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Twenty-eight years after the complete ban on the physical punishment of children in Finland: trends and psychosocial concomitants

Österman, Karin; Björkqvist, Kaj; Wahlbeck, Kristian

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description of the history of early child protection laws in Finland is provided by Husa (2011). The Finnish law of 1983 finally criminalized all kinds of physical punishment, under all circumstances. It states that *“A child shall be brought up in the spirit of understanding, security and love. He shall not be subdued, physically punished or otherwise humiliated. His growth towards independence, responsibility and adulthood shall be encouraged, supported and assisted.”* (Finnish Law, Article 1.3 of the Child Custody and Right of Access Act, 1983, effective 1984). Simultaneously, in 1983, two public information campaigns were launched in order to affect attitudes concerning physical punishment.

### International Legislation Against the Physical Punishment of Children

By the year 2014, a total of 35 countries had prohibited all kinds of physical punishment towards children (1979: Sweden; 1983: Finland; 1987: Norway; 1989: Austria; 1994: Cyprus; 1997: Denmark; 1998: Latvia; 1999: Croatia; 2000: Germany, Israel, Bulgaria; 2002: Turkmenistan; 2003: Iceland; 2004: Romania, Ukraine; 2005: Hungary; 2006: Greece; 2007: Togo, Spain, Venezuela, Uruguay, Portugal, New Zealand, Netherlands; 2008: Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Republic of Moldova, Costa Rica; 2010: Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tunisia, Poland, Albania; 2011: South Sudan; 2013: Honduras) (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2014). Still, this means that only 5.2% of the child population in the world is legally protected from all physical punishment.

The Council of Europe, encompassing 47 countries with 800 million citizens, including, for example, Russia, considers all kinds of physical punishment towards children to be a breach of fundamental human rights. By 2009 the majority of its member states had committed themselves to ending all types of physical punishment towards children both at school and in the home. It was agreed that children should not have less protection than adults under the criminal law of assault; furthermore, it was decided that the practice concerning what, in some states, is called the “reasonable punishment” of children is not compliant with international human rights (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2009).

Data from 10,812 respondents from 14 countries of the European Union have shown that the existence of national laws banning the physical punishment of children is associated with lower levels of acceptability regarding physical punishment in the population at large (Gracia & Herrero, 2008). Zolotor and Puzia (2010) made a similar review of legal bans in 24 countries and found that bans were closely associated with a decrease in both support and use of physical punishment.

Efforts to legally ban all types of physical punishment of children are underway in many countries. For an in-depth description of law reforms and information campaigns round the world see Durrant and Smith (2011).

### Research on Physical Punishment in Finland and Sweden

Finland is a relatively small country with a population of 5.4 million, the majority of the population have Finnish as their mother tongue, while a minority (5.4%) speak Swedish, mainly along the Finnish coast.

The acceptance of physical punishment has been steadily decreasing in Finland over the past 30 years. In a survey carried out in 1981, Peltoniemi (1983), found that 44% of women and 52% of men accepted the physical punishment of children. When two similar studies were carried out just over 20 years later, the percentages had, by the year 2004, gone down to 23% and 45%, respectively, and by 2006 to 23% and 36% (Sariola, 2006).

When Sariola and Uutela (1992) investigated family violence, including physical punishment, among 9,000 Finnish 15-year olds, they found that 22.8% of respondents reported having sometimes been pushed, shoved, or shaken angrily as a punishment; 65.1% reported having been pulled by the hair, the most common form of physical punishment; 24.2% reported having been slapped; 34.6% had been switched (traditionally being hit with branches from a tree or bush); and 12.3% had been beaten up. Three percent had been hit with a fist, 4.3% beaten with an object, and 3.4% had been kicked. They also found that physical punishment was more common among Finnish-speakers than among Swedish-speakers in Finland.

One of the foremost aims of the present study was to report changes over time regarding exposure to physical punishment in Finland. Similar studies have been carried out in Sweden where victimization as a result of physical punishment has steadily declined since measurements started (see Janson, Långberg, & Svensson, 2007, for a review).

When Janson et al. (2007) investigated positive attitudes towards physical punishment among parents in Sweden, they found that the percentages had continued to decline steadily between 1965 and 2006: during this period positive attitudes towards physical punishment fell from 53% to 7%. Also among children, positive attitudes towards physical punishment fell from 32% to 10% between 1994 and 2006.

In the 1960s, almost 94% of parents reported that they used physical punishment towards their children. In the 1970s this percentage had decreased to 50%, and in the 1980s the percentage was 35%. In the 1990s, 20% of Swedish children reported that they had been the victims

of physical punishment at home, and in the 2000s, this number had fallen to 11%. In 2006, 2.4% of Swedish parents reported that they had hit their child, between 1 and 10 times during the last year (Janson et al., 2007, pp. 34–35). Hitting with an object was reported by 0.4% of the parents. Not a single parent had hit their child more than ten times during the last year. According to Janson, Långberg, & Svensson (2011), almost an entire generation of Swedes who were themselves victims of physical punishment during childhood, have refrained from inflicting physical punishment on their own children.

When Durrant (1999) evaluated the situation of physical punishment in Sweden, 20 years after the implementation of the ban, she concluded, among other things, that child abuse mortality was low, social interventions had become both supportive and preventative, and that public support for physical punishment had declined. Modig (2009) made an evaluation 30 years after the abolition of physical punishment and came to the same conclusions. She especially stressed the importance of legislation and awareness campaigns.

### **Adverse Concomitants of Physical Punishment**

While physical abuse has been studied extensively, the concomitants of physical punishment are much less known. The trend in the research of today, however, is slowly shifting towards an understanding that physical punishment may also be damaging for children. A wide range of adverse concomitants, in the form of psychological, physical, or social disturbances, have been associated with physical/corporal punishment. The studies of Murray Straus, a forerunner in this field of research show many harmful associations of corporal punishment, such as depression, suicidal thoughts, escalation from corporal punishment to physical abuse, family, street, and school violence, sexual violence, masochistic sex, feelings of alienation, delayed mental development, poorer achievement, and infanticide (for an overview, see Straus, 2009).

In a review, Gershoff (2002), found an association between corporal punishment and 10 negative outcomes. In the case of children these were: increased risk of aggression, victimization of abuse, and antisocial behavior; as well as poorer mental health, quality of relationship to parents, and moral internalization. In adults they were: increased risk for aggression, criminal and antisocial behavior, spouse or child abuse, and poorer mental health.

The impact of physical punishment on mental disorders has been studied by Afifi and colleagues in nationally representative samples in the US. It was shown that physical punishment during childhood (things thrown at the child, being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, or spanked) was associated with major depres-

sion, alcohol abuse, and externalizing problems in adults (Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006). This was also the case after controlling for parental bonding, and it shows that, in contrast to what is frequently stated, physical punishment by a loving parent does not make it less damaging for the child (Afifi et al., 2006). In another study, physical punishment (being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, or hit) was found to be associated with the following mental disorders: major depression, dysthymia, mania, specific phobia, anxiety, borderline, narcissism, obsessive compulsiveness, schizoid, schizotypal, and antisocial personality, alcohol, and drug abuse (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012). In a third study Afifi, Mota, MacMillan, and Sareen (2013) found that harsh physical punishment during childhood in the absence of maltreatment, was associated with higher odds of arthritis, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Sociodemographic variables were controlled for in the studies.

Physical punishment victimization is also associated with depression (e.g., MacMillan, Boyle, Wong, Duku, Fleming, & Walsh, 1999; Turner & Finkelhorn, 1996; Turner & Muller, 2004), externalizing problems (Callender, Olson, Choe, & Sameroff, 2011; MacMillan et al., 1999), cognitive functions (Gershoff, 2002), and psychopathy (Lynam, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2008).

Aggressive behavior has been linked to childhood physical punishment, since harsh parenting often includes the physical punishment of the child. Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, and McBride-Chang (2003) studied harsh parenting in Southern China and the physical punishment of “hitting” the child was included among the things parents did when the children misbehaved. The results showed that harsh parenting by the mother affected emotion regulation in particular, and harsh parenting by the father was associated with higher levels of aggression in the children. Corporal punishment, such as spanking, has also been found to increase the risk for aggressiveness in children (e.g., Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010).

Studies have shown that physical punishment during childhood is linked to alcohol abuse during adulthood (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; MacMillan et al., 1999). In a series of three articles, Cheng and colleagues analyzed the relationship between alcohol problems and childhood physical punishment in a representative sample from Beijing and Shanghai (Cheng, Anthony, & Huang, 2010; Cheng et al., 2011a; Cheng, Huang, & Anthony, 2011b). Physical punishment was measured with items like “pushed, grabbed or shoved,” “threw something,” and “slapped, hit, or punched.” Using structural equation modeling, a robust association between childhood physical punishment and drinking problems was found (Cheng et al., 2011a). Subjects with a history of

childhood physical punishment were 1.5 times more likely to start drinking alcohol, and three times more likely to suffer from alcohol problems. The transition from onset of drinking to actual problems was also more rapid than for individuals who had not been subjected to physical punishment during childhood. Childhood adversities and parental alcohol use were accounted for in the study.

Two meta-analytic studies found no or no substantial associations between childhood physical punishment and negative concomitants (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005; Pao-lucci & Violato, 2004), and a third (Ferguson, 2013) found a small but statistically significant impact on negative concomitants.

For a condensed review of 20 years of research on physical punishment, see Durrant and Ensom (2012), where the conclusion is reached that the physical punishment of children increases the risk of enduring negative developmental outcomes.

### Physical Punishment and Physical Abuse

Although physical abuse is, by definition, prohibited in all cultures, the line between “reasonable” punishment and abuse is culturally defined. In the US, for example, the physical punishment of children is not considered to be abuse unless it is very severe, and in most states it is not prohibited. The individual’s personal history of punishment also influences the perception of when physical punishment is considered abuse. Bower and Knutson (1996) showed that subjects who had been victimized by a specific form of physical discipline were less likely to consider that same type of discipline as abusive. Subjects with a history of abuse, who did not admit to themselves that they had been abused, were less likely to perceive an event as abusive, than abused subjects who did admit to themselves to having been abused.

Whereas the consequences of physical punishment have been investigated only to a limited degree, those of child abuse have been studied extensively. There is substantial evidence for several associations between child abuse and both psychological and somatic consequences in adulthood. However, what is referred to as physical abuse often also contains items measuring milder forms of abuse that, in many cases, could just as well be called physical punishment.

As an example, Fuller-Thomson, Bottoms, Brennenstuh, & Hurd (2011a) have found that childhood physical abuse was associated with the following medical problems in adulthood: peptic ulcers, functional somatic syndromes in women (Fuller-Thomson, Sulman, Brennenstuh, & Merchant, 2011b), 45% higher risk for heart disease (Fuller-Thomson, Brennenstuh, & Frank, 2010b), 36% higher risk for migraine headaches (Fuller-Thomson, Baker, & Brennenstuh, 2010a), osteoarthritis (Fuller-

Thomson, Stefanyk, & Brennenstuh, 2009b), and 47% higher odds for cancer (Fuller-Thomson & Brennenstuh, 2009a). A number of potentially confounding variables were adjusted for in these studies. In all these six studies based on the Canadian Community Health Survey, childhood physical abuse was measured with the item “Were you ever physically abused by someone close to you?” Thus, the results are clearly dependent on the respondents understanding of what actually constitutes abuse, and where the line should be drawn between “real” abuse and milder forms of assault, such as, for example, hitting, slapping, or pushing, which are typical physical punishment behaviors.

### The Dose/Response Relationship Supports a Continuum Between Physical Punishment and Physical Abuse, and Conveys the Danger of Escalation

Most researchers seem to acknowledge the continuum between milder and harsher forms of assault on children. Several studies have shown a clear dose/response relationship with respect to negative outcomes associated with physical punishment. Fergusson and Lynskey (1997) suggested a continuum that reaches from no physical punishment to abusive treatment. The same conclusion has also been reached by, for example, MacMillan et al. (1999), who found a linear association between frequency of slapping and spanking during childhood and a lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders.

A clear dose/response effect has also been found in two representative samples of 15–16-year-old adolescents, one from continental Finland and one from Denmark (Peltonen, Ellonen, Larsen, & Helweg-Larsen, 2010). Children exposed to severe forms of parental violence, such as hitting and kicking, showed poorer mental health and poorer prosocial behavior than children exposed to only verbal aggression.

A dose/response relationship has also been described by several other researchers (e.g., Callender et al., 2011; Turner & Muller, 2004). However, there seems to be no essential difference between childhood physical punishment and physical child abuse; the only difference being the matter of force and frequency.

Durrant and Ensom (2012) describe how the dichotomisation that earlier used to separate punishment from abuse is now slowly starting to subside, and they conclude that most physical child abuse occurs in the context of punishment. There is consequently a growing insight that milder forms of physical punishment can escalate into child maltreatment and abuse. Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, and Runyan (2008) found that the risk for abuse was 2.7 times higher if the child had been spanked previously and 8.9 times higher if the child had been hit with an object.

In a similar vein, Korpilahti (1981) found that in half of the sample of battered child cases brought to court in Finland and Sweden, the abuse was a result of an escalation of physical punishment.

### **Physical Punishment and Its links to Victimization, Suicidal Ideation, Suicide, and Filicide**

Victimization from aggression has been associated to physical punishment. Björkqvist, Österman, and Berg (2011) found that children who were victims of bullying in school reported having been physically punished by adults significantly more often than other children. Straus (2009, p. 73) found that adults who were frequently hit as adolescents were more likely to have thoughts about killing themselves, and also to attempt suicide. Likewise, Lester (1991) found, in a prison sample, that significantly more inmates who had attempted suicide had been victims of physical punishment from their fathers during childhood when compared to other inmates.

The link between physical abuse and suicidality is well established. Suicidal ideation has been found to be five times higher in abused men and women than among the non-abused (Fuller-Thomson, Baker, & Brennenstuhl, 2012). Moreover, suicide attempts in women have been linked to childhood physical abuse (McHolm, MacMillan, & Jamieson, 2003). A longitudinal study in New Zealand revealed that harsh or abusive childhood experiences increased the risk of, among other things, suicide attempts (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997). Physical abuse has been associated with both suicidal ideation and attempts for both men and women (Afifi et al., 2008).

The ultimate consequence of physical abuse is the killing of a child. The number of children killed in Finland has fallen drastically since the 1960s (Lehti, Kääriäinen, & Kivivuori, 2012). Especially the number of children killed under 12 months of age has decreased steeply, from 75 children between the years 1950 and 1954, to three children between the years 2000 and 2004 (Ellonen et al., 2007, p. 22). Another study shows that between 1970 and 1994, 16 children were fatally battered in Finland (Vanamo, Kauppi, Karkola, Merikanto, & Räsänen, 2001). Half of those children had a documented history of previous abuse. The most common cause of death was hitting, spanking, and throwing.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

In 2011, the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare distributed 10,000 paper-and-pencil questionnaires to a representative sample of citizens in Western Finland aged between 15 and 80 years. The questionnaires

were returned by 2,632 females and 1,977 males, the response rate being 46.2%. Of the respondents, 82.1% had Finnish as their mother tongue, 16.7% had Swedish, and 1.2% had some other language. For more details on the methodology and sample see, Herberts et al. (2012).

### **Measures**

The questionnaire measured, among other things, exposure to physical punishment during childhood, alcohol abuse, depression, suicidal ideation and attempt, mental health problems, and schizotypal personality. Details of the scales are presented in Table I. Since the scales had different response ranges, they were all standardized into z-scores in order to facilitate comparisons.

The *Brief Physical Punishment Scale* (BPPS, Österman & Björkqvist, 2007) consists of four items. The respondents estimated on a five-point scale (from 0 never to 4 very often) how often they had been subjected to the following things by an adult during their childhood: (a) their hair was pulled, (b) their ear was pulled, (c) they were slapped, and (d) they were beaten with an object.

*Suicidal Ideation and Attempted Suicide* was measured with two questions. "During the past 12 months, have you had suicidal thoughts?" and "During the past 12 months, have you tried to commit suicide?" The response alternatives were yes or no.

### **Socioeconomic Differences and Health**

In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries in Europe, socioeconomic differences are small in comparison to other nations. Finland has been ranked fourth in the world regarding economic equality in the population (United Nations, 2009; p. 195).

In the present study, as shown in the results section, the educational level of the respondents did not affect the relationship between physical punishment and psychosocial concomitants. In view of this finding, socioeconomic status has not been included in the following statistical analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### **Exposure to Four Types of Physical Punishment Before and After the Establishment of a Law Banning Physical Punishment in 1983**

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with the four types of physical punishment as dependent variables and being born before or after the establishment of the law in 1983 as a dichotomous independent variable. The multivariate analysis showed a significant effect for being born before or after the law

**TABLE I. Reliabilities, Number of Items, and Response Ranges of the Scales in the Study**

Scales	Number of Items	$\alpha$	Response Range	Authors
Brief physical punishment scale (BPPS)	4	.79	0–4	Österman and Björkqvist (2007)
Psychosocial concomitants				
Alcohol abuse (CAGE)	4	.71	Yes/no	Ewing (1984)
Depression (CIDI-SF)	2	.78	Yes/no	Kessler, Andrews, Mroczek, Ustun, and Wittchen (1998)
Mental health problems (GHQ)	12	.90	0–3	Goldberg and Hillier (1979)
Schizotypal personality (SPQ)	9	.63	Yes/no	Raine (1991)

was implemented (see Table II and Fig. 1). The univariate analyses revealed significant effects for all four types of physical punishment. Respondents born before the law had been pulled by the hair, slapped, and beaten with an object significantly more often than respondents born after the law. Regarding being pulled by the ear, the result was the opposite; respondents born after the law was implemented had been pulled by the ear significantly more often than those born before. It is possible that being pulled by the ear, which is a milder form of physical punishment, had substituted the harsher forms of punishment, that is, being slapped and beaten by an object.

#### Summed Variable of Physical Punishment. Comparison Before and After the Law

When the four different types of physical punishment were added together, respondents born before the law scored significantly higher on the summed variable of Physical Punishment, as compared to those born after the law [ $t_{(4492)} = 4.72, p < .001, d = 0.20$ ]. Please note that the four variables measuring physical punishment had an equal weight in the summed variable; as a consequence, Pulled by the Hair, which was the most frequently used form of physical punishment in Finland, received an unreasonably high weight in the scale. In future research, depending on the objective of the study, the different forms should perhaps be weighted so that the harshest form receives the highest weight.

#### Pulled by the Hair the Most Common Form of Physical Punishment

A within-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (WSMANOVA) was conducted with the four items measuring physical punishment. The multivariate test showed a significant effect [ $F_{(3, 4503)} = 1982.79, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .57, \text{power} = 1.00$ ]. Subsequent paired samples *t*-tests revealed that Pulled by the Hair was the most common form of physical punishment in Finland for respondents born between 1931 and 1996, differing from the other forms at the  $p < .001$  level (see Fig. 1).

#### Sex and Age Group Differences for Exposure to Physical Punishment

A MANOVA was conducted with sex and age group as independent variables and four different kinds of physical punishment as dependent variables (see Table III and Fig. 1). The multivariate analysis was significant for both sex and age group, and no interaction effect was found. The univariate analyses showed significant effects for both sex and age group. Males had significantly more often been subjected to all four different kinds of physical punishment during childhood than females.

According to Scheffé's test, being pulled by the hair was significantly less common among respondents born 1991–1996 than among those born 1951–1970 (see Table III and Fig. 1). A tendency was also found for them

**TABLE II. Results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) Measuring the Effect of Being Born Before or After the Introduction of the Law against Physical Punishment With Four Types of Physical Punishment as Dependent Variables ( $N = 4,494$ )**

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$	Observed Power	Before		After	
						M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Effect of year of birth									
Multivariate analysis	28.23	4, 4489	$\leq .001$	.025	1.00				
Univariate analyses									
Pulled by the hair	15.27	1, 4492	$\leq .001$	.003	0.97	2.29	(0.94)	2.13	(0.93)
Pulled by the ear	6.20	1, 4492	$\leq .013$	.001	0.70	1.39	(0.77)	1.47	(0.79)
Slapped	39.21	1, 4492	$\leq .001$	.009	1.00	1.51	(0.85)	1.29	(0.67)
Beaten with an object	47.44	1, 4492	$\leq .001$	.010	1.00	1.43	(0.81)	1.21	(0.59)

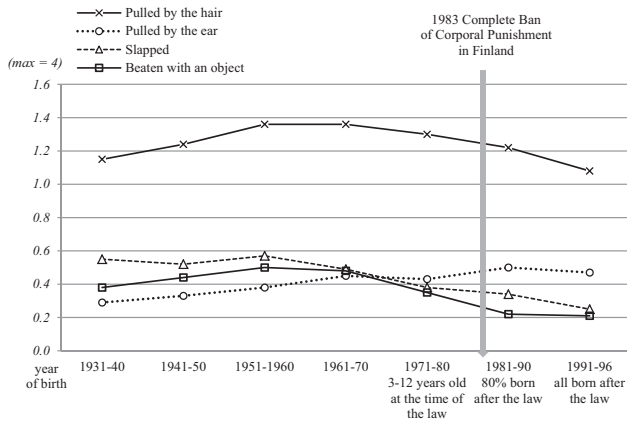


Fig. 1. Mean values of four types of physical punishment in seven age groups.

to be pulled by the hair less often than those born between 1971 and 1980, but not those born between 1931 and 1950. Respondents born 1931–1940 reported significantly less frequent hair-pulling than those born 1951–1970. Respondents born 1981–1990 were significantly more often pulled by the ear than those born 1931–1950 (see Table III and Fig. 1). This difference was unexpected. It was not the case for those born later. Pulled by the Ear seems to have substituted the harsher forms of physical punishment such as beaten with an object or slapped when these were less frequent. There was also a tendency for those born 1931–1940 to have

been pulled by the ear less often during their childhood than those born 1961–1970.

Respondents born 1991–1996 had been slapped significantly less often than those born 1931–1970, and those born 1981–1990 had been slapped significantly less often than those born 1931–1960 (see Table III). Respondents born 1971–1980, 3–12 years old at the time when the law was established, had been slapped significantly less often than those born 1951–1960.

A pattern similar to that of being slapped was found for having been beaten with an object. According to Scheffé’s test, respondents born 1981–1990 (80% of who were born after the law was established) and 1991–1996 had been significantly less often beaten with an object than respondents born 1941–1970. Respondents born between 1971–1980 tended to have been less often beaten with an object in comparison with those born 1951–1960 ( $p = .068$ ). Respondents in this age group were all under 12 years of age at the time of the law in 1983, and they are therefore likely to have been affected by it.

All children in the age group born 1981–1990 were affected by the law. Eighty percent of the children in this group were born after the law and the oldest children, who were only 2 years old at the time of the law, were also affected by it after their second year of life. All children in the age group born just before the law (1971–1980) were also affected by it since they were between 3 and 12 years old at the time when the law was passed.

TABLE III. Results of a Sex × Age Group (2 × 7) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) With Four Types of Physical Punishment as Dependent Variables (N = 4,492)

	F	df	p	$\eta_p^2$	Observed Power	Group With Higher Mean
Effect of sex						
Multivariate analysis	35.72	4, 4475	≤.001	.031	1.00	
Univariate analyses						
Pulled by the hair	27.45	1, 4478	≤.001	.006	.99	Males
Pulled by the ear	132.17	1, 4478	≤.001	.029	1.00	Males
Slapped	10.57	1, 4478	≤.001	.002	.90	Males
Beaten with an object	6.50	1, 4478	≤.011	.001	.72	Males
Effect of age group						
Multivariate analysis	11.10	24, 17912	≤.001	.015	1.00	
Univariate analyses						
Pulled by the hair	6.56	6, 4478	≤.001	.009	.99	I < (III), IV–V VII < IV–V
Pulled by the ear	6.87	6, 4478	≤.001	.009	1.00	II > VI–VII (IV > VII)
Slapped	10.87	6, 4478	≤.001	.014	1.00	I < IV–VII II < V–VII III < V
Beaten with an Object	11.58	6, 4478	≤.001	.015	1.00	I, II < IV–VI (III < V)
Interaction between sex and age group						
Multivariate analysis	1.11	24, 17912	ns	.001	.87	

Note. Year of birth: I = 1991–1996, II = 1981–1990, III = 1971–1980, IV = 1961–1970, V = 1951–1960, VI = 1941–1950, VII = 1931–1940. For results in brackets  $p = .05-.09$ .



### Language and Victimization From Physical Punishment During Childhood

Respondents from the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland had significantly lower scores on the summed variable of Exposure to Physical Punishment during Childhood, than Finnish-speaking respondents did ( $t_{(4502)} = 4.58, p < .001$ ).

### Percentages of Respondents Who Had Never Been Exposed to Four Different Types of Physical Punishment During Childhood

The percentages of respondents of the age groups studied, and males and females of the two language groups, who had never been exposed to the four investigated types of physical punishment, are presented in Table IV. With regard to age trends, the results reflect those presented in Table III.

The group comprising 15–20-year-old girls of Swedish-speaking origin ( $n = 26$ ) was least exposed to any type of physical punishment within the study: of these, 46.4% had never at any time in their childhood been pulled by the hair, 82.1% were never pulled by the ear, 89.3% never slapped, and 89.3% never beaten with an object.

After the law came into effect, the percentage of children who were never victimized during their childhood, increased steadily for all measures; except for never being pulled by the ear. Before the law came into effect, there was only one significant increase in the percentage of children who had never been victims of

physical punishment: the percentage of children who had never been slapped increased from 64.4% for the age group born in the 1950s to 71.1% for those born a decade later [ $\chi^2_{(1)} = 8.27, p = .005$ ].

### Percentages of Respondents Never Exposed to Any of the Measured Types of Physical Punishment

Among respondents born after the law was established, that is, after 1983, 25% had never been exposed to any of the measured types of physical punishment. This number was significantly higher than for respondents born before the law, among whom 20% had never been exposed to physical punishment [ $\chi^2_{(1)} = 8.68, p = .003$ ].

Of respondents in the youngest age group, born 1991–1996, 30.9% of females and 25% of males had never been exposed to any of the four types of physical punishment measured (see Table V). The figure, both sexes included, for this age group was 28.4%, and was the highest percentage of non-exposed respondents in any age group of the study. This result might be due to a combination of three factors: attitude changes in Finnish society preceding the law, an effect of the law itself, and an effect of campaigns launched in order to inform citizens of the law in 1983 and later on.

The youngest age group was also the only one where the percentage of non-exposed females and males did not differ significantly from each other. In all the other age groups, the percentage of females not exposed to physical punishment was significantly higher than that of males.

**TABLE IV. Percentage of Finnish- and Swedish-Speakers, Males and Females of Seven Different Age Groups Who Were Never During Childhood Exposed to Four Different Forms of Physical Punishment**

	Never Pulled by the Hair	Never Pulled by the Ear	Never Slapped	Never Hit With an Object	<i>N</i>
Finnish-speakers					
Females	25.8%	83.3%	72.7%	73.6%	2,194
Males	16.4%	66.4%	65.5%	67.5%	1,624
Swedish-speakers					
Females	40.0%	71.1%	70.6%	86.0%	411
Males	24.1%	49.7%	59.6%	84.6%	342
Age groups (born)					
Affected by the law					
1991–1996	31.8%	68.0%	84.0%	86.4%	332
1981–1990 <sup>a</sup>	24.9%	66.9%	75.9%	82.7%	501
1971–1980 <sup>b</sup>	21.5%	72.2%	74.4%	76.8%	539
Not affected by the law					
1961–1970	18.0%	71.9%	71.1%	70.6%	684
1951–1960	20.2%	75.1%	64.4%	68.6%	952
1941–1950	25.9%	76.8%	65.0%	69.6%	994
1931–1940	28.8%	78.0%	60.5%	72.1%	525
Whole sample	23.7%	73.5%	68.8%	73.2%	4,540

<sup>a</sup>All under 3 years of age at the time of the law in 1983.

<sup>b</sup>All between 3 and 12 years of age at the time of the law.

**TABLE V. Sex Differences in Percentages of Respondents in Seven Age Groups Never Exposed to Any of Four Types of Physical Punishment ( $N = 4,494$ )**

Year of Birth	Never Exposed to Any of Four Types of PP			$\chi^2$	$p$	Group With Higher Frequency
	Total	Females	Males			
1991–1996	28.4%	30.9%	25.0%	1.38	ns	—
1981–1990	20.8%	24.7%	14.5%	7.46	$\leq .006$	Females
1971–1980	20.1%	23.9%	15.0%	6.45	$\leq .011$	Females
1961–1970	15.8%	19.4%	10.5%	9.54	$\leq .002$	Females
1951–1960	17.3%	20.9%	12.5%	11.52	$\leq .001$	Females
1941–1950	22.8%	30.1%	13.9%	36.04	$\leq .001$	Females
1931–1940	25.1%	32.0%	17.7%	14.06	$\leq .001$	Females

The difference might reflect increased egalitarianism between the sexes.

### Physical Punishment and Life Expectancy

In the oldest group of respondents, 71–80 years of age, 25.1% had never been exposed to any of the measured types of physical punishment. This percentage was unexpectedly high since it is common knowledge that attitudes towards physical punishment in Finland were much less condemning in the beginning of the 20th century than today. Recent research (see the Introduction Section) has, however, showed a clear association between exposure to physical punishment in childhood and a large number of psychological problems, lethal diseases, and suicide attempts. The authors of this paper wish to bring forward the hypothesis that exposure to physical punishment during childhood might be related to a reduced life expectancy. Consequently, in the oldest age group, the respondents who were not exposed to any type of physical punishment during childhood are likely to be overrepresented, if this hypothesis is correct. As Table V reveals, this prediction seems to be particularly accurate in the case of females in the oldest age groups (30.1% and 32.0%, respectively). The prominent sex difference in the age group born 1941–1950 is noteworthy.

The trend for the percentage of non-exposed respondents to increase begins after the age of 50 (those born 1951–1960). It could be argued that at this age, the effect of physical punishment on life expectancy begins to show.

### Psychosocial Concomitants in Adulthood and Exposure to Physical Punishment During Childhood

A dichotomous variable for exposure to Physical Punishment was constructed, dividing the respondents in a low punishment group, with scores below the mean of the scale, and a high punishment group, with scores above the mean of the scale. A MANOVA was conducted

with sex and amount of physical punishment (high vs. low) as independent variables, and the four psychosocial concomitants as dependent variables (see Table VI). The multivariate test was significant for both sex and amount of physical punishment. The univariate analyses revealed that males scored significantly higher than females on alcohol abuse, while females scored higher on depression, mental health problems, and schizotypal personality. Respondents scoring above the mean on physical punishment scored significantly higher than the others on all four psychosocial concomitants. The interaction between sex and physical punishment was not significant.

### Schizotypal Personality in Adulthood

A univariate analysis of variance was conducted with Schizotypal personality as the dependent variable and Beaten with an object and sex as independent variables. A significant effect was found for Beaten with an object [ $F_{(4, 4301)} = 18.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .017, \text{power} = 1.00$ ]. Scheffé's test revealed that those who had very often been beaten with an object during childhood scored significantly highest on schizotypal personality in adulthood (all  $p \leq .006$ ). No sex difference, nor any interaction effect, was found.

### Physical Punishment and Subsequent Divorce as Adult

A  $5 \times 4$  MANOVA was conducted with civil status (married, partnership, divorced, unmarried, widow/widower) as an independent variable, and the four items of physical punishment during childhood as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis was significant [ $F_{(16, 17896)} = 8.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.007, \text{power} = 1.00$ ]. According to Scheffé's test, divorced respondents scored significantly higher than all the other groups on having been pulled by the hair, and beaten with an object during childhood. They also scored significantly higher than all the other groups, except the widowed ones, on having been slapped.

**TABLE VI. Results of a Sex  $\times$  Physical Punishment (High vs. Low;  $2 \times 2$ ) Multivariate Analysis of Variance With Four Psychosocial Concomitants (Presented in  $z$ -Scores) as Dependent Variables ( $N = 3,944$ )**

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$	Observed Power	M (SD)	M (SD)
Effect of sex							
Multivariate analysis	81.94	4, 3937	$\leq .001$	.077	1.00		
Univariate analyses						Females	Males
Alcohol abuse	204.30	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.049	1.00	-0.20 (0.82)	0.28 (1.14)
Depression	55.26	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.014	1.00	0.10 (1.06)	-0.11 (0.92)
Mental health problems	37.40	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.009	1.00	0.06 (1.01)	-0.10 (0.94)
Schizotypal personality	30.16	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.008	1.00	0.07 (1.02)	-0.09 (0.95)
Effect of physical punishment							
Multivariate analysis	29.76	4, 3937	$\leq .001$	.029	1.00		
Univariate analyses						Low PP	High PP
Alcohol abuse	50.71	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.013	1.00	-0.10 (0.92)	0.20 (1.10)
Depression	47.31	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.012	1.00	-0.06 (0.95)	0.13 (1.08)
Mental health problems	52.69	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.013	1.00	-0.09 (0.93)	0.12 (1.06)
Schizotypal personality	56.95	1, 3940	$\leq .001$	.014	1.00	-0.08 (0.94)	0.14 (1.08)
Interaction between sex and physical punishment							
Multivariate analysis	1.58	4, 3937	ns	.002	0.49		

Note. Exposure to physical punishment (PP): Low PP, below the mean of BPPS; High PP, above the mean of BPPS.

### Suicidal Ideation and Attempted Suicide

Respondents who had had suicidal thoughts during the last 12 months ( $n = 258$ ), had experienced significantly more physical punishment (the summed variable) as children than those without suicidal thoughts [ $t_{(4482)} = 9.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .61$ ] (cf. Fig. 3). It was also found that respondents who had attempted suicide

during the last 12 months ( $n = 18$ ) had experienced significantly more physical punishment as children than those who had not attempted suicide [ $t_{(4479)} = 4.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .97$ ].

### Comparison Between Amount of Victimization from Physical Punishment and Number of Murdered Children in Finland 1950–1996

The numbers of murdered children in Finland between 1950 and 1996, provided by Ellonen et al. (2007), were compared to the amount of physical punishment reported in the present study, measured at the same 5-year intervals. Differences over time in population size was accounted for. It was found that the number of murdered children under 1 year of age ( $N = 314$ ) was highly positively correlated with how often children in general had been beaten with an object [ $r = .88$ ,  $p = .001$ ], slapped [ $r = .94$ ,  $p < .001$ ], pulled by the hair [ $r = .75$ ,  $p = .012$ ], while it correlated negatively with children being pulled by the ear [ $r = -.83$ ,  $p = .003$ ]. The difference between the correlational coefficients ( $r$ ) for having been slapped and beaten with an object was not significant [ $z = 0.68$ ,  $p > .05$ ]. The number of murdered children between 1 and 9 years old ( $N = 273$ ) was also highly positively correlated with how often children in general had been beaten with an object [ $r = .84$ ,  $p = .002$ ], slapped [ $r = .89$ ,  $p = .001$ ], pulled by the hair [ $r = .74$ ,  $p = .014$ ], while it correlated negatively with children being pulled by the ear [ $r = -.78$ ,  $p = .008$ ]. The number of murdered children between 10 and 14 years of age ( $N = 88$ ) showed a tendency towards a significant correlation with having been slapped ( $r = .58$ ,  $p = .079$ ).

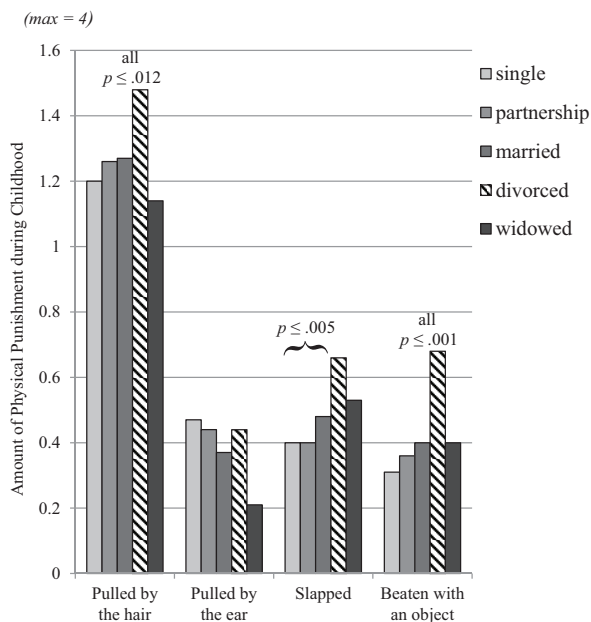
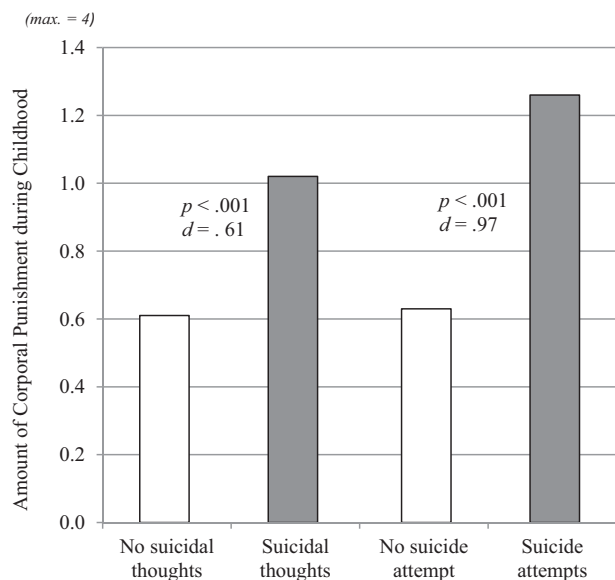


Fig. 2. Adult civil status and victimization from physical punishment as a child.



**Fig. 3. Victimization from physical punishment during childhood reported by respondents who had attempted suicide during the last 12 months, and for respondents with suicidal thoughts.**

## DISCUSSION

It was expected that physical punishment would have diminished slowly before the passing of the law due to developmental changes in society. The present study, however, shows that there was no consistent decrease in victimization from physical punishment during a period of 39 years preceding the implementation of the law (see Table III). Only one significant change preceded the law, the percentage of children who had never been slapped increased between the 50s and 60s (Table IV). Instead, when comparing the amount of physical punishment before and after the law, a significant decrease was found. Respondents affected by the law had been significantly less often pulled by the hair, slapped, and beaten with an object (Table II). The same result was also obtained when the four types of punishment were summed together. This finding suggests that a decline in physical punishment of children does not occur automatically but that the implementation of a law is necessary.

The decreasing amount of victimization from physical punishment after the law is clearly reflected in the steadily increasing percentages of respondents who had never been victimized during childhood to three different types of physical punishment (see Table IV). By 2011, the percentage of children who had never been pulled by the hair had increased to 31.8%, never slapped to 84.0%, and never beaten with an object to 86.4%. In contrast, the percentage of children who had never been pulled by the ear was slightly lower than before the law. It is suggested that pulling by the ear, being a milder form of physical

punishment, might have been a substitute for harsher forms as they became illegal. This is supported by the fact that in the case of the youngest age group (born 1991–1996), pulling by the ear had diminished again and the difference was no longer significant when compared to older age groups.

An unexpected finding was made regarding the oldest age group. Respondents born before 1940 did not, as could have been assumed, report the highest amounts of victimization from any type of physical punishment measured. Since exposure to physical abuse has been shown to correlate with a wide range of adverse health effects, for example, cancer and heart disease, as shown by Fuller-Thomson and Brennenstuhl (2009a) and Fuller-Thomson et al. (2010b) it is possible that those who received the harshest physical punishment as children died early and accordingly were under represented in their age group at the time of the data collection. Since the reports were all given in retrospect, it could be argued that the oldest respondents had simply forgotten their childhood experiences of physical punishment. However, according to Hardt and Rutter (2004), the bias of retrospective reports is not sufficiently great to invalidate reports of childhood adversities. Brown, Craig, Harris, Handley, and Harvey (2007) have shown that retrospective measures and self-reports of childhood maltreatment do not contain any significant recollection bias; instead, a tendency towards under reporting has actually been found. The results of the present study suggest that physical punishment could be associated with reduced life expectancy.

There are similarities between the present results and those of Sariola and Uutela (1992), which was also carried out in Finland. Being pulled by the hair was the most common form of physical punishment in both studies. The present study also found that Swedish-speakers had experienced significantly less physical punishment during childhood than Finnish-speaking, which is in line with the result obtained by Sariola and Uutela (1992). However, the present study found that boys had been subjected to more physical punishment of all types than girls, which is in contrast to the study by Sariola and Uutela (1992), who found that girls had experienced more mild violence than boys, and that girls and boys had been equally often victims of severe violence in the home.

In the present study, 23.2% of the respondents born in the 1970s had been beaten with an object (Table IV), while this was the case for only 4.3% of almost the same age group (born 1973) in the study by Sariola and Uutela (1992). The difference may be explained by the fact that Sariola and Uutela measured birching (switching) and being hit with an object as two separate items. Historically, birching was very common in Finland and

many old people still recall today the traditional way it was administered. After misbehaving, the child was told to go out in the forest to collect twigs, return home and ask the father to be hit with them. (The most humiliating part of birching used to be to have to collect the twigs oneself.) Sariola and Uutela (1992) also found that, as late as in 1988, 34.6% of the Finnish respondents, aged 15–16 years, had been switched (birched). Since birching was not measured as a separate item from being otherwise beaten with an object in the present study, respondents probably included it in their responses to “beaten with an object” which explains the higher figures.

Physical punishment during childhood was found to be associated with schizotypal personality, general mental health problems, alcohol abuse, and depression in adult women and men alike. The results are in concordance with previous studies that have found associations between physical punishment and schizotypal personality (Afifi et al., 2012), general mental health problems (Gershoff, 2002), alcohol abuse (Afifi et al., 2006, 2012; Cheng et al., 2010, 2011a,b; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; MacMillan et al., 1999), and depression (Afifi et al., 2006, 2012; MacMillan et al., 1999; Straus, 2009; Turner & Finkelhorn, 1996; Turner & Muller, 2004). Divorced respondents scored significantly higher than others on having been pulled by the hair, and beaten with an object during childhood. Divorcees had also been slapped more during childhood than all the other groups, with the exception of widowed ones. A similar finding has not, to our knowledge, been reported previously.

Respondents with suicidal ideation had experienced more physical punishment during childhood than those without suicidal thoughts. Respondents who reported that they had actually attempted suicide during the last 12 months had also experienced significantly more physical punishment as children when than those who had not attempted suicide. These findings are in concordance with previous studies (Afifi et al., 2008; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; Lester, 1991; Straus, 2009).

A strong correlation between the physical punishment of children in general and number of murdered children was found. When the number of murdered children in Finland between the years of 1950 and 1996, measured every 5 years, was compared to the amount of physical punishment during the same time period, it was found that the number of murdered children, from under 1 to 9 years old, was highly positively correlated with how often children in general had been beaten with an object, slapped, and pulled by the hair. A tendency for a correlation with being slapped was also found for children between 10 and 14 years of age. This association supports the idea of escalation suggested by Straus

(2009), Korpilahti (1981), and Zolotor et al. (2008). It must be noted, however, that ecological correlations, that is, correlations on a group level like these, cannot validly be used as substitutes for individual correlations, as has been demonstrated by Robinson (1950).

It is known that attitudes predict subsequent physical punishment (Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). An example of the importance of information and attitude change is documented by Mweru (2010). When the Kenyan government in 2001 banned physical punishment in schools, it was found that the teachers were aware of the law, but they still continued to use physical punishment, since they thought it was the most effective thing to do. In order to diminish violence against children and ensure their human rights, a coordinated approach is essential, with information campaigns before, after, and at the implementation of the law. A significant improvement in the safety of children in Finland has been reached, but much still remains to be done. A national action plan for the period 2010–2015, intended to raise awareness and change attitudes regarding physical punishment in Finland has been launched (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2011).

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