



# Intergenerational Transmission of Punishment and Negative Emotional Reactivity in Low-Income African American Mothers

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## Introduction

### Conceptual Model for the Current Study

Childhood  
Punishment

Mental and  
Emotional  
Functioning

Adulthood Use  
of Punishment

Harsh punishment has been linked to poor mental health in childhood with long-lasting effects into adulthood.

Heightened negative emotion, depressive symptoms, or stress may undermine parenting and make parents' more likely to react with hostility toward children.

Although the intergenerational transmission of harsh punishment is often linked to positive attitudes toward punishment or cultural norms, it may also be explained by parents' difficulty regulating their emotions when dealing with difficult children.

### Study Hypotheses

- H1. Punishment in childhood would predict worse adult functioning.
- H2. Punishment in childhood would be related to punishment in parenthood.
- H3. Intergenerational transmission of punishment would be mediated by parents' negative emotional reactivity toward children.

## Participants & Procedure

Participants were 157 mothers of 4- to 7-year-old children recruited from a larger PreK program evaluation in Baltimore, Maryland.

100% African American, 50% female children, 49% completed High School diploma, median income \$25,000

Mothers were surveyed in the home and reported demographics, childhood experiences, mental and emotional functioning, and parenting behavior.

## Measures

### IV-Childhood Harsh Punishment

Sum of four items from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale

### Mediators-Mental and Emotional Functioning

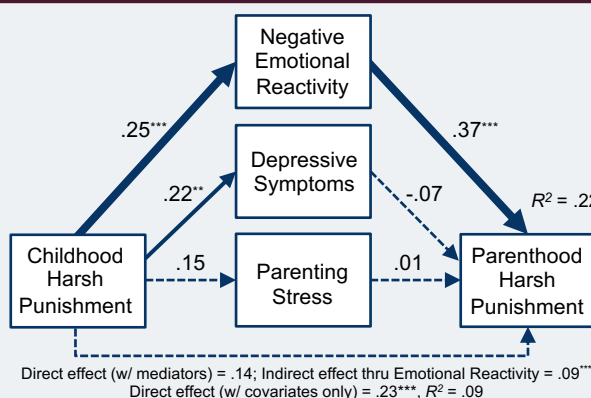
Negative Emotional Reactivity: sum of four items  
e.g., "You have lost your temper when your child was fussy"  
Depressive symptoms: Center for Epidemiologic Studies  
Depression Inventory (CESD)  $\alpha = .90$   
Parenting Stress: Parenting Stress Index (PSI)  $\alpha = .89$

### DV-Parenthood Harsh Punishment

Sum of five items from the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (PC-CTS)

Covariates: recruitment cohort, child sex, parent education, and marital status

	Percent Reported Occurring
<b>Childhood Harsh Punishment (ACES) Total</b>	45%
How often did a parent... swear at you, insult you, or put you down?	39%
Push, grab, shove, or slap you?	36%
Hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?	20%
Act in a way that made you afraid that you would be hurt?	19%
<b>Parenthood Harsh Punishment (PC-CTS) Total</b>	71%
In the last week...You shouted, yelled, or screamed at your child.	69%
Spanked on the bottom with your bare hand.	15%
Hit, slapped, or popped on the hand, arm, or leg.	19%
Hit bottom with an object such as a stick, hairbrush, or belt.	1%
Hit elsewhere with an object such as a stick, hairbrush or belt.	1%



Note. Estimates are standardized Betas. The model controlled for recruitment cohort, child sex, parent education, and marital status. Bold lines indicate pathways through which significant indirect effects occurred. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Results

### Analysis Plan and Model Fit

An indirect effects model was estimated in Mplus v7.4 with the Bayesian estimator (Markov chain Monte Carlo algorithm based on the Gibbs sampler). This estimator is ideal for SEM models using small samples ( $N < 200$ ), yielding unbiased estimates, allowing for more accurate inferences, and reducing Type 1 error in detecting mediation effects compared to maximum likelihood robust estimation (MLR) or bootstrapping methods.

The Posterior Predictive  $p$ -value for goodness-of-fit testing was .438, which is close to the score of .5 proposed to indicate good fit in Bayesian SEM models.

### Intergenerational Transmission of Punishment Estimates

**Bivariate correlation:**  $r = .22^{**}$   
**Direct effect (w/ covariates only):**  $\beta = .23^{**}$ ,  $b (SE) = .18 (.07)$ , 95% CI [.05, .31]  
**Direct effect (w/ mediators):**  $\beta = .14$ ,  $b (SE) = .11 (.06)$ , 95% CI [-.01, .24]  
**Indirect effect (thru emotion):**  $\beta = .09^{**}$ ,  $b (SE) = .07 (.03)$ , 95% CI [.02, .14]

## Discussion

### General Findings

Punishment in  
childhood linked  
to worse adult  
functioning

Punishment in  
childhood linked to  
using punishment  
as parent

Intergenerational  
link explained by  
parents' negative  
emotional reactivity

Although limited by the correlational nature of the data, these results are consistent with other work suggesting that childhood harsh punishment may have long-lasting consequences for adult functioning.

Parents should be encouraged to avoid using punitive techniques and some may need additional support with regulating emotion.

More work is needed in both our measurement and conceptual thinking of discipline to ensure that diverse cultural values and perspectives are reflected in our inferences about punishment.

Social work practice would benefit from parenting intervention programs that also address emotion regulation strategies.

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