



Children's assessments of corporal punishment and other disciplinary practices: The role of age, race, SES, and exposure to spanking

Brigitte Vittrup^{*,1}, George W. Holden²

Department of Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712, USA

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ABSTRACT

African-American and Anglo-American children's assessments of four disciplinary methods (spanking, reasoning, withdrawing privileges, and time-out) were investigated with 108 children ages 6–10 years old and one of their parents. Children watched videos depicting a child being disciplined and then rated each discipline method. Reasoning was rated as most fair, spanking as least fair. Spanking was regarded most effective for immediate compliance but not for long-term behavior change. Children with medium high levels of exposure to spanking were more likely to regard it as the best disciplinary technique compared with children with low or high exposure levels. Younger children rated spanking as fairer than older children. No differences were found between African-American and Anglo-American children's assessments after controlling for exposure to spanking and socioeconomic status. Implications about the role of children's assessments of discipline for internalization are discussed.

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Introduction

Child discipline and its effectiveness have been studied for more than half a century. However, the 1990s marked a decade of change in conceptualizations concerning the purpose and effectiveness of punishment. This transformation was largely due to the increased recognition of the role of children's social cognitions. An influential article by Grusec and Goodnow (1994) led the way. They proposed that internalization is the key to long-term behavior change. Internalization occurs when a person takes the values of society as one's own and thus, appropriate behavior is motivated by internal rather than external factors. Grusec and Goodnow proposed internalization to be a two-pronged meditational process. A child must first accurately perceive the parental message, and then, in order for behavioral change to occur, the child must accept it. This recognition of the child's role in effective discipline and internalization is in stark contrast to the unidirectional view that has characterized much of the research on the topic (Dobbs & Duncan, 2004; Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Maccoby, 1992).

The goal of discipline is to shape the child into being an appropriately self-regulated individual. Self-regulation occurs when the child has internalized a moral norm and thus believes that

compliance with the norm is self-generated rather than imposed. Central to the behavioral change process outlined by Grusec and Goodnow (1994), and subsequently refined by Gershoff (2002), is the child's evaluation and acceptance of the parental regulatory message. Acceptance requires that the child perceives the message as appropriate for the circumstances and that the child is motivated to comply with the message. Children's views of the legitimacy and fairness of their parents' requests or punishments are thus likely to be a key determinant in children's acceptance of and potential compliance with such demands (Laupa & Turiel, 1986; Tisak, 1986). However, relatively few studies have examined children's evaluations of discipline. Most investigations have focused on disciplinary practices and effectiveness from the parent's point of view. That creates a limited understanding of the role of discipline in children's lives, given that parents and children sometimes interpret discipline events very differently. For example, Dobbs and Duncan (2004) and Willow and Hyder (1998) found that while adults often interpret spanking as "a gentle tap or a loving slap" (Dobbs & Duncan, p. 376), most of the children defined it as a "hard hit" or a "very hard hit." The children in these studies also reported that adults are usually angry when they spank, whereas parents often report that they do not spank while angry. Thus, in order to get a more complete picture of the context and experiences of discipline, it is important to also understand children's perspectives. This study was designed to investigate children's assessments of several commonly used disciplinary techniques with a focus on corporal punishment.

Children's reaction to corporal punishment, most frequently operationalized as spanking, is a useful variable to study for several reasons. First, corporal punishment is salient and memorable so children are likely to have formed opinions about it. Second, across

* Corresponding author. Department of Family Sciences, Texas Woman's University, PO Box 425769, Denton, TX 76204, USA. Tel.: +1 940 898 2624.

E-mail address: Bvittrup@twu.edu (B. Vittrup).

¹ Now at Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX, USA.

² Now at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, USA.

families, there is wide variability in its use (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995). Third, few investigators have studied children's opinions about corporal punishment. In the work that has been done (e.g., Carlson, 1986; Dobbs & Duncan, 2004; Herzberger & Tennen, 1985; Rohner, Bourque, & Elordi, 1996; Willow & Hyder, 1998), children's assessments of corporal punishment have generally not been studied in relation to other less severe disciplinary techniques. It is useful to include reactions to other discipline methods along with spanking, because comparisons can be made to better gauge children's evaluations. Finally, given the continuing controversy over the use of corporal punishment, collecting children's opinions adds their voice to the debate.

Variables related to children's evaluations of discipline

In studying which variables impact children's evaluations of discipline, most research has centered on five independent variables: type of transgression preceding the discipline (Catron & Masters, 1993; Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993), disciplinary agent (Catron & Masters, 1993), child's gender (Sorbring, Deater-Deckard, & Palméus, 2006), child's age (Barnett, Quackenbush, & Sinisi, 1996; Catron & Masters, 1993; Siegal & Cowen, 1984; Wolfe, Katell, & Drabman, 1982), and prior exposure to the disciplinary technique (Barnett et al., 1996; Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003; Wolfe et al., 1982). To limit the number of independent variables, we focus here only on the impact of child's age and several types of prior exposure to corporal punishment.

Child's age

Not surprisingly, age has been found to be an important determinant of children's evaluations. For example, Catron and Masters (1993) found that preschool children viewed spanking as acceptable for any transgression, whereas fifth graders were less willing to accept this form of discipline and only found it acceptable for prudential violations (behaviors that pose a threat or danger to oneself) and moral violations (behaviors that involve harm to others or violate certain rights). Younger children tend to consider reprimands to be an authority figure's affirmation of transcendental, immanent morality (Mancuso & Lehrer, 1986; Turiel, 1983), and therefore accept punishment more readily across situations (Catron & Masters, 1993; Turiel, 1983). As children's cognitive abilities expand, their reasoning skills increase, their sense of autonomy grows, and they are likely to view adults as less fear-evoking and having limitations to their authority (Catron & Masters, 1993). Thus, older children are less likely to consider spanking and other manifestations of coercion to be legitimate and fair forms of discipline.

Prior exposure

It is becoming increasingly clear that an important determinant of children's perceptions of discipline is the child's history of exposure to the particular discipline method. This variable has received little explicit attention but can be operationalized at two levels. First, there is an individual's own experience. Supporting evidence comes from studies that have found young children tend to endorse the disciplinary methods used by their parents. More specifically, children who experienced corporal punishment or other coercive forms of discipline in the home were more likely to approve of its use (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 1982).

A second type of personal exposure a child may have is by vicariously experiencing a punishment. Children who frequently see or hear about a sibling or peer getting spanked will most likely then perceive the discipline as "normative" (e.g., Gershoff, 2002; Lansford et al., 2005). This view is consistent with social cognitive theory which highlights the role of observational learning through both direct and vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1986). There are few previous efforts to quantify children's exposure, and those that have been published have limited

their assessments of exposure to parents' or children's reports of the children's own disciplinary experiences. Consequently, it was expected that children's assessments of corporal punishment will be influenced by not only whether they are spanked but also their perceptions of how frequently siblings and peers are spanked.

Exposure to corporal punishment can also be considered at a more distal level, such as a cultural or subcultural level. Two variables that relate to exposure are race and socioeconomic status (SES). Both variables have been associated with differential rates of corporal punishment. In particular, a well established finding is that lower SES parents endorse harsher disciplinary responses, such as spanking, more frequently than higher SES parents (Bornstein, Hahn, Suwalsky, & Haynes, 2003; Flynn, 1994; Gunnoe & Mariner, 1997; Jackson et al., 1999; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Similarly, a number of researchers have found that African-American parents are more likely to report they spank than Anglo-American parents (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Flynn, 1994; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Pinderhughes et al., 2000; Straus & Stewart, 1999).

However, a closer reading of the literature reveals both heterogeneity and confounding in results comparing African-American and Anglo-American parents' use of spanking. Several researchers have not found racial differences despite using large samples (Ellison, Thompson, & Segal, 1995; Hemenway, Solnick, & Carter, 1994), or discovered considerable variability within racial groups (e.g., Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, & Walker, 1993). Other researchers have either confounded race and SES or have neglected to include information about the SES levels within racial groups (e.g., Day et al., 1998; Deater-Deckard et al., 1996, 2003; Flynn, 1994; Giles-Sims et al., 1995). Given that African-Americans are often disproportionately represented in lower socioeconomic groups, the apparent racial differences found in prior studies may in reality be due to socioeconomic differences (Hoffman, 2003). Thus, it remains an open question whether there are racial differences in the use of spanking in African-American and Anglo-American families who are of similar socioeconomic status. If a racial or SES group difference does emerge in a sample, then that would mean the children have different exposure levels and this, in turn, should translate into different evaluations.

The present study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate children's assessments of corporal punishment – specifically spanking – in comparison with three other disciplinary techniques commonly used in American homes: reasoning, withdrawal of privileges, and time-out (Caughy & Franzini, 2005; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, & Pike, 1996). We had five hypotheses. Our first prediction concerned child age. Based on research on cognitive developmental differences in children's views of authority figures and their evaluation of fairness (e.g., Catron & Masters, 1993), we predicted a main effect for child age, with younger children more likely to endorse spanking. Children aged 6 to 10 years were chosen because they have demonstrated their ability to articulate opinions about disciplinary practices (Catron & Masters, 1993). Children younger than 6 years were not recruited due to their difficulty in expressing their views about discipline (e.g., Buck, 2003; Konstantareas & Desbois, 2001).

Our second hypothesis was that children would select reasoning as the most fair and most effective form of discipline, as well as the best overall method when compared to other discipline alternatives. This expectation was based on previous studies (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996; Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993) and because reasoning is a non-coercive technique and thus is more respectful of the child's autonomy. Third, based on prior work indicating children's dislike of spanking (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996; Carlson, 1986), we expected the children would judge spanking as the least fair, least effective, and worst overall method when compared to other

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