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Preschoolers perceptions of the unfairness of maternal disciplinary practices

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of this study was to examine preschoolers' perceptions of maternal discipline's unfairness. The participants' gender, age, SES, family intactness and sibship size were examined for their possible relevance to such perceptions.

Method: Five vignettes, describing forms of discipline the literature suggests constitute psychological maltreatment, were presented to 57 preschoolers (27 boys and 30 girls). They included excessive withdrawal of privileges, withdrawal of entertainment, differential treatment of siblings, threatening power assertion, and public humiliation. The children had to decide on the fairness or unfairness of each vignette in which a child was disciplined in each of these ways by his/her mother. They were then asked to offer an explanation for each of their choices.

Results: Of the five forms of discipline employed in the vignettes, children judged differential treatment of siblings as more unfair than either power assertion (threatening spanking), or public humiliation. No differences were found for withdrawal of privileges or entertainment. Of the various predictor variables employed, preschoolers from smaller families were more likely to judge threatening to spank as unfair. As well, compared to boys, girls and children from larger families were more likely to judge differential treatment as unfair. Age, SES, and family intactness had no effect on discipline judgements likely because of their limited range.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that preschoolers can offer views on the fairness or unfairness of parental disciplinary practices, and can differentiate among them. Further, not all forms of parental discipline were viewed by preschoolers as unfair. Yet it has to be appreciated that the vignettes employed here were adapted for younger children, hence they may not have appeared as negative as in studies involving older children and adults. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Discipline; Fairness; Emotional maltreatment; Preschoolers; Perceptions of maternal behavior

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Introduction

Parental discipline and its effectiveness have been explored from the socialization standpoint for some time (Hoffman, 1970). More recently, with increasing awareness of the issue of child abuse, a perspective that considers discipline as potentially abusive has emerged. This development has moved the field from its preoccupation with the parental viewpoint to the child's welfare vantage point. Aside from how children evaluate different practices and react to them, there has been increasing interest in extreme forms of discipline. Practices that ignore the recipient child's needs, are arbitrary or discriminatory, are more recently seen to fall into the domain of child abuse. It is of course well recognized that disciplinary practices vary considerably across social and cultural groups (Abney, 1996), and across time (Straus, 1994). What might have been considered standard practices 30 years ago, may be judged as harsh and unacceptable within the current zeitgeist.

Despite such considerations, and the relative fuzziness of evaluating practices in the middle of the disciplinary continuum, there is little doubt that some practices are seen as harsh, vindictive, punitive, and devoid of concern for the child's welfare by most cultures. Further, Burnett (1993) provides findings by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPA), conducted in 1991, which showed that the public is yearly becoming less tolerant and accepting of parental behaviors that are detrimental to children's welfare, such as yelling or swearing at them, ignoring their needs, and generally of behaviors that are psychologically "toxic" to children. Furthermore, the need to provide clearer definitions and frames of reference for what constitutes psychological as well as other forms of maltreatment has been stressed by many authors (Hart & Brassard, 1991; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998).

With the different emphasis on the parental versus the child's perspective, there is a corresponding difference in the source of data. While parents and their views are the source of information for research on traditional socialization studies, in the child abuse literature it is evident that, since the children are the recipients of maltreatment, it is their viewpoint that must be sought. Yet, as Straus et al. (1998) point out, most research studies have employed the parents' views in determining what is harmful to children or the practices they engage in vis-a-vis their children. Research on the children's perspective of parental discipline is scarce. In an early study, Siegal and Cowen (1984) presented participants between the ages of 5 and 19 with descriptions of five disruptive behaviors and subsequent maternal disciplinary techniques. They were: induction, physical punishment, love withdrawal, and permissiveness. Siegal and Cowen found that participants' evaluations depended on the type of maternal intervention and of disobedient behavior as well as on the participant's age: participants favored induction with mild physical punishment. Not unexpectedly, a decline in favorable ratings with age was found for physical punishment but not for induction. More recently, Barnett, Quackenbush, and Sinisi (1996) examined the issue of effectiveness, by looking at the types of discipline 2nd graders, 6th graders, high school students, and college undergraduates perceived as good deterrents of future child transgressions. Between power assertion, love withdrawal, and induction, power assertion was seen by the child participants as a better deterrent for a son, while induction was rated as more effective in suppressing a daughter's transgressions.

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