



# The State of Research on Corporal Punishment

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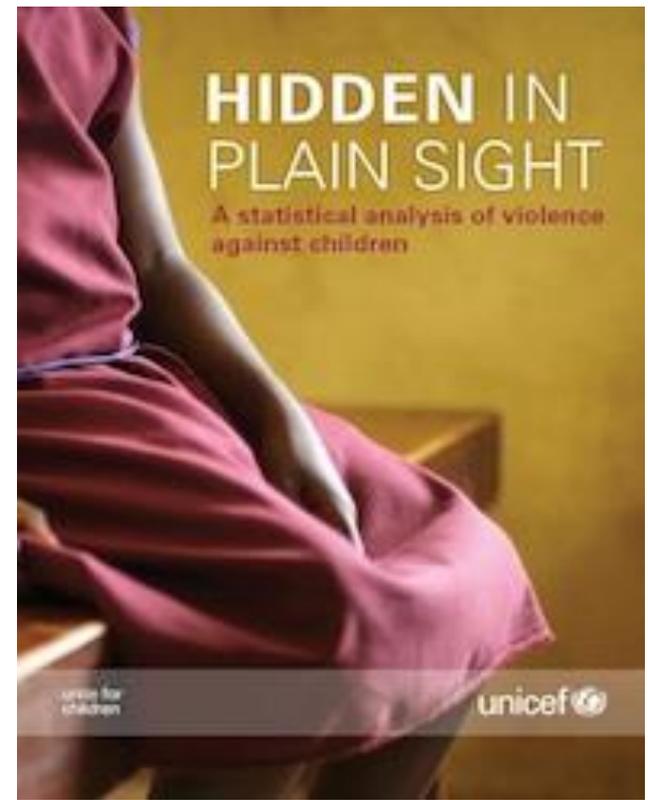
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*To Better Protect Children in Switzerland: Ban All Corporal Punishment?  
Bern, Switzerland – May 2018*



# Corporal Punishment is Prevalent

60% of children around the world are corporally punished by their parents  
(UNICEF, 2014).





## Corporal Punishment is a Form of Violence

- Corporal punishment involves the use of pain to correct children's misbehavior; it involves intentionally physically or emotionally hurting children.
- The U.N. has stated that corporal punishment of children is a form of violence that is inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.



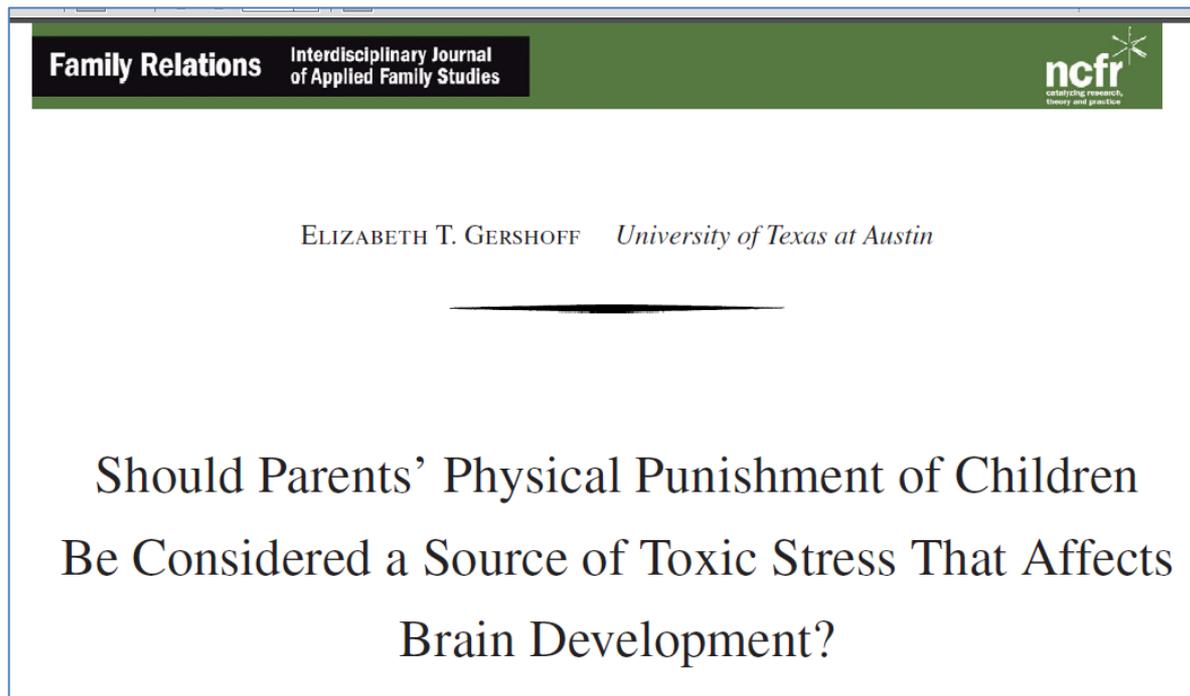
## Corporal Punishment is a Form of Violence

- Most people use euphemisms to talk about corporal punishment, for example: smacking, slapping.
- But when we asked parents in the U.S., to define corporal punishment nearly half used the word “hit” in their definition—they implicitly acknowledge that corporal punishment is violence. (Lee, Gershoff, & Lee, in progress)



# Corporal Punishment is a Source of Toxic Stress

- I made this argument in a recent article:



Gershoff, E. T. (2016)



## What Is Toxic Stress?

Toxic stress is “the excessive or prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships.”

- Shonkoff, Gardner, & the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2012, p. e225



## What Is Toxic Stress?

Toxic stress is believed to precipitate allostatic load, which has been linked to:

- changes in physical brain structures, such as reductions in size of the hippocampus, which can lead to memory deficits

- changes in brain functioning, such as atrophied dendrites in the prefrontal cortex, which can lead to impairments in emotion regulation

Shonkoff, Gardner, & the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2012, p. e225



# Is There Evidence That Corporal Punishment Leads to Such Brain Changes?

Yes. Corporal punishment has been linked to changes in brain structures: Young adults who were subjected to chronic and sometimes harsh corporal punishment as children had smaller gray matter

volume in the with their peers who did not experience

it. (Tomoda et al., 2009)

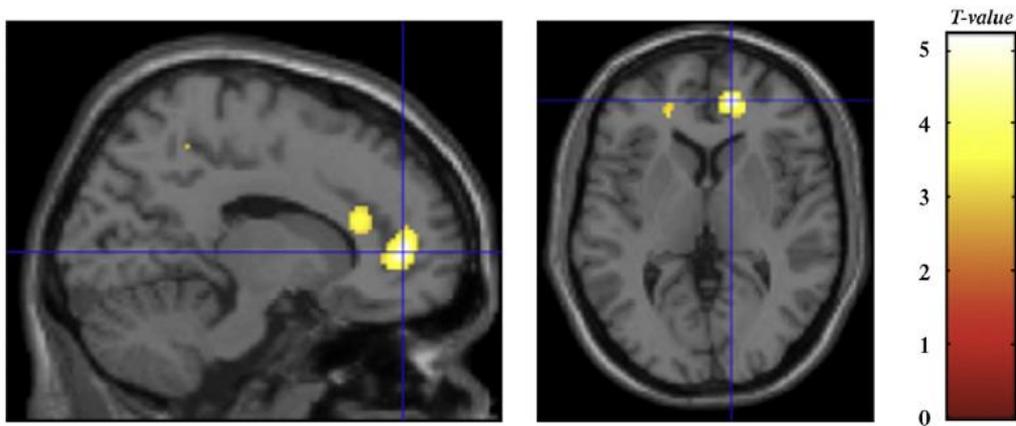


Fig. 1. Significant differences between corporal punishment (CP) subjects and controls. Significantly lower gray matter densities in CP subjects were measured in the right frontal gyrus (medial prefrontal cortex, BA10). Crosshairs placed at  $x = 14, y = 47, z = 1$ , the right medial prefrontal cortex. Color scale: 0–5 represent  $t$ -values.



# Is There Evidence That Corporal Punishment Leads to Such Brain Changes?

- Corporal punishment has also been linked to changes in brain functioning:

Children who experience corporal punishment respond to stressful situations with more cortisol than do children not corporally punished.

(Bugental, Martorell, & Baraza, 2003)

# Additional Evidence that Corporal Punishment Is A Source of Toxic Stress

We have evidence from the original Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study:

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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Child Abuse & Neglect



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Research article

Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health<sup>☆</sup>



Melissa T. Merrick<sup>a,\*</sup>, Katie A. Ports<sup>a</sup>, Derek C. Ford<sup>a</sup>, Tracie O. Afifi<sup>b</sup>, Elizabeth T. Gershoff<sup>c</sup>, Andrew Grogan-Kaylor<sup>d</sup>

Merrick, M. T., Ports, K. A., Ford, D. C., Afifi, T. O., Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2017).



# Reanalysis of Original ACES Study Data

ACE Exposure	Drug Use OR <sub>adj</sub>	Moderate to Heavy Drinking OR <sub>adj</sub>	Suicide Attempt (lifetime) OR <sub>adj</sub>	Depressed Affect OR <sub>adj</sub>
1. Sexual abuse	1.48	1.35	2.31	1.18
2. Emotional abuse			2.27	
3. Physical abuse	1.29	1.19		1.33
4. Corporal punishment	1.42	1.29	1.39	
5. Physical neglect				
6. Emotional neglect			1.65	1.38
7. Mother treated violently				
8. Household mental illness	1.42		3.41	1.65
9. Incarcerated household member			1.50	
10. Household substance abuse	1.55	1.82		1.23
11. Parental separation/divorce				

Adjustment factors included in the model: age, race, sex, educational attainment, and marital status

N=7465



## Common Questions about Corporal Punishment:

- 1-Does corporal punishment improve children's behavior?
- 2-Can we be sure corporal punishment is causing bad behavior?
- 3-Is corporal punishment linked with unintended negative outcomes in childhood?
- 4-Is it linked with unintended negative outcomes in adulthood?
- 5-Can corporal punishment lead to physical injury?
- 6-Do the effects of corporal punishment vary by country or culture?
- 7-What is known about corporal punishment in schools?



Question 1:

**Does Corporal Punishment  
Improve  
Children's Behavior?**



## Does Corporal Punishment Improve Children's Behavior?

- The two main reasons parents use corporal punishment are:
  - To stop misbehaviors immediately and decrease them in the future
  - To increase children's positive behaviors (for example, being kind, being respectful) in the future
- Unfortunately for parents worldwide, corporal punishment does not achieve either goal.



# Does Corporal Punishment Improve Children's Behavior?

Journal of Family Psychology

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0893-3200/16/\$12.00 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>

## Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analyses

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Whether spanking is helpful or harmful to children continues to be the source of considerable debate among both researchers and the public. This article addresses 2 persistent issues, namely whether effect sizes for spanking are distinct from those for physical abuse, and whether effect sizes for spanking are robust to study design differences. Meta-analyses focused specifically on spanking were conducted on a total of 111 unique effect sizes representing 160,927 children. Thirteen of 17 mean effect sizes were significantly different from zero and all indicated a link between spanking and increased risk for detrimental child outcomes. Effect sizes did not substantially differ between spanking and physical abuse or by study design characteristics.

- 75 studies, over 50 years, from 13 different countries
- 160,927 children were included

Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016).



## Does Corporal Punishment Improve Children's Behavior?

Corporal punishment does not make children more compliant in the short term.

Corporal punishment is not linked with long-term compliance or internalization of morals.

Corporal punishment is also not linked with reductions in aggression or antisocial behavior.



## Does Corporal Punishment Improve Children's Behavior?

Instead, corporal punishment is linked with worse, not better, behavior in children.

In our meta-analyses, we found that corporal punishment was associated with significantly more aggression and antisocial behavior problems in children.

None of the studies showed a link between corporal punishment and better behavior.



Question 2:

**Can We Be Sure Corporal  
Punishment is Causing Bad  
Behavior?**



## Can We Be Sure Corporal Punishment is Causing Bad Behavior?

- Could past findings be explained by the fact that difficult children elicit harsh discipline from their parents?
- No—studies using a variety of research designs that get closer to causal explanations have found corporal punishment continues to predict increases in children's behavior even when their initial behavior is taken into account.

Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff (2012)



## Can We Be Sure Corporal Punishment is Causing Bad Behavior?

- We cannot conduct experiments to see if corporal punishment causes harm to children.
- I and others have done research that rules out alternative explanations statistically and gets as close to an experiment as possible. In these studies, corporal punishment continues to predict worse behavior in children over time. (Gershoff, Sattler, & Ansari, 2018)
- We also have results from evaluations of intervention programs that reduce parents' use of corporal punishment and this reduction predicts decreases in children's behavior problems.



## Can We Be Sure Corporal Punishment is Causing Bad Behavior?

- Taken together, the findings from long-term studies using advanced statistics and from evaluations of parenting programs support a causal link between corporal punishment and increases in children's problematic behavior over time.
- It is also important to note that critics of the corporal punishment research never produce any evidence that corporal punishment is good for children—because there is none.



Question 3:

**Is Corporal Punishment Linked  
with Unintended Negative  
Outcomes in Childhood?**



# Is Corporal Punishment Linked with Unintended Negative Outcomes in Childhood?

- Our meta-analyses of dozens of studies revealed that corporal punishment is linked with several unintended outcomes:
  - Mental health problems
  - Difficult relationships with parents
  - Low self-esteem
  - Low academic performance



Question 4:

**Is Corporal Punishment Linked  
with Unintended Negative  
Outcomes in Adulthood?**



# Is Corporal Punishment Linked with Unintended Negative Outcomes in Adulthood?

- Our meta-analyses revealed that adults who report a history of corporal punishment in childhood report:
  - More mental health problems
  - More antisocial behavior
  - More positive attitudes about and use of corporal punishment with their own children.
    - Cycle of violence from generation to generation.



Question 5:

**Can Corporal Punishment Lead  
to Physical Injury?**



## Can Corporal Punishment Lead to Physical Injury?

A review of child maltreatment cases in Canada determined that **75%** of substantiated physical abuse cases began as **intentional corporal punishment**. (Durrant et al., 2006)



## Can Corporal Punishment Lead to Physical Injury?

My colleague and I found a strong, statistically significant association between corporal punishment and the risk of physical abuse.

In studies that looked at both corporal punishment and abuse, the size of the association between corporal punishment and negative outcomes was two thirds the size of the association for physical abuse and those same outcomes.



Question 6:

**Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?**



## Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

A common argument is that, because rates of corporal punishment vary across cultures, the effects of corporal punishment will vary according to how “normative” it is (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997).

This argument is known as the “cultural normativeness” hypothesis.

Although initial studies in the US found the effects of corporal punishment to be different across race groups (i.e., Black and White), many later studies have failed to replicate these findings.



## Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

In a study of mothers and their children in China, India, Italy, Kenya, Philippines, and Thailand, we found that corporal punishment predicted higher aggression and more anxiety problems in children.

Even when children or parents believed most people in their communities used corporal punishment (ie it was normative), it was still linked with these negative outcomes, just to a slightly lesser degree.



## Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

In a study of over 11,000 children in the U.S., the majority of all groups use corporal punishment :

89% of Black parents

80% of Latino parents

78% of White parents

73% of Asian parents



## Do the Outcomes Linked with Corporal Punishment Vary by Country or Culture?

Yet, when we looked at links between corporal punishment and change in children's behavior problems from age 5 to age 8, we did not find any differences across the race and ethnic groups.

In other words, corporal punishment predicted increases in children's behavior problems over time, over and above children's initial behaviors, for all four U.S. cultural groups.



Question 7:

**What is Known About Corporal  
Punishment in Schools?**



# What is Known About Corporal Punishment in Schools?

- Corporal punishment in schools remains legal in 70 countries.
- Corporal punishment in schools is typically administered with objects, such as canes, sticks or whips.

- In the U.S., teachers and school administrators often use wooden paddles to hit children.



- In some countries, over 90% of children are corporally punished in school (e.g., Cameroon, Kazakhstan, Kenya, and South Africa).

Gershoff, E. T. (2017)



# What is Known About Corporal Punishment in Schools?



sharing child and youth development knowledge

## Social Policy Report

### Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: Prevalence, Disparities in Use, and Status in State and Federal Policy

Elizabeth T. Gershoff Sarah A. Font  
University of Texas at Austin

PSYCHOLOGY, HEALTH & MEDICINE, 2017  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2016.1271955>



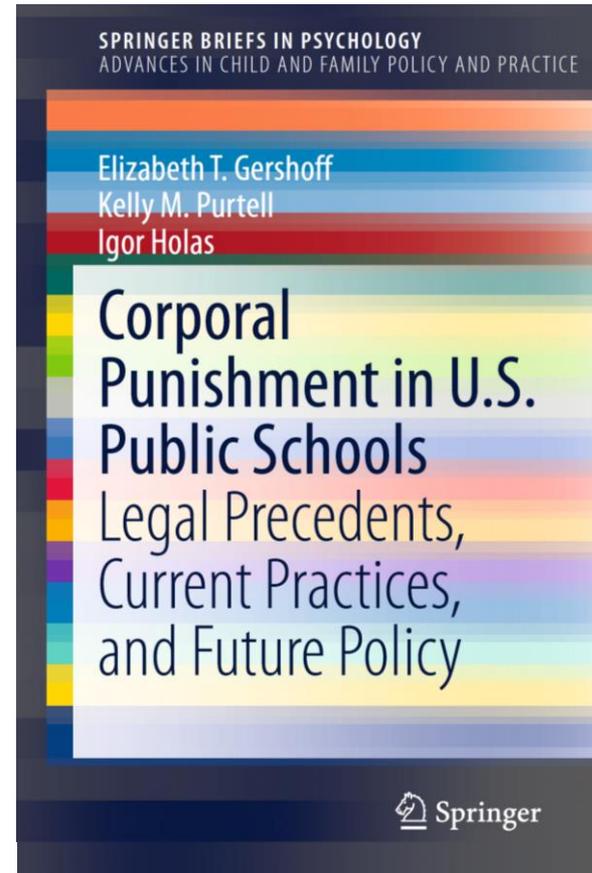
Taylor & Francis  
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OPEN ACCESS

### School corporal punishment in global perspective: prevalence, outcomes, and efforts at intervention

Elizabeth T. Gershoff

Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX,





## What is Known About Corporal Punishment in Schools?

- The best data we have on school corporal punishment comes from UNICEF's Young Lives study of children in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam:

The more children were corporally punished in school at age 8, the smaller their gains in math achievement at age 12 in Vietnam and in both math and vocabulary in Peru.

- Children in a range of countries, including Barbados, India, Pakistan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, report that corporal punishment makes them to feel afraid of or angry at teachers, unable to concentrate, and likely to drop out of school.



# What is Known About Corporal Punishment in Schools?

- Studies in many countries, including UNICEF's Young Lives study, have found that the more children experience school corporal punishment, the greater their mental health and behavioral problems.
- Severe corporal injuries resulting from school corporal punishment have been found in a range of countries, including Egypt, Tanzania, the U.S., and Zambia.
- Tragically, several cases of children dying from school corporal punishment have also been documented.



## What is Known About Corporal Punishment in Schools?

- Plan International calculated the social costs to society from corporal punishment in India (namely lower achievement, lower earnings, higher corporal and mental health needs, and higher reliance on social services).
- They found that the costs of continued use of school corporal punishment were between \$1 billion and \$7 billion in lost benefits to society each year.
  - This was equivalent to .13% and .64% of GDP of India.



# Going Forward

- We need more efforts to educate communities about the research on corporal punishment, through research summaries and educational campaigns.



<http://www.phoenixchildrens.com/community/injury-prevention-center/effective-discipline.htm>  
<http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/physicalpunishment/>



## Going Forward

- We need more evaluations of bans on corporal punishment and on educational campaigns.
- Evaluations can help dispel myths about and distrust of bans.
- For example, we found that state-level bans on school corporal punishment in the U.S. did not result in an increase in youth crime.

Bussman, Erthal, & Schroth (2011); Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas (2015)



# Going Forward

- A handful of hospitals in the U.S. are implementing **No Hit Zones**.
- No Hit Zones prohibit any kind of hitting, including parents spanking children, in the hospital.
- The goals are to reduce violence in the hospital and to reduce acceptance of hitting children generally.



**HANDS ARE NOT FOR HITTING**

Tell others what you want to see rather than hitting them. Hitting or spanking has long-term negative effects, and sends a message to others that violence is okay.

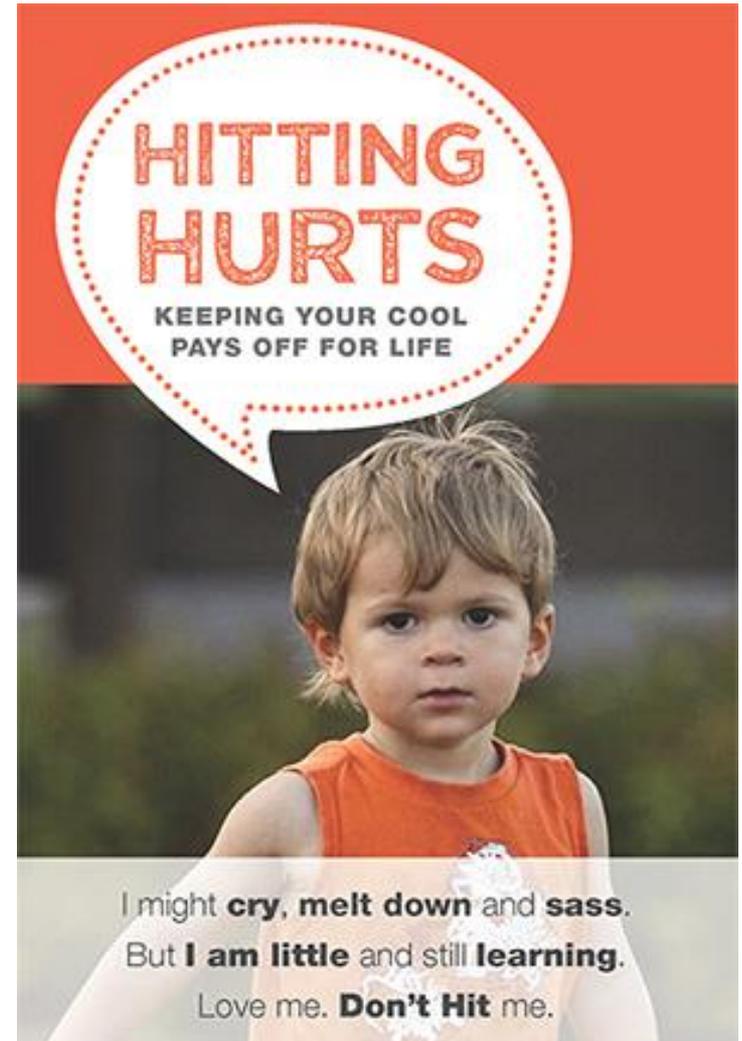
**NO HIT ZONE**  
Gundersen Health System has a No Hit Zone policy to help maintain a safe and healing environment for patients, families and staff.

**GUNDERSEN HEALTH SYSTEM®**  
Where Caring Meets Excellence



# Going Forward

- We found that after the No Hit Zone was implemented, staff had more negative views of corporal punishment and were more likely to intervene if they saw parents hitting children in the hospital.
- No Hit Zones could be implemented in a range of other settings, such as schools, libraries, or shops.





# Thank you.

Please feel free to contact me with questions  
or for further information:

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