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Early Childhood Research Quarterly 19 (2004) 463–484

**Early
Childhood
Research
Quarterly**

Talking about corporal punishment: nine low-income African American mothers' perspectives[☆]

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Abstract

Qualitative interviews conducted over the course of 5 years with nine young low-income African American mothers were analyzed in order to gain understanding of their perspectives on corporal punishment. All used corporal punishment with their children. Results pertain to the vocabulary mothers used to describe corporal punishment (*pop, tap, whup, spank, hit, and smack*), the circumstances in which different levels of corporal punishment were used, the criteria mothers used when deciding whom to allow to administer corporal punishment to their children, and the reasons they supported the use of (non-abusive) corporal punishment.

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Keywords: Corporal punishment; African American mothers; Perspectives

As pointed out by Holden (2002), few parenting topics evoke as much emotion and controversy as the use of corporal punishment for disciplining children. Practitioners, like researchers, are divided in their conclusions regarding its appropriateness and efficaciousness. Dobson (1997) and Leman (2003), for example, advocate spanking and teach its judicious use, while Gardere (1999), Severe (2002), and Taylor (2001) caution parents to avoid spanking and offer instruction in alternative guidance methods.

[☆] The findings reported here are based on research conducted as part of the national Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through Grant DHHS 90YF0011/05 to the University of Missouri-Columbia. The research is part of the independent research the University of Missouri-Columbia conducted with one of 17 programs participating in the national Early Head Start study. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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One certainty is that corporal punishment is widespread, cutting across all segments of U.S. society. Straus and Stewart (1999) have reported that about 94% of American parents spank their children. Nonetheless, the likelihood that parents will endorse and use corporal punishment is greatest in lower-income homes and when mothers (1) are younger rather than older, (2) are employed, (3) have high school educations or less, (4) are religiously conservative, and (5) have children of preschool age (the peak child age is 3) (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Xu, Tung, & Dunaway, 2000). In addition, African American parents are more likely to endorse corporal punishment than are European American parents. They also use it with more frequency (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003; Heffer & Kelley, 1987; McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Straus, 2001; Xu et al., 2000).

After performing a meta-analysis of 88 studies on the child outcomes associated with corporal punishment, Gershoff (2002) concluded that, while corporal punishment may contribute to children's short-term compliance with parental demands, it does not contribute to their internalization of parental values regarding positive behavior. Other researchers, such as Holden (2002), Straus (2001), and McCord (1997) likewise argue strongly against its use.

However, the title of one of Baumrind's several articles on this issue, "A Blanket Injunction against Disciplinary Spanking is not Warranted by the Data," (1996a) summarizes an alternative position. The validity of many studies, including those in Gershoff's meta-analysis, have been criticized as seriously flawed. Common methodological problems include lack of distinction between ordinary and abusive corporal punishment, cross-sectional rather than longitudinal research designs, lack of control for important third variables, reliance on retrospective recall from parents or children, shared source, and/or inattention to the possible moderating impacts of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parental warmth on the links between corporal punishment and child outcomes (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, & Sorbing, in press; Gunnoe, 2003; Larzelere, 2003). An additional issue is related to the "packaged nature" of parenting. Singling corporal punishment out from the wide array of tactics used by parents is most likely a misguided research strategy; children are more likely to be affected by the *overall* style of discipline used in their families than by any single practice (Baumrind, 1996b, 2003; Holden, 2002; Parke, 2002).

In fact, a growing body of evidence indicates that in both low- and middle-income families, mild or moderate corporal punishment is not by itself predictive of internalizing or externalizing problems in children (Baumrind, 2003). Instead, the meanings ascribed to it by parents and children appear to be crucial; these meanings seem to depend on the parental warmth accompanying it and family ethnicity or sociocultural context. While some researchers (e.g., McLoyd & Smith, 2002; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997) have found no moderating impacts of maternal warmth or ethnicity on the child outcomes associated with corporal punishment, in general, studies based on African American samples provide especially consistent evidence of benign or beneficial consequences when corporal punishment is combined with warmth (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997). Additionally, McLeod, Kruttschnitt, and Dornfeld (1994) found that, unlike the pattern in European American families, in African American families, corporal punishment is the result rather than the cause of children's antisocial behavior.

The fact that corporal punishment predicts different outcomes in African American, as compared to European American, families underscores the need for sensitive descriptive data exploring parents' cognitions underlying its use (Parke, 2002; Xu et al., 2000). According to the social information processing perspective, individuals (consciously or unconsciously) base their action choices on their goals, their interpretations of incoming information, their knowledge of various strategies, and their assessment of

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