



PII S0145-2134(96)00010-5

# THREATS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AS VERBAL AGGRESSION: A NATURALISTIC STUDY

PHILLIP W. DAVIS

Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

**Abstract**—This study examined firsthand observations of adults ( $N = 70$ ) making public verbal threats to physically punish or hurt children. While many adults threatened the child with a “spanking,” most used a variety of other terms, some euphemistic and some menacing, to label the threatened event. Angry shouting seemed rare, and swearing was almost nonexistent. Many threatening adults, however, also hit the child. In the course of threatening their children, adults typically attributed unshared responsibility for group problems to the child. They also normalized their own aggression by acting as though nothing unusual had happened. Perhaps for tactical reasons, most children also reacted as though there were nothing unusual about the threat. No one inside or outside the group intervened. It is argued that a complete understanding of verbal aggression against children requires an appreciation of the ongoing interaction in which episodes are embedded, and of the immediate social context in which episodes develop. Public places may be an important facilitative context because of the expectations associated with a parent’s public persona.

*Key Words*—Verbal aggression, Physical punishment, Threats.

## INTRODUCTION

RESEARCHERS GENERALLY AGREE that verbal aggression against children is widespread and harmful (Pagelow, 1984). Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) report, for example, that almost two out of three children under 17 experienced “verbal/symbolic aggression” in the year of the study, and those experiences were associated with higher rates of delinquency and interpersonal problems. Other studies that focus on effects point to low self-esteem, anger, anxiety, depression, dependency, academic underachievement, and lying (Briere & Runtz 1988; Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983). Increases in verbal aggression have also been associated with increases in physical aggression (Ney, 1987; Straus, 1974), one study finding that verbal aggression against children was one of 14 factors associated with severe violence toward children (Straus & Smith, 1990). Verbal aggression, in fact, may be more closely associated with children’s psychosocial problems than physical aggression (Vissing et al., 1991), and it is possible that the overall incidence of verbal abuse is increasing in response to the prohibitions on physical and sexual abuse during the last few decades (Ney, 1987).

Most authors discuss verbal aggression as a type of psychological maltreatment or as an example of emotional abuse. These are said to be the most prevalent forms of child abuse, but also the most difficult to isolate and define (Knudsen, 1992; Lesnik-Oberstein, Koers, & Cohen, 1995; Tower, 1993). The National Incidence Study (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988) points to three types of emotional abuse: close confinement, verbal or emotional assault, and other. Examples of verbal assault are belittling, denigrating, scapegoating, and threatening. Garbarino, Guttman and Seeley (1986) point to a pattern of rejecting,

---

Received for publication April 4, 1995; final revision received September 11, 1995; accepted September 14, 1995.

Reprint requests should be addressed to Phillip W. Davis, Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, 30303.

isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, or corrupting the child. Terrorizing can involve threatened harm (see Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1987) or "threatening affective or verbal assaults" (Cicchetti, 1989, p. 388). Poertner (1986) writes that verbal or emotional abuse includes name-calling, threats, intimidation, and frightening or humiliating the person. A common approach is the one taken by Brown (1984) who identifies specific kinds of verbal activity as measures of emotional abuse, including yelling and screaming, name-calling, and cursing. Similarly, Briere and Runtz (1988) created a psychological maltreatment scale including items to measure yelling, insulting, criticizing, guilt inducement, and ridicule or humiliation.

Research of this kind on the extent, severity, and long-term effects of verbal aggression is important, but we also need studies that examine the dynamics and contexts of verbal aggression, studies that explore, for example, the empirical relationships between aggressive episodes, denigrating expressions, and the immediate social situations in which they occur. We know very little about what adults actually say and do during particular episodes, and even less about children's immediate reactions and other people's activities. These things are important because aggression's effects may depend to an extent on the manner and style with which it is enacted (see Berkowitz, 1993; Straus, 1994).

### *Verbal Aggression as Symbolic Interaction*

The objective of this study is to present a theoretically informed description of particular episodes of verbal aggression, taking the approach that verbal aggression is a potentially damaging communicative activity (McGee & Wolfe, 1991) that signals intended harm. It adopts the definition that verbal aggression is, ". . . a communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent" (Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991, p. 224). This definition is meant to include nonverbal as well as verbal communications, but not physical assaults. It includes instrumental acts aimed at achieving some objective, such as getting the child to stop doing something, as well as expressive acts reflecting inner states such as anger and frustration (Feshbach, 1970; Gelles & Straus, 1979).

One especially helpful theoretical model of communicative activity is known as symbolic interactionism. The model is based on the notion that social action is based on the meaning of things for people in particular situations, and that those meanings develop in the course of interaction with others who share their symbolic world (Blumer, 1969; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Stryker, 1964; Turner, 1970). People also develop interpretations or "definitions" of their immediate situations, and their definitions have causal status (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). Much of their activity involves symbolic gestures designed to influence the definitions of an audience in a particular social context, usually because they are concerned about how others view and evaluate them. People are also able to act as audiences to their own actions, and they routinely monitor their own "performances" according to their own standards and the real or imagined standards of others. To influence or "manage" the impressions that others have of them, they tend to present themselves in favorable ways, often through the tactical use of language (Felson, 1978; Goffman, 1959; Strauss, 1959). According to the model, these processes are ongoing, tentative, changing, and dynamic (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Turner, 1970). Few researchers have applied the model to aggression against intimates (but see Bersani & Chen, 1988, and Gelles & Straus, 1979). At least two ideas about verbal aggression flow from this model. The first is that verbal assaults may be one way that parents and other adults can present themselves in favorable ways. Many people expect parents to engage in mild physical aggression, so long as it looks like physical punishment (Donnelly, 1995; Straus, 1994), and the same is probably true for mild verbal assaults. Denigrating imputations to children may actually help adults communicate favorable impres-

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات