Sherkat (1993) found that conservative Protestants highly support the use of corporal punishment due to their belief in Biblical literalism, the sin nature of children from birth, and the idea that sin deserves punishment. The majority of respondents surveyed with General Social Survey agreed that “a good, hard spanking” is sometimes necessary. These Protestants viewed developmentally appropriate behaviors as sin. Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank (2001) also found in a meta-analysis of 94 studies since 1980 that while religiosity is good for families, conservative Christians are more likely to use corporal punishment with their pre-adolescent children. “Only a few studies contrast the disciplinary attitudes or practices of members of Catholic, mainline Protestants, and Jewish religious groups. Consequently, well-established findings about religion and parent discipline, based on our criteria of at least five bivariate associations across three studies, are limited to various indexes of Christian conservatism” (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001, p. 577).

In another study conducted by Ellison (1996), he discovered that conservative and fundamental Christians holding the belief that everyone is born sinful and worldly strongly believe that corporal punishment must be used to help the child submit to parental authority and, ultimately, God's authority. Using data from the 1988 General Social Survey, "they found that the link between Conservative Protestant affiliation and support for corporal punishment is mediated via three related theological tenets: (1) the belief that the Bible should be interpreted as the literal Word of God; (2) the belief that human nature is fundamentally sinful and corrupt; and (3) the belief that persons who violate God's rules must be punished" (Ellison, 1996, p. 3).

In addition, Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament (2006) discovered that mothers with Conservative Biblical views used more corporal punishment with their children than mothers with Liberal Biblical views. Mothers with Liberal Biblical views are more likely to look for the symbolic meanings of the rod verses instead of taking them literally. Mothers with Liberal Biblical views also tend to be more open to using positive discipline strategies with their children. This trend continues as Gershoff, Miller, & Holden (1999) studied 132 families with 3-year-olds and found that Conservative Christians used corporal punishment more often than the other religious families. Other forms of discipline remained neutral.

Socular & Stien (1995) surveyed mothers from different ethnic groups to see if they believed spanking infants was acceptable. Out of the entire group of mothers participating in the study, 19% of mothers felt it was necessary to spank infants under a year at times, and 74% believed this for children between one and three years old.

When looking at the professional realm, Benjet & Kazdin (2003) found that 70% of clinical psychologists would never endorse the use of corporal punishment. Twenty-six percent

of clinical psychologists would rarely advise parents to spank their children. Four percent of clinical psychologists would sometimes advise parents to spank their children.

When comparing different religious groups regarding the use of corporal punishment with children, Grogan-Kaylor & Otis (2007) found that Protestants were more likely to use corporal punishment than Catholics. Parents with no religious affiliation did not differ from Protestants in their use of corporal punishment. Along the same lines, Woodberry & Smith (1998) found that Conservative Protestants who believed in “biblical literalism” highly valued obedience from their children and used corporal punishment. These Christians, while they use corporal punishment, are more likely to use rules for spanking.

Here is a list of the common rules most Christians that spank abide by for spanking children:

1. Never spank in anger.
2. Always spank “lovingly” and calmly.
3. Spank only for outright disobedience or harmful behavior.
4. Tell the child exactly why he/she is being spanked before and after the spanking.
5. Explain to the child that Jesus wants the parent to discipline him/her because the child sinned by disobeying the parent.
6. Hug, comfort, and pray with the child after the spanking.

Of course, there are different variations of these rules depending on which Christian pro-spanking advocate one consults. Another “rule” that often varies among Christian advocates of spanking is whether or not to use one’s hand or an object to spank the child because for some, the hand is part of the parent and should symbolize love and care to the child. Also, some Christians believe that multiple spankings in a row are necessary to break the child’s will. In his

book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, Tripp (1995) states, "After you have spanked, take the child up on your lap and hug him, telling him how much you love him, how much it grieves you to spank him, and how you hope that it will not be necessary again. Then if he is still not restored, you are to check your own spirit to see if you have handled him roughly... [or] brought unholy anger on this holy mission, and if you have, seek forgiveness from God. If your child is still angry, it's time for another round, 'Daddy has spanked you, but you are not sweet enough yet. We are going to have to go back upstairs for another spanking'" (p. 149).

It is unknown if secular parents and parents from other religions try to follow a similar set of rules when spanking their children. Christian pro-spankers are often quick to label the two types of spankings in our current culture—the godly spanking versus the cultural spanking. According to many Christian pro-spankers, the cultural spanking is when non-believers spank their children out of anger or frustration. Of course, Christians are also capable of spanking their children out of anger or frustration. But, according to Christian pro-spankers, godly spanking always follows the “rules” stated above and rids the children of sin, thus, putting them back in God’s good graces.

### **Regional attitudes toward spanking**

There are regional differences within the United States with regards to people’s beliefs about using corporal punishment with children. Again, there seems to be a religious link as the southern United States tends to be more predominately conservative Christian.

Flynn (1994) found that the southern region of the United States (84%) considers the use of corporal punishment with children highly favorable. The northeastern region considers it least favorable. Similarly, Wiehe (1990) found that Biblical literalism was positively related to favorable spanking attitudes. He collected data from churches in southern Ohio, Kentucky, North

Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The strong use of corporal punishment in the southern United States “may be due in part to the geographic location in which this research occurred. . . . The strong belief in the use of physical punishment in this area of the country, which may have its roots in the Bible, appears to have even impacted on persons not holding a literal belief in the Bible” (Wiehe, 1990, p. 184).

The areas in which there are the most Fundamentalist and Conservative Christians have higher rates of corporal punishment used with children. Areas with less Christian influence tend to have lower rates of corporal punishment (Flynn, 1994; Wiehe, 1990). However, it is important to note that not all Christians believe in the use of corporal punishment. And as the other sections of this chapter show, the United States as a whole accepts the right of parents to choose how they treat their children as long as it does not cause injury to the child.

## **Conclusion**

As this literature review indicates, the use of corporal punishment with children is complex and controversial among parents, society, and professionals (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2013; Kadzin & Benjet, 2003). That being said, much of the research shows that corporal punishment negatively affects the parent-child relationship (Paolucci & Violato, 2004; Straus, 2000; Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff, 2013; & Dietz 2000). In fact, based on the research provided here, even if one does not believe that corporal punishment is child abuse, it can be concluded that using corporal punishment can be a gateway to abuse (Gershoff, 2002; Straus, 2000; Straus, 2006). Interestingly, Fundamentalist Christians use corporal punishment the most out of religious parents (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). However, the research also shows that non-religious parents tend to spank their children just as much as religious parents (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007). It

appears from the research that the age-old adage, “spare the rod, and spoil the child” has infiltrated the culture of the United States.

The research also shows that in countries where corporal punishment is banned with a greater focus on educating society on the harmful effects of corporal punishment as well as alternative discipline strategies, the society as a whole has less acceptance of corporal punishment (Durrant, 1999; Straus, 2000). And according to the research, the child abuse rates in these countries where all corporal punishment is banned tends to be lower than in the United States (Bussmann, 2004; Straus, 2000). The United States is one of the only countries that apparently does not see corporal punishment as a violation of basic human rights (Gershoff, 2013). Interestingly, depending on which region of the United States one lives in, the prevalence of corporal punishment is higher or lower (Flynn, 1994; Wiehe, 1990).

Overall, it can be concluded based on the research presented in this literature review that use of corporal punishment is based on religious and cultural values. This study’s goal is to add an understanding of how denial is related to the use of corporal punishment to the research literature, as denial is not well studied when it comes to the use of corporal punishment. One excellent point is that there are many euphemisms used when speaking about corporal punishment, such as spank, whack, beat, whip, tap, smack, swat, paddle, physical discipline, correction, Biblical chastisement, and slap. The need for euphemisms indicates a certain amount of denial. Hitting is never used to describe corporal punishment among those that support and practice it. “Although most Americans do not like to call it so, spanking is hitting and hitting is violence. By using the euphemistic term spanking, parents feel justified in hitting their children while not acknowledging that they are, in fact, hitting” (Gershoff, 2013, p. 136). Many parents get quite upset if it is suggested that they “hit” their children when

corporal punishment is used.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

The purpose of this thesis was to explore whether or not denial is a factor in the continuance of spanking children. The goal of this research was to better understand the question: Does religion facilitate denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment? There were three research questions that this study answered: Does religion guide parental discipline strategies? Was spanking done in obedience to God? And, was spanking done calmly, angrily, or both? Each of the answers of these questions was compared to parental attitudes of spanking. The goal was to see if each of these three questions influenced how parents felt about corporal punishment. For this study, the definition of corporal punishment/spanking is “that subset of the broader category of physical punishment that is within the normal range and is ‘a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an opened hand to the extremities or buttocks’” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853). This is a quasi-experimental, quantitative study.

#### **Participants**

For this study, 203 parents participated and took the survey. Parents who were recruited had to be parents; their children could be of any age. The sample was a purposeful sample of convenience and was recruited through social media via Facebook. Participants were asked to complete the three measures discussed below. Their participation was voluntary and confidential, and they were informed of their rights as participants. Their participation indicated consent for the study. Completing the survey took about 25 to 30 minutes. All participants were anonymous to the researcher.

## Measures

*Demographic form.* The researcher created this form to gather background information such as age, educational level, number of children, religious affiliation and frequency of church attendance, importance of Bible study, homeschooling, and if religion played a role in discipline of children. This form also asked about parents' experiences with corporal punishment and discipline techniques. Questions such as "How often were you spanked?" and "What was used to spank you?" were asked in this instrument.

*Discipline and Spanking Beliefs.* This questionnaire was created by the researcher. It consisted of twenty true or false questions about how parents view being spanked and religion when it comes to discipline; items included statements such as "I feel no ill effects from being spanked" and "God requires children to be spanked." This was not verified as a valid or reliable instrument but was used to gauge parental beliefs of spanking and religion.

*Attitudes Toward Spanking a Child.* The attitudes of parents regarding the spanking of children was measured using Holden's Attitudes Toward Spanking (ATS) Questionnaire (Holden, 1995). The questionnaire asks parents to rate how strongly they agree with a particular statement with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 7 being "strongly agree." Four of the thirteen items (#3, #4, #8, & #10) were reversed coded. The questions ask how parents feel about spanking children such as "Spanking is a normal part of my parenting" and "Sometimes, the only way to get my child to behave is with a spank." Higher scores reflect more willingness to apply spanking to children. Alpha for this single-scale questionnaire ranged from .89 to .91 for five independent samples of parents. Test-retest correlations over three weeks averaged  $\alpha$ .76 for a sample of 20 middle- to upper-middle class mothers. Validity was assessed by correlating total

scores with participants' reported weekly rates of spanking ( $r=.73$ ), and with 14 days of daily reports about whether they spanked ( $r=.54$ ) (Holden, 1995).

### **Procedure**

Participants were asked to complete a demographic form and two questionnaires with an anticipated participation time of about 20-30 minutes. A link to the demographic form and questionnaires using Survey Monkey was placed on Facebook parenting pages and two parenting blogs. In every post, the researcher introduced herself as a graduate student working on her Master's thesis on the topic of corporal punishment. Then the following statement from the consent page of the survey was entered:

“By taking this survey, I hereby give my consent to participate in the following research study conducted by Stephanie Cox. I understand that my participation in this project will involve questions about my experiences and feelings regarding the use of corporal punishment and other discipline techniques. I understand that completing the questionnaire will take me no longer than 20-30 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and I am free to not respond to any item and to withdraw my consent from the study at any time. I understand that there is no penalty for refusal to participate or withdraw from the study.

I understand the answers will be completely anonymous. My name will not be identified with any data collected in the study and responses will be considered for confidential research use only. The data will only be used for this study and data will be reported in the aggregate.

If I have any questions or concerns, I may contact Stephanie Cox at [sgcox@siu.edu](mailto:sgcox@siu.edu) or Stacy D. Thompson, Ph.D. at (618) 453-4254.”

Then the researcher thanked them for their participation. Once the researcher posted the link to the survey on Facebook, anyone could share it. All responses were delivered electronically to the researcher via Survey Monkey.

The following is a list of the Facebook pages and the two blogs in which the link to the questionnaire was placed:

1. "Mama Drama." <https://www.facebook.com/MamaaDramaa?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 19,590 "likes" and is Non-Christian.
2. "Why Not Train A Child." <https://www.facebook.com/WhyNotTrainaChild?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 1,435 "likes" and is Christian.
3. "Why Not Train A Child Blog." <http://whynottrainachild.com/>. This is a Christian parenting blog.
4. "Family Talk With Dr. James Dobson." <https://www.facebook.com/DrJamesDobsonsFamilyTalk?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 152,386 "likes" and is Christian.
5. "Loving Bitchin' Parents." <https://www.facebook.com/LBP2013?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 174 "likes" and is Non-Christian.
6. "Hitting Is Never The Answer." <https://www.facebook.com/pages/HINTA-Hitting-Is-Never-The-Answer/551876971500709?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 768 "likes" and is Non-Christian.
7. "Practical Homeschooling." <https://www.facebook.com/PracticalHomeschooling?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 52,782 "likes" and is Christian and Non-Christian.
8. "Olive Branch." <https://www.facebook.com/olivebranchcommunity>. This page has 432 "likes" and is Christian and Non-Christian.

9. The researcher's personal Facebook page. The researcher has 338 Facebook friends that are Christian and Non-Christian.

10. "Raising Mama Blog." <http://raisingmama.com/>. This is a Christian parenting blog.

11. "On The Fence." <https://www.facebook.com/OnTheFenceAdvocacy?ref=ts&fref=ts>. This page has 8,526 "likes" and is Christian and Non-Christian.

12. "Grand Avenue Christian Church." <https://www.facebook.com/grandavenuechristian>. This page has 236 "likes" and is Christian.

### **Plan of Analysis**

In order to analyze the research question, does religion facilitate denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment, three questions were addressed. For the first question, does religion guide parental discipline strategies, an ANOVA was computed in order to see if the view that religion guided parental strategies positively or negatively influenced parental attitudes regarding spanking children.

For the second question, was spanking done in obedience to God, an ANOVA was computed in order to see if the fact that parents spanked in obedience to God as children influenced their attitudes regarding spanking children in a positive or negative manner.

For the third question, was spanking done calmly, angrily, or both, an ANOVA was computed in order to see if the fact that parents were spanked either calmly or angrily as children influenced their attitudes about spanking children in a positive or negative manner. ANOVAs were computed using SPSS. Along with the ANOVA, each question was analyzed using a Tukey HSD test.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of this study. The goal of the research was to better understand if religion facilitated denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment by looking at three independent variables and seeing how they influenced parental attitudes toward spanking. The three independent variables were whether religion guided parental discipline strategies, whether parents were spanked in obedience to God as children, and whether parents were spanked calmly or angrily as children. The three variables helped to show that religion facilitates denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment by showing whether or not the parents had positive views of spanking children.

A total of 203 parents participated in the study. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (94%). The majority of the parents in this study were between the ages of 26 and 35 (53.2%). As far as educational background, most of the parents had a Bachelor's degree (39.3%). Thirty two percent of parents had two children while 10.8% had five or more children. Stay-at-home parents comprised 70.4%. Homeschooling occurred in 38.3% of households surveyed. The largest religious group was Non-Denominational Evangelicals (22.9%). The majority of the participants in this study were married (83.7%). Figures 1 to 10 show the demographic makeup of the sample with descriptive statistics. Additionally, regarding religion, most of the sample was Christian of some denomination, while 29.5% were a religion other than Christian. The majority of parents said that they attend church weekly (50.2%).

## Quantitative Analysis

In order to answer the question “Does religion facilitate denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment?” three ANOVA analyses were conducted using SPSS (see Table 1). Three research questions were addressed through the statistical analysis: Does religion guide parental discipline strategies? Was spanking done in obedience to God? And, was spanking done calmly, angrily, or both? Each of the answers of these questions were compared to parental attitudes of spanking. The goal was to see if each of these three questions influenced how parents felt about corporal punishment.

For the first question, “Does religion guide parental discipline strategies?”, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the independent variables of whether religion guided discipline strategies a lot, some, and not at all to study the dependent variable of parental attitudes regarding spanking children (see Table 1). There was a significant effect on parental attitudes regarding spanking when religion was used in the guidance of disciplining children at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions (a lot, some, not at all) [ $F(2, 181) = 3.898, p = .022$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the “not at all condition” ( $M = 31.44, SD = 10.629$ ) was significantly different than the “a lot” condition ( $M = 35.36, SD = 16.935$ ). However, the “some” condition ( $M = 36.05, SD = 14.878$ ) did not significantly differ from the “not at all” and “a lot” conditions. Taken together, these results suggest that participants who reported that religion guided discipline a lot had significantly different parental attitudes regarding spanking than those who said that religion did not guide their discipline. Specifically, the more religion guides discipline, the more parents have positive attitudes towards spanking children.

For the second question, “Was the respondent’s spanking as a child done in obedience to God?”, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare participants on whether they were spanked in obedience to God, not spanked in obedience to God, or didn’t know if they were spanked in obedience to God affected parental attitudes regarding spanking children. There were significant differences on parental attitudes regarding spanking when parents reported that they had been spanked in obedience to God at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions (spanked in obedience to God, not spanked in obedience to God, didn’t know if they were spanked in obedience to God) [ $F(2, 174) = 3.02, p = .051$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for “not being spanked in obedience to God” condition ( $M = 33.31, SD = 12.769$ ) was significantly different than the “being spanked in obedience to God” condition ( $M = 40.17, SD = 18.599$ ). However, the “didn’t know if they were spanked in obedience to God” condition ( $M = 36.11, SD = 14.905$ ) did not significantly differ from the “not spanked in obedience to God” and “being spanked in obedience to God” conditions. Taken together, these results suggest that participants who reported being spanked in obedience to God had significantly different parental attitudes of spanking from those who said that they were not spanked in obedience to God. Specifically, the more that spanking was done in obedience to God to parents as children, the more parents have positive attitudes toward spanking children.

For the third question, “Was their childhood spanking done calmly, angrily, or both?”, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare on whether they were spanked angrily, calmly, or both depending on the situation affected parental attitudes regarding spanking children. There were significant differences between the three groups on parental attitudes regarding spanking when parents were spanked calmly at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions (angrily, calmly, both depending on the situation) [ $F(2, 174) = 9.231, p = .000$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the

Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for “angrily” condition ( $M = 30.56$ ,  $SD = 10.458$ ) was significantly different than the “calmly” condition ( $M = 42.88$ ,  $SD = 17.615$ ). However, the “both depending on the situation” condition ( $M = 36.35$ ,  $SD = 15.145$ ) did not significantly differ from the “calmly” and “angrily” conditions. Taken together, these results suggest that participants who reported being spanked calmly had significantly different parental attitudes toward spanking than those who were spanked angrily as children. Specifically, the more calmly parents were spanked as children, the more parents have positive attitudes towards spanking children.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment in children is facilitated by religion. The negative effect of denial when it comes to corporal punishment has not been well studied within the fields of psychology and child development. After all, it is extremely difficult to specifically measure denial, therefore one must measure the attitudes of parents regarding corporal punishment in order to see if being spanked in a calm, religiously sanctioned manner causes them to have positive attitudes of corporal punishment. One of the questions in Holden's ATS questionnaire was "When all is said and done, spanking is harmful for a child." This thesis shows that denial is, in fact, one of the many harmful effects of corporal punishment due to children learning from very young ages that corporal punishment is part of the parent-child dyad with society condoning and even expecting it. This is especially true if children are also taught that God "approves" of the corporal punishment.

The research for this thesis was conducted using an online survey that targeted parents. The survey gathered background information on the parents and asked about their own experiences with corporal punishment as well as their religious preferences. The survey then assessed parental attitudes toward spanking children. The background information was compared to the attitudes of the parents regarding the use of corporal punishment with children.

Three major findings were established with the statistical analysis. The first major finding was that parents whose religion guided their parenting a great deal had more favorable views towards spanking children than parents whose religion did not guide their parenting. The second major finding was that parents who were spanked in obedience to God as children had more favorable attitudes regarding spanking children than parents who were not spanked in obedience

to God. The third major finding of this study was that parents who were spanked calmly as children greatly favored spanking children over the parents that were spanked angrily as children. All of the parents who viewed the use of corporal punishment in a favorable light were less likely to believe that corporal punishment could be harmful to children.

In the future, more studies regarding denial as one of the many harmful effects of corporal punishment on children need to be conducted on a larger scale. This study, while limited to mostly Caucasians, provides a solid base from which continued research can be done. The importance of seeing and understanding that denial is one of the harmful effects of corporal punishment on children will help to provide greater insight into better education for parents and professionals in order to stop this violence toward children.

Given the results of this study, it appears that religion does in fact play a role in the facilitation of denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment. Parents that use religion to guide the way that they discipline their children viewed spanking more positively than parents who do not use religion to guide them in disciplining their children. To further back up the fact that religion facilitates denial, parents that were spanked in obedience to God are more likely to view spanking children in a positive manner than those who were not spanked in obedience to God as children. It appears that if parents believe that God wants them to spank their children, those parents are more likely to deny that corporal punishment is harmful to children (Gershoff, Holden, & Miller, 1999).

What is even more interesting regarding the results of this study is the significant difference in parental attitudes toward spanking if the parents were spanked calmly versus angrily as children. The parents who were spanked calmly as children viewed spanking children quite a bit more positively than the parents who were spanked angrily as children did. This

should not be surprising considering that Christian advocates of spanking such as Dobson, Tripp, the Pearls, Lessin, and Fugate (1996) tell parents to never spank their children in anger. To be spanked in a calm, systematic, “loving” manner is confusing to young children. “Hitting, by its nature, causes physical pain, and it can be confusing and frightening for children to be hit by someone they love and respect, and on whom they are dependent” (Gershoff, 2013, p. 135). It can be hypothesized that children become conditioned into believing spanking is a “good thing” when they are calmly and “lovingly” spanked. “Spanking models the use of aggression and violence, teaching children that it is acceptable and reasonable for the person in charge to get what he or she wants and that violence is sometimes a part of loving relationships (Eron, Walder, & Lelkowitz, 1971)” (Gershoff, 2013, p. 135). This seems especially true for children that are spanked not only calmly but also in the name of God. Therefore, calm, religiously sanctioned corporal punishment appears to facilitate the denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment by forcing children to repress their emotional pain from these spankings. To go against religious teachings regarding corporal punishment is to risk rejection by the church. This leaves open the possibility that some Christians may believe that God will also reject them.

### **Limitations**

There are some limits to this study. Most of the participants were Caucasians despite equal opportunities for people of other races and ethnicities to respond; therefore, the generalization of the results to other races and ethnicities is limited. Another limitation of this study is the fact that the survey was conducted on Facebook, so only people on Facebook that saw the link to the survey could choose to participate. Also, it is assumed by the researcher that every participant answered the survey honestly. Future studies on this topic need to be

conducted on a bigger scale. The detrimental effect of denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment needs to be studied in greater detail.

### **Implications**

The implications of this research include an increased understanding of psychological damage by which perpetration of corporal punishment in the guise of religious doctrine occurs within a socially accepted framework. Also, further implications of this research are that, through the increased understanding that this research brings, the societal acceptance of corporal punishment could be diminished by awareness that denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment is one of the many psychological factors of being hurt as children by the people that are supposed to have their best interests at heart. Parents may feel that spanking is not harmful because of the denial of the effects as demonstrated by this study. When conducting parent education classes, it should be noted that these parents may become defensive when challenged with the fact that corporal punishment is harmful. Therefore, the education needs to be done in a manner that will allow them to be open to alternative discipline strategies. For example, instead of pointing out that spanking is harmful, parent educators need to provide effective discipline strategies that these parents may not know. Filling the discipline tool box for parents will help them to use spanking less often. Finally, professionals in the psychological, sociological, and child development fields need to use this knowledge to stop using euphemisms to describe mild to moderate forms of violence toward children. There should be no “normative” version of hitting a child. This only perpetuates the denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment.

This research will provide support for the advocates against corporal punishment to better present the case to ban the practice where it has not already been outlawed. In addition, these results will force society to take a closer look in the mirror to see that just because most children

survive corporal punishment, does not mean that no harm has been done to them. Seeing that religious-based calm, systematic spanking is indeed harmful despite what many Christian advocates of corporal punishment claim will expose the misconceptions these people hold.

As previously stated, this research needs to be done on a larger scale with more racially and ethnically diverse populations. It also needs to be done with people of different religions as most of the participants of this study were Christians. Finally, additional research needs to be done on the impact of denial of the harmful effects of corporal punishment in a non-religious population in order to be able to further confirm that denial is a definite negative effect of corporal punishment.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this research study contribute to an understanding of the relationship between systematic corporal punishment in a religious environment and the belief that it is somehow mandated by God, and that denial that corporal punishment is harmful is the reason why corporal punishment is continued. The reasoning behind this belief is that if corporal punishment is done in a “godly, calm, loving” manner, it will not harm children psychologically. However, the literature in this field shows that all corporal punishment of children is harmful. The research provided by Gershoff (2002, 2013), Straus (2000, 2001, 2006), and Holden (1995) show that there is a host of negative effects for children who are spanked. Just because one may not see the damage does not mean it isn’t there. As Gershoff (2013) states, “We now have enough research to conclude that spanking is ineffective at best and harmful to children at worst” (p. 136). It is time to heed and apply the research.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
Figures and Tables

## Age of Participants

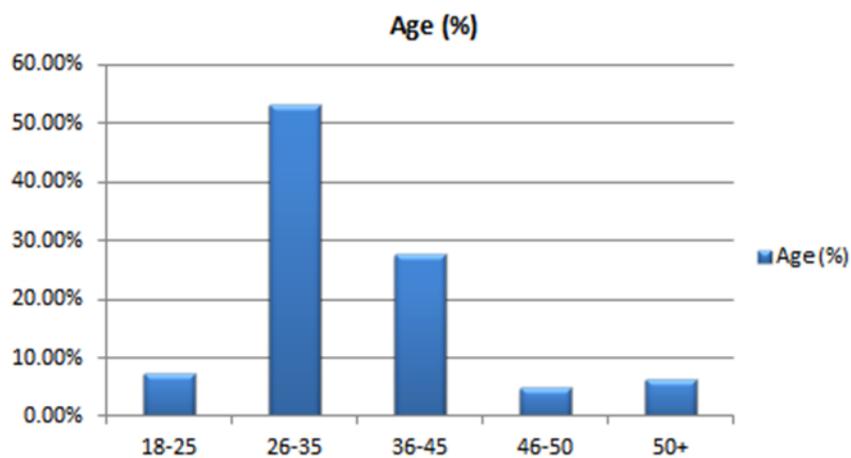


Figure 1 Age of Participants by Percentage

## Race/Ethnicity

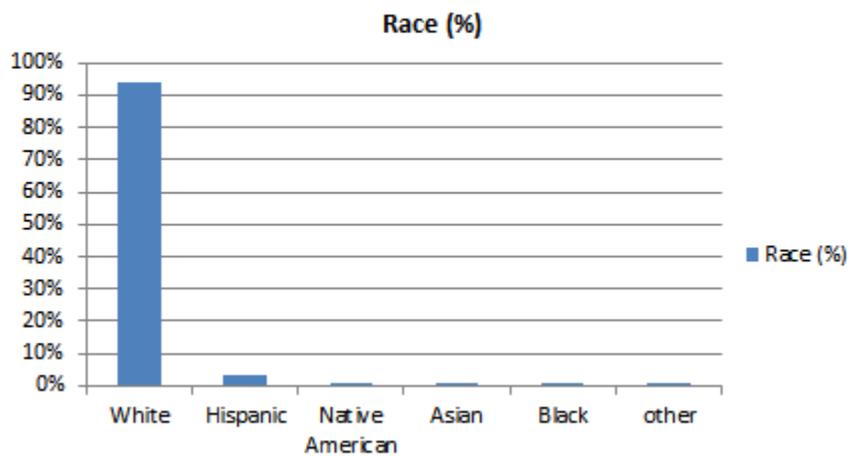


Figure 2 Race/Ethnicity of Participants by Percentage

## Educational Background

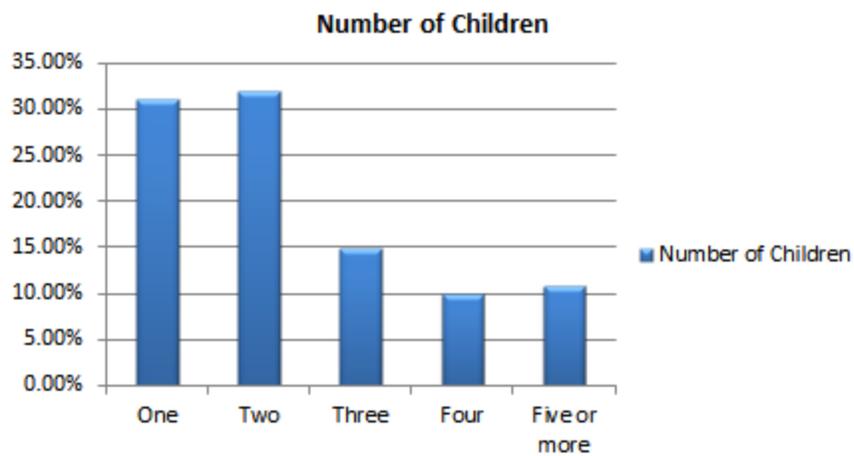


Figure 3 Educational Background of Participants by Percentage

## Number of Children

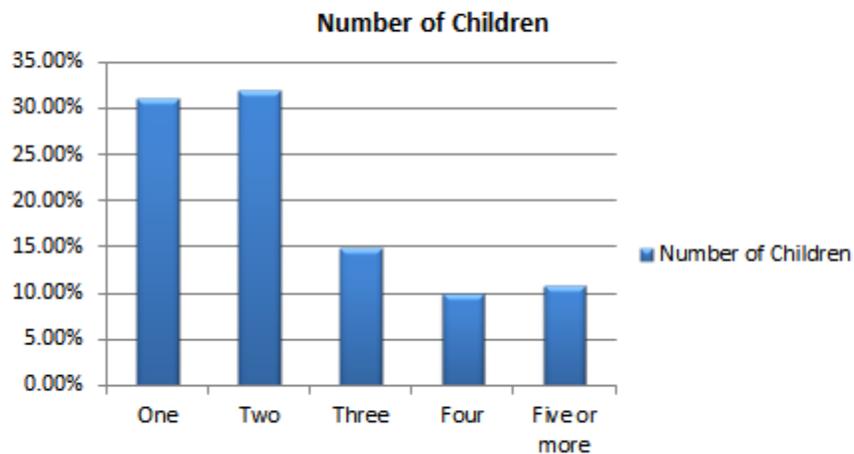


Figure 4. Number of Children of Participants by Percentage

# Relationship Status

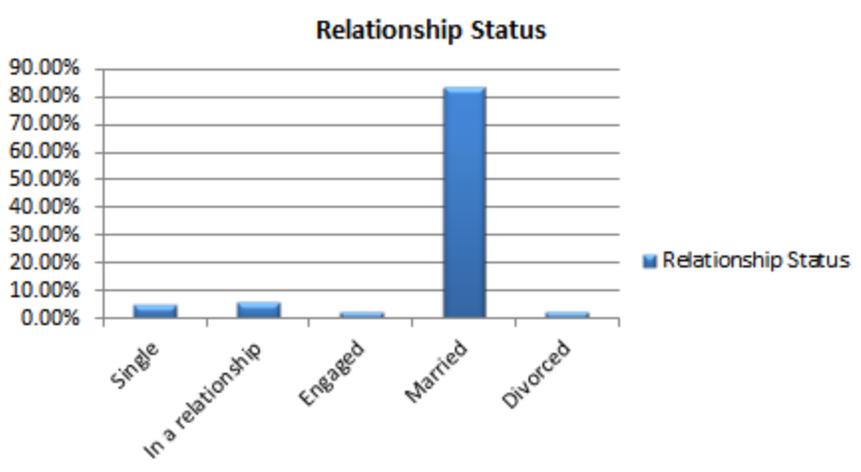


Figure 5 Relationship Status of Participants by Percentage

# Religious Preferences

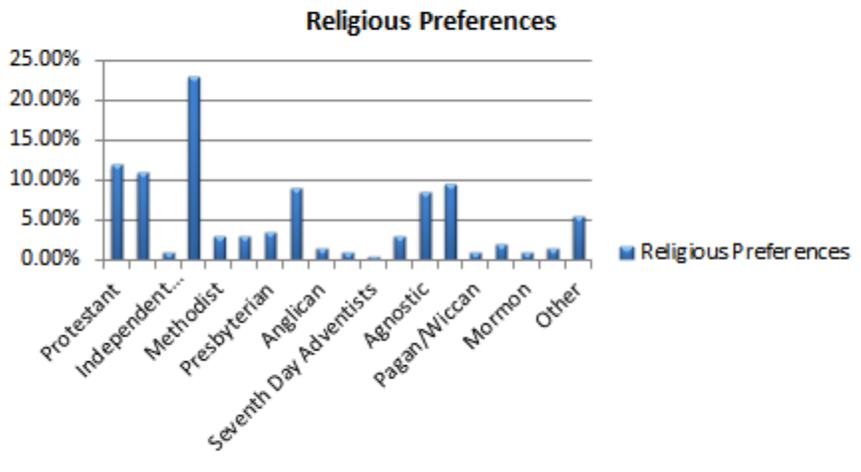


Figure 6 Religious Preferences of Participants by Percentage

## Employment

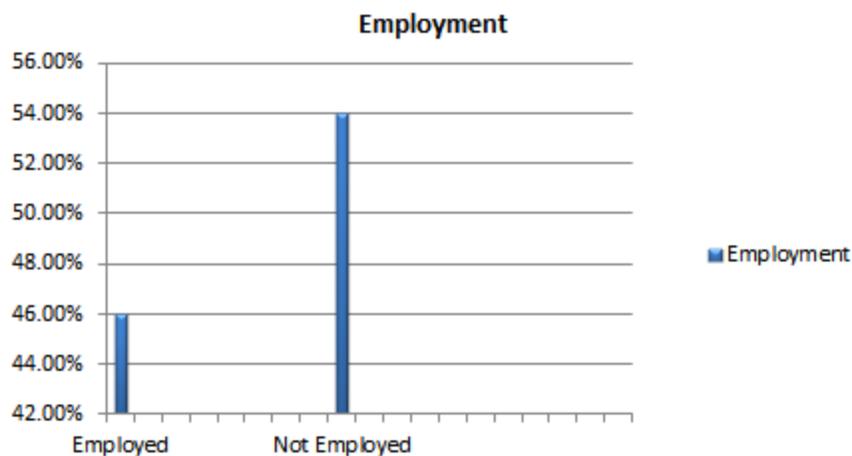


Figure 7 Employment Status of Participants by Percentage

## Church Attendance

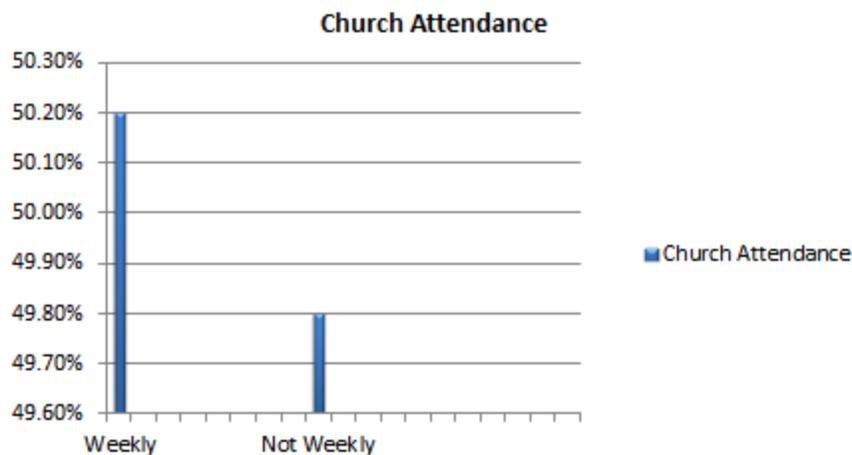


Figure 8 Church Attendance of Participants by Percentage

## Stay-at-home parents

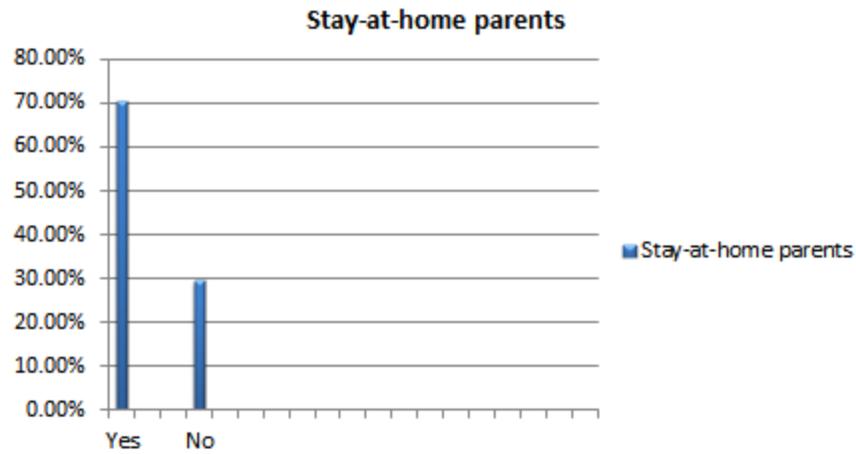


Figure 9 Stay-at-home Parents of Participants by Percentage

## Homeschooled the children

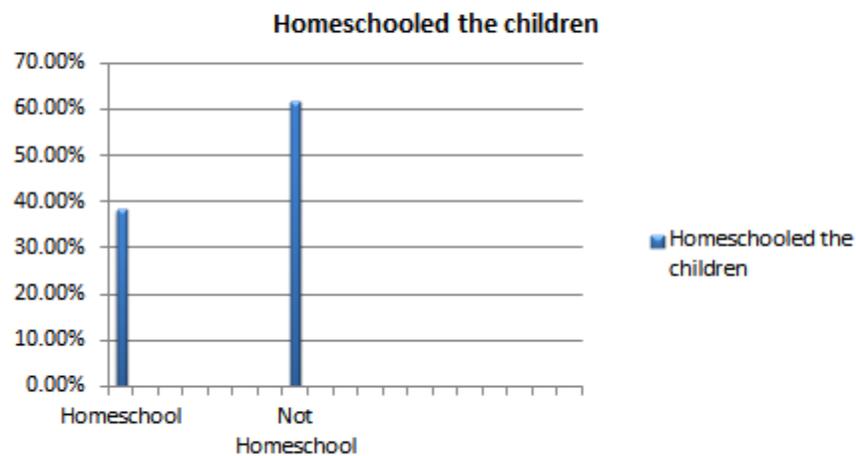


Figure 10 Homeschooling of Participants by Percentage

Table 1

*One-Way Analysis of Variance of Scales Between Groups on Parental Attitudes Toward Spanking*

	M (SD)	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Religion Guides Discipline	35.36 (14.592)	38966.326	2	804.599	3.898	0.022
Spanked in Obedience to God	35.24 (14.680)	37928.034	2	636.390	3.021	0.051
Calm vs. Angry Spanking	35.28 (14.656)	3626.562	2	1813.281	9.231	0.000

APPENDIX B  
Instruments

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

By taking this survey, I hereby give my consent to participate in the following research study conducted by **Stephanie Cox**. I understand that my participation in this project will involve questions about my experiences and feelings regarding the use of corporal punishment and other discipline techniques. I understand that completing the questionnaire will take me no longer than 20-30 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and I am free to not respond to any item and to withdraw my consent from the study at any time. I understand that there is no penalty for refusal to participate or withdraw from the study.

I understand the answers will be completely anonymous. My name will not be identified with any data collected in the study and responses will be considered for confidential research use only. The data will only be used for this study and data will be reported in the aggregate. If I have any questions or concerns, I may contact Stephanie Cox at [sgcox@siu.edu](mailto:sgcox@siu.edu) or Stacy D. Thompson, Ph.D. at (618) 453-4254.

I have read and fully understand this form.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Development and Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709, by phone at 618 453-4533, or by email [siuhsc@siu.edu](mailto:siuhsc@siu.edu).

# \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

I am interested in learning more about how parents feel about the use of corporal punishment with their children as well as other forms of discipline. Corporal punishment is defined as striking a child's bottom or hand with an open hand or object such as a wooden spoon, belt, or paddle that does not leave marks on the child's bottom or hand. The word "spank" will be used when asking about corporal punishment. Only you can help me to better understand your view and experiences with corporal punishment and discipline.

This inventory consists of three sections. Be sure to read the directions carefully before answering the questions in each section. No individual in the study will be identified by name and all responses will be confidential.

Section 1. The questions in this section are about characteristics of you and your family. Place a check mark in the blank next to your answer or fill in the blank.

1. How old are you?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46-50
  - e. 50 +
  
2. What is your relationship status?
  - a. Single
  - b. Married
  - c. Divorced
  - d. In a relationship
  - e. Engaged
  
3. How many children do you have?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5 or more
  
4. How old is your oldest child? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Are you a stay-at-home parent?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
6. Do you homeschool your children?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

7. What is your race or ethnic background?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ White      \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic      \_\_\_\_\_ Native American  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Asian      \_\_\_\_\_ Black  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please state): \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is the highest level of education completed you've completed?  
 a. High School      b. Associate's Degree      c. Bachelor's Degree  
 d. Master's Degree      e. Doctoral Degree      f. Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Are you employed?  
 a. Yes      b. No
10. Who is the breadwinner?  
 a. I am      b. My partner is      c. We both are
11. What is your religious preference?  
 a. Protestant      i. Roman Catholic  
 b. Baptist      j. Anglican  
 c. Independent Fundamental Baptist      k. Pentecostal  
 d. Non-Denominational Evangelical      l. Seventh Day Adventists  
 e. Methodist      m. Non-Christian  
 f. Lutheran      n. Presbyterian  
 g. Agnostic      o. Atheist  
 h. Other (Please state): \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you attend church weekly?  
 a. Yes      b. No
13. If you answered "Yes" to the question above, how many times a week do you attend church?  
 a. Once      b. Twice      c. Three or more times a week
14. Is prayer and Bible study...  
 a. Very important      b. important  
 c. Somewhat important      d. Not important
15. Who is the disciplinarian in your household?  
 a. My husband/male partner      b. My wife/female partner      c. I am  
 d. We both are
16. How much does your religion guide the way you discipline your children?  
 a. A lot      b. Some      c. Not at all
17. Were you raised in a religious household?  
 a. Yes      b. No

18. Were you spanked as a child?  
a. Yes            b. No
19. If yes, was it done in obedience to God?  
a. Yes            b. No            c. I don't know
20. How often were you spanked as a child?  
a. Very frequently            b. Frequently            c. Occasionally            d. Rarely
21. Did your parents spank you calmly or angrily?  
a. Angrily    b. Calmly    c. Both depending on the situation
22. Please check everything your parents used to spank you:  
\_\_\_\_Open hand    \_\_\_\_Belt    \_\_\_\_Wooden spoon    \_\_\_\_Paddle  
\_\_\_\_Slipper    \_\_\_\_Hickory stick/small tree branch    \_\_\_\_Spatula
23. Did your parents explain why they spanked you?  
a. Yes            b. Sometimes            c. No
24. What other discipline methods did your parents use with you? (Please check all that apply).  
\_\_\_\_Time-out    \_\_\_\_Taking privileges away    \_\_\_\_Grounding  
\_\_\_\_Natural consequences
25. What does spanking mean to you?
-

### DISCIPLINE AND SPANKING BELIEFS

Please answer each true or false question based on your experiences with corporal punishment and discipline.

- |  |      |       |
|--|------|-------|
| 1. Being spanked helped me.                                      | True | False |
| 2. I feel no ill effects from being spanked.                     | True | False |
| 3. Spanking was not for my own good.                             | True | False |
| 4. I would be happier had I not been spanked.                    | True | False |
| 5. Had I not been spanked I may have become a delinquent.        | True | False |
| 6. I often wish I had not been spanked.                          | True | False |
| 7. If I had been spanked, it would have benefitted me.           | True | False |
| 8. I feel good about how my parents raised me.                   | True | False |
| 9. God requires that children be spanked.                        | True | False |
| 10. Spanking is hitting.   | True | False |
| 11. Spanking is discipline.                                      | True | False |
| 12. Other discipline methods should be used instead of spanking. | True | False |
| 13. Spanking should always be used.                              | True | False |
| 14. Spanking should be used only as a last resort.               | True | False |
| 15. Spanking isn't harmful if done calmly and lovingly.          | True | False |
| 16. Godly children are created through spankings.                | True | False |
| 17. Spare the rod and spoil the child is a Bible verse.          | True | False |
| 18. Being spanked harmed my relationship with God.               | True | False |
| 19. I respected my parents due to spankings.                     | True | False |
| 20. I survived spankings, so my child(ren) will too.             | True | False |

### Attitudes toward spanking a child

Using the rating scale below, rate how much you currently agree or disagree with each statement about spanking a child.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly	Moderately	Slightly	Neither	Slightly	Moderately	Strongly
.....Disagree.....				.....Agree.....		

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Spanking a child is a normal part of parenting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Sometimes, a spank is the best way to get a child to listen.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A spank is not an effective method to change a child's behavior for the long term. (r)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Sometimes, spanking is necessary to instill proper moral and social conduct.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Sometimes, the only way to get a child to behave is with a spank.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. One of the best ways for a child to learn "no" is to spank him/her after disobedience.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. If a child is spanked for misbehavior, he or she should always be spanked for that misbehavior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When all is said and done, spanking is harmful for a child. (r)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I believe it is the parent's right to spank their children if they think it is necessary.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Overall, I believe spanking is a bad disciplinary technique. (r)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. If and when I become a parent, I plan to spank my child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. If and when I become a parent, if my child needs to be spanked, I will not hesitate to do so.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. If and when I become a parent, I'm sure I won't spank my child. (r)

## VITA

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