

Research Initiatives Designed to Reduce Positive Attitudes Toward Spanking Among Conservative Christians

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Abstract

Social Science research has concluded that children should never be hit or spanked. However, in the United States, especially among conservative Christians, spanking remains normative. The present article summarizes intervention research conducted by the authors that attempts to challenge and change pro-spanking attitudes among conservative Christians. This research suggests that when Christians are presented with the empirical evidence on the potential harm of physical punishment, alongside progressive interpretations of the Biblical passages that are often interpreted by Christians as a mandate to spank, Conservative Christians are amenable to attitudinal change. Theological and secular resources on the physical punishment of children are offered.

Keywords: *corporal punishment, spanking, prevention, physical abuse*

As we began work on this paper, we started where, we assume, our students and most of our colleagues typically start when researching a popular cultural topic. We asked the internet: “Should parents spank/hit their children?” The results of our search were, at least to us, somewhat surprising. Ninety-two out of the first one hundred websites our search produced recommended *against* corporal punishment.

The first 10 websites recommended *against* corporal punishment, and were from Psychology Today (e.g., Bredehoft, 2022; Cummins, 2024), TheHealthSite.com (Arora, 2015), The American Psychological Association (Glicksman, 2019), Healthyplace.com (Peterson, n.d.), Harvard Health (McCarthy, 2019), Raising Children Network (n.d.), Stanford Medicine Children’s Health (2025), and UNC Health Talk (2022), and Webmd.com (Taylor, 2023).

We expected more pro-spanking websites. Why? Because pro-spanking attitudes and behaviors are normative in the U.S. The General Social Survey (2022) indicates that 56% of Americans agree or strongly agree that “It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking” (NORC, n.d.). Other research suggests that as many as 90% of toddlers are spanked or slapped at some

point in their lives (Stark, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014).

None of the above websites was from a Christian organization. In contrast, ALL eight websites that recommended spanking for childhood misbehaviors were from Christian organizations. This observation is consistent with the research literature, which demonstrates that conservative Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, are more likely to spank (Beller, Kroger, & Kliem, 2019; Hoffman, Ellison, & Bartkowski, 2017; Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Vieth, 2014).

On the first website we found, which was supportive of spanking, Dr. Jared Pingleton (2014), a clinical psychologist and former Director of Counseling at the religiously conservative advocacy organization, Focus on the Family, cautiously supports corporal punishment. “Generally speaking,” he writes, “we advise parents that corporal discipline should only be applied in cases of willful disobedience or defiance of authority—never for mere childish irresponsibility. And it should never be administered harshly, impulsively, or with the potential to cause physical harm.” Pingleton acknowledges that his support for corporal punishment is tied to his Christian

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beliefs, citing Hebrews 12:11: “No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” ScriptureSavvy.com (n.d.) similarly concludes, “Using discipline, such as spanking, *when appropriate*, can help steer children away from folly and toward wisdom.”

Two posts by Danny Huerta (2024a), Vice President of Parenting and Youth at Focus on the Family, also *cautiously* endorse spanking. His posts were among the more nuanced of all the website material we consulted. In the post “Is Spanking Biblical?” Huerta states that Proverbs passages do, in fact, endorse spanking, but encourages readers to be cautious: “Focus on Love,” “Look for Other Discipline Options Before Choosing to Spank,” and “Maintain Self-Control and Avoid Anger.”

In a separate Focus on the Family post from Huerta (2024b) entitled “How to Spank: To Spank or Not to Spank?” (2024), Huerta argues that spanking should not be the “go-to discipline,” should not be “done in anger,” and should not be “used during the height of emotion.” Spanking, he argues, should be “the most infrequently used tool in a comprehensive discipline toolkit.” He concludes that spanking “may be appropriate” when the child is (1) in an extremely unsafe situation, (2) deliberately defiant and disobedient, (3) severely disrespectful.

Other websites more strongly recommended that parents physically punish their children. The website *faughnfamily.com*, for example, in a March 2016 post by Church of Christ minister Jeremy Tatum, concludes, “My children are depending on me. I have to answer to God and I have to answer to them when it comes to my part in their development. I am not interested in being ‘PC.’ I am not concerned about cultural changes or public opinion when it comes to their raising. I am interested in the truth. The truth is that spanking is a part of parenting and is, at times, necessary. At least, it is if we are parenting God’s way.”

Similarly, a post on Christianity.com, in November of 2023, entitled “What’s Wrong (and Right) with

Spanking,” author Jen Thorn encourages the reader to “ignore the hype but don’t trust your heart either. Instead, defer to the ‘authority of the word of God,’ as recorded in Proverbs 22:15: ‘Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.’”

And finally, GotQuestions.org, in response to the question, “How should Christians discipline their children?” affirmed physical punishment as biblical (n.d.). “How to best discipline a child can be a difficult task to learn, but it is ‘crucially important.’ Some claim that physical discipline (corporal punishment), such as spanking, is the only method the Bible supports. Others insist that ‘time-outs’ and other punishments that do not involve physical discipline are far more effective. What does the Bible say? The Bible teaches that physical discipline is appropriate, beneficial, and necessary.”

GotQuestions.org (n.d.) poses the question: What does it mean to “spare the rod, spoil the child”? In response to this question, the writer is somewhat contradictory. The website’s article entitled, “What does it mean to ‘spare the rod, spoil the child,’” indicates that Proverbs 13:24 is a “modern-day proverb on the wisdom of discipline.” The rod in this case is a “thin stick” or “switch” used to inflict a “small amount of pain with no lasting physical injury.” However, using the rod is also a sign of parental “wisdom, foresight, and love.”

In a lengthy September 2024 post entitled, “Biblical Parenting: ‘Spare the Rod’ in Proverbs 13:24 Explored,” ChristianPure.com articulates a culturally progressive interpretation of the “rod of discipline.” The Biblical reference to the “rod” of discipline, we read, is not actually a reference to a literal ‘rod.’ According to this website, “To understand this proverb’s true meaning, we must look beyond a literal interpretation and seek its deeper spiritual wisdom. The ‘rod’ in this context should not be understood simply as an instrument of physical punishment. In the ancient Near East, the shepherd’s rod was a tool for guiding sheep, not just for striking them. Similarly, this proverb speaks to the need for loving

guidance and correction in raising children.” The ‘rod’ is instead a “biblical symbol of guidance, authority, and discipline.” The “rod of correction” is a metaphor representing the necessity of “nurture through discipline, boundaries, and accountability.” According to this article, the Proverbs passage is intended to promote “active correction of a child’s wrong choices and behaviors as a form of love and care.”

Despite the progressive rhetoric, ChristianPure.com stops short of recommending that parents NOT hit their children. The website warns that “we must be very careful not to use this proverb as justification for harsh or abusive treatment of children. Such an interpretation goes against the overall biblical message of God’s love and the value of every human being, including children. Jesus himself said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). However, it approves of physical punishment, even if only as a last resort: “Physical discipline, if used at all, should be a last resort, employed sparingly and with great caution. It should never be the primary means of correction or instruction.”

While a significant proportion of the Christian world in the United States, especially the conservative Christian world, has concluded that to “spare the rod” is to “spoil the child” the academic community has, for the most part, reached an entirely different conclusion. Corporal punishment is an act of violence that likely causes more harm than good (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2018). But how do we share this message with Christians, especially conservative Christians? How do we convince this group that disciplinary practices that “spare the rod” are likely equally effective, and healthier, for children?

The answer is that we do so with respect and patience, and with *evidence* that the “spanking scriptures” can, and should, be interpreted very differently. We point out, for example, that the phrase “spare the rod, spoil the child” does not actually appear in Scripture. Rather, it is a paraphrase of

a few passages in the Bible, primarily in the Old Testament book of Proverbs (e.g., 13:24, 22:15, 23:13-14). Proverbs 13:24, for example, states: “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.” We offer a reminder that these passages were written at a time when violence was understood as the *only* way to discipline a child. We indicate that discipline can, and should, impose costs on a child. But these costs need not, and should not, be physical. Time-outs, removal of privileges, and even verbal reprimands can be effective, and hitting is *never* the answer. We should not hit our friends, we should not hit each other, and we should *not* hit our children.

Research Designed to Reduce Positive Attitudes Toward Spanking Among Conservative Christians

Our interest in the empirical relationship between corporal punishment and Christianity began relatively early in our careers. Our first book together, along with our co-author, was *Family Violence Across the Lifespan: An Introduction* (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin, 1997, 2005, and 2011). Our interest in violence directed toward family members, and in particular children, ultimately led us to studies of corporal punishment. Having grown up in Christian households and having been educated in the social sciences at a Christian university, we were well aware of the corporal punishment passages in the Bible and their presumed impact on high corporal punishment rates in the United States. We were also well aware of the potential harm caused by spanking, including behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal sequelae (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2018). We wondered whether we could offer a different way to interpret the corporal punishment passages by addressing and explaining them in a historical context, in an effort to change pro-spanking attitudes among Christians.

Professionals have developed a range of creative interventions designed to change positive attitudes and behavior related to physical punishment. Interventions vary based on both the content

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of the intervention and the targeted outcome. The vast majority include measures of attitude change and behavioral intentions and focus on the research establishing the harm and ineffectiveness of physical discipline (Perrin & Miller-Perrin, 2020). Interventions that focus on changing positive attitudes toward physical punishment are a particularly important strategy for both reducing physical punishment and potentially preventing its use in the first place. In one study, an interactive multimedia intervention that teaches alternatives to physical punishment, known as the Play Nicely program, decreased parents' positive attitudes toward spanking and intentions to use spanking as a disciplinary technique compared to a control group (Chavis et al., 2013; Scholer et al., 2010). In another study, first-time mothers received baby books that educated them about effective alternatives to physical punishment and also about typical child development. Compared to mothers who received non-educational baby books or no books, mothers who received the educational baby books reported significantly less favorable views toward physical punishment, and these effects were strongest for African American parents and parents with low levels of educational attainment (Reich et al., 2012).

As discussed above, Christians, especially conservative Protestants, are significantly more likely than other parents to support and practice physical punishment (Ellison et al., 2011; Vieth, 2014). Therefore, it is important to offer alternative interpretations of Biblical scriptures that are often interpreted by conservative Christians as a mandate to spank. The intervention that we created, therefore, focused on two factors: 1. The research evidence on spanking, as compared to other disciplinary techniques, and 2. A progressive biblical interpretation of Proverbs passages that influence many Christians.

Our intervention was based, in large part, on William Webb's book, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (2011). Webb, a conservative Protestant himself, reminds the reader that the

Bible must be read within the cultural context in which it was written. He describes an ancient world in which the weak and powerless, including women, children, ethnic minorities, and slaves, were sometimes violently mistreated. Proverbs passages relevant to the spanking debate, he argues, were directed towards a people who understood "blows and wounds" as the *only* way to "cleanse evil away" (Proverbs 20:30). These passages, he argued, should actually be understood as an attempt to reign in violence.

The first empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Attitudes About Spanking Using Alternative Biblical Interpretations," was based on a sample of 121 students at our University (Perrin et al., 2017). Students were randomly assigned to participate in one of three intervention conditions. In the first condition (Research Only), students read a summary that described the research evidence showing a link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes, including noncompliance, aggression toward others, anxiety and depression, negative parent-child interactions, and delinquent behavior. The summary concluded by stating that "the preponderance of evidence suggests that spanking causes more harm than good." For the second condition (Research and Religion), students read the summary from the Research Only condition as well as a summary describing a progressive Christian interpretation of biblical passages about discipline. The summary addressed the importance of viewing biblical passages within a cultural context that suggests that such passages are actually meant to place restrictions on violence in a culture where violence was common. The summary also emphasized that many current Christian interpretations of these biblical passages are not literal interpretations, such as Focus on the Family's "two smack max" policy (Ingram, n.d.). The summary concluded by suggesting that, although the biblical passages address the importance of child discipline, non-violent disciplinary practices are likely more effective and that Christians need not, and should not, spank. For the third condition (Control), students read a summary of

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research on the link between daycare and various child development outcomes such as cognitive development, child behavior problems, child health, quality of family functioning, and social competence.

For each intervention condition, a 30-40-minute intervention session of approximately 5-20 students each, was conducted by the authors in a classroom setting. Students in all conditions were exposed to their condition's intervention, as described above, designed to influence attitudes toward spanking. In each of these conditions, students read the respective summary, followed by a brief oral summary of that information and a time to clarify any questions about the information. Students complete an assessment of attitudes toward child discipline both four weeks prior to the intervention sessions and then immediately following the interventions.

Findings indicate that both the intervention conditions decreased positive attitudes toward spanking compared to the Control condition. In addition, the combined Research and Religion condition demonstrated a greater decrease in favorable attitudes toward spanking compared to the Research Only condition. Although the students in the Research and Religion condition were exposed to both the empirical research on spanking as well as alternative interpretations of biblical scripture, this study demonstrated that *additional change* is possible when religious convictions are also addressed.

The second empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative Christians Using Interventions that Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Alternative Biblical Interpretations," was based on a sample of 129 students at our university (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2017). Students were randomly assigned to participate in one of three intervention conditions: Research Only, Religion Only, and Research and Religion. Similar to our earlier study, students in the Research Only condition read the same summary used in our initial study describing the research evidence showing a link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes. For the Religion Only condition, students read the

same summary used in our initial study describing a progressive Christian interpretation of biblical passages about discipline. In the third Research and Religion Condition, students read both summaries included in the two previous conditions.

For each intervention condition, a 30-40-minute intervention session of approximately 5-20 students each was conducted by the authors in a classroom setting. Students in all conditions were exposed to their condition's intervention as described above. In each condition, students read the respective summary, after which the researchers provided a brief oral summary of that information and answered any questions about the information. Four weeks prior to the intervention sessions, students completed an assessment of attitudes toward child discipline as well as two measures of conservative religious orientation, including denominational affiliation and religious fundamentalist attitudes. Students completed the attitudes toward discipline measure again, immediately following the intervention sessions.

Findings indicated that the intervention conditions decreased positive attitudes toward spanking and that the impact of the intervention condition was influenced by whether or not participants had a conservative religious orientation. In particular, the students with a more conservative religious orientation evidenced greater change in their attitudes toward spanking. The greatest change occurred in those participants who heard both the research evidence and the alternative biblical interpretations. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of the various intervention conditions depends upon religious orientation, with the greatest decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking among those with a conservative Protestant affiliation and those high on religious fundamentalist beliefs among those exposed to both the research evidence and the progressive biblical interpretations.

The third empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Physical Punishment Attitudes Using the Alternative Biblical Interpretation Intervention (ABII) Among First-generation Korean Protestants,"

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was based on a sample of 60 Korean adults, including both parents and non-parents, attending a theologically conservative Protestant church. (Perrin, Miller-Perrin, Bayston, Song, 2023). All participants participated in an intervention designed to decrease positive attitudes toward spanking that included three main informational components comprised of a written and oral summary: (a) the latest research on spanking, (b) what the Bible says about spanking, and (c) non-physical disciplinary methods.

The first intervention component (latest research on spanking) included a modified version of the Research Only condition written summary used in our previous research, updating the research evidence on the link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes. The oral summary that followed the reading of the written summary briefly described the research evidence on the ineffectiveness and negative outcomes of spanking and concluded by stating that “there is no compelling evidence that it is more effective than other methods” and that “the preponderance of evidence suggests that spanking causes more harm than good.” The second intervention component (what the Bible says about spanking) included a modified version of the Religion Only condition written summary used in our previous research, presenting a progressive Christian interpretation of the Proverbs passages most commonly cited by Christians as a mandate to spank and modified to additionally include New Testament scriptures that focus on the way Jesus interacted with children, to potentially improve the intervention’s effectiveness. The oral summary that followed the reading of the script described this progressive interpretation of scripture and concluded by suggesting that these progressive interpretations simply have not gone far enough and that “Christians need not, and should not, spank.” The third component of the intervention (non-physical discipline) included a written summary that acknowledged and emphasized the importance of child discipline, but also emphasized the fact that there are many ways to discipline other than hitting a child. This component described the

distinction between positive reinforcement and punishment, stating the superiority of the former, and providing examples. The section ended by stating the importance of recognizing developmentally appropriate behavior in children. The oral summary that followed the reading of the written summary emphasized these main points.

Participants attended three sessions: a pre-intervention assessment session, an intervention session, and a post-intervention assessment session, all of which were conducted in classrooms during designated Bible class times at the Good Stewards Church. All sessions included a professional interpreter who translated the presenters’ English presentation into Korean. In addition, all measures and materials included both English and Korean translations of each item. In the pre-intervention assessment session, participants completed a measure of religious fundamentalism and a measure of attitudes toward child discipline. In the intervention session, which occurred five weeks after the pre-intervention session, participants attended a 30 to 40-minute session in which participants read each component of the intervention written summary, followed by an oral summary of the information the participants had just read. Participants were then allowed to ask questions directed at clarifying any of the information presented in that section. The post-intervention assessment session took place immediately following the intervention session, in which participants completed the measure of attitudes toward child discipline a second time.

Findings indicated a significant decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking from pre- to post-intervention, for both parents and non-parents. In addition, our findings suggested that the majority of our sample of Korean Americans endorsed religiously fundamentalist Christian beliefs, even more so than the general U.S. population. In particular, our findings indicated that the intervention was just as effective at changing attitudes among parents as it was with non-parents.

Limitations

Our research, however, is not without its limitations. One significant limitation of the research described above is that intervention outcomes focused on attitude change and/or behavioral intentions rather than actual behavior. This limitation is consistent with other studies in this research area (e.g., Chavis et al., 2013; Reich et al., 2012). Although there is potential value in targeting attitudes and intentions, the ultimate measure of an intervention's success in reducing corporal punishment would be to assess actual change in spanking behavior. One approach to reducing the frequency of physical punishment among parents who use physical punishment is the Adults and Children Together against Violence educational program (ACT: <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/>), which was created by the American Psychological Association's Violence Prevention Office (2016). The intervention provides group-based parent education in nonviolent discipline, child development, anger management, and social problem-solving skills in school and community-based settings. Several evaluations have indicated that parents who participated in ACT reported using physical punishment significantly less often (e.g., spanking and hitting with an object) and using positive parenting practices more often (e.g., nurturing behavior) than parents in control groups (Knox, Burkhardt, & Cromly, 2013; Knox, Burkhardt, & Hunter, 2011; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011).

Future Research

Additional research should examine specific religious beliefs and behaviors, as previous research has found significant differences in attitudes and behavior with regard to spanking depending on whether religious affiliation or religion-related behavior, such as attending religious services, is examined (Petts, 2012). Indeed, some research has identified several benefits of Christian parenting, sans physical punishment. For example, the belief that the Bible is God's true word and that it has answers to important human problems is associated with parents

using more praise and hugs. The sanctification of parenting, or the belief that parenting holds spiritual significance, is also associated with positive aspects of parenting. These include more consistency in responding to child misbehavior, less use of verbal aggression, more praising of child behavior and character, more emphasis on the importance of moral responsibility, greater investment and intentionality in parenting, sharing more positive memories with one's child, and having a greater emotional tie to one's child (e.g., Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006; Murray-Swank et al., 2006; Volling et al., 2009; Wilcox, 1998).

Additional research is also needed that focuses on targeting professionals who are in a position to influence conservative Christians, such as ministers and teachers. We are currently working on two relevant projects. One project focuses on an intervention to educate teachers and ministers in training at the undergraduate level that utilizes Victor Vieth's *When Faith Hurts* workshop. We assessed 95 students at a conservative Christian midwestern university at three time points: prior to the workshop, immediately following the workshop, and three years post workshop. Our preliminary findings suggested that the workshop was successful at changing positive attitudes toward spanking and in increasing the likelihood of advising parents against physical discipline and positive attitudes toward child protection. Changes were observed from pre-to post-test assessment, and these changes were maintained at the three-year follow-up. We are conducting a similar evaluation of Victor Vieth's *Keeping Faith* seminar, which he has conducted with over 200 religious leaders across the U.S. Our previous research, along with these continuing research projects, provides hope that we can reduce parental use of physical punishment and thereby protect the lives of vulnerable children.

Theological and Secular Resources

In addition to the William Webb book discussed in this article, other scholars have addressed this subject in a way that is theologically sensitive to the concerns

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of conservative Protestants. The Academy on Violence and Abuse has published guidelines for working with parents who sincerely believe God requires them to discipline their children by hitting them (AVA, n.d.), and APSAC has also published guidance for a culturally humble approach to this challenging issue (Vieth, 2019). APSAC has also developed a membership category for faith leaders, and we are hopeful that expanded dialogue between faith and child protection leaders will be fruitful.

With respect to theological engagement, it may be helpful to provide accounts of those who grew up in theologically conservative communities, have painful memories of physical discipline, and have left these communities because of their experiences. As one example, Sarah McCammon writes about her experiences growing up in an evangelical community and recounts the physical and emotional impact physical discipline had on her:

I had purple and green bruises the next morning. I also remember hearing my younger siblings screaming down the hall as they were disciplined in the same way. I will never be able to erase the sound of their cries, or the sound of wooden implements repeatedly swatting their little bodies, from my memory. At 41, I still have flashbacks and have spent significant time in therapy discussing these events. Based on my research, I know I'm not alone. (McCammon 2024, p. 192).

It would be intriguing to pose a case study such as this to an evangelical audience and lead a discussion on ministering to someone wounded in this way.

A discussion with real-life experiences such as this may create a deeper understanding of the physical, emotional, and spiritual harm that can result from striking children as a means of discipline. It is perhaps an additional consideration for future research.

Conclusion

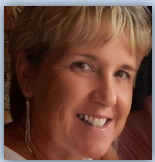
Research and popular evidence suggest that many conservative Christians believe that the Bible, at minimum, supports spanking, and may actually mandate that parents use physical punishment to discipline their children. However, social science research suggests that spanking is ineffective and may result in negative developmental outcomes. Our research on interventions to reduce positive attitudes toward spanking provides evidence that a culturally sensitive intervention approach that challenges traditional Biblical interpretations of scriptures can be effective at changing positive attitudes toward spanking. These findings further provide support that such interventions can be particularly effective with those holding conservative Christian beliefs, especially when such individuals are provided with both an empirical research perspective and alternative interpretations to scripture traditionally viewed as supportive of physical discipline. Although additional research is needed, there is reason to believe a more culturally humble approach to corporal punishment practiced in theologically conservative communities may reduce both corporal punishment and the physical, emotional, and spiritual risks associated with this form of discipline. ■



About the Authors



Robin Perrin received his doctorate in sociology from Washington State University in 1989. Following his doctoral studies he was an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington. Currently he is Professor of Sociology at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. Perrin's research interests and publications are in the areas of family violence, deviance theory, the social construction of social problems, and the sociology of religion. He is the coauthor of four books; *Social Deviance: Being, Behaving, and Branding* (with David Ward and Tim Carter, Allyn and Bacon, 1991), *Child Maltreatment: An Introduction* (with Cindy Miller-Perrin, Sage, 1999, 2007, 2012), *Family Violence Across the Lifespan* (with Ola Barnett and Cindy Miller-Perrin, Sage, 1997, 2005, 2011), and *Violence and Maltreatment in Intimate Relationships*. He is also the author or coauthor of numerous articles on a variety of topics including family violence, deviance theory, and the sociology of religion. At Pepperdine Professor Perrin teaches *Introduction to Sociology*, *Deviant Behavior and Social Control*, and *Sociology of Religion*. He is the recipient of the 2004 Howard A. White Award for Teaching Excellence.



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