



Research article

Transnationalism, parenting, and child disciplinary practices of African immigrants in Alberta, Canada



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ABSTRACT

Child discipline remains a topic of public health interest across the globe. Despite this enduring interest, very little is known about the child disciplinary practices of African immigrants in Canada. This paper explores the disciplinary practices of African immigrant parents in Alberta, a Canadian province with a recent surge in the population of African immigrants. Employing a critical ethnographic methodology, informed by transnational theory, we collected data through in-depth qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of African community leaders ($n = 14$), African immigrant parents ($n = 32$), policymakers ($n = 2$), and health and immigrant settlement workers ($n = 10$). As members of the African immigrant community, we were deeply immersed in the research settings, which afforded us the opportunity to collect pertinent observational data in the form of reflexive notes. Thematic analysis of the data revealed child disciplinary approaches that incorporate Canadian and African parenting practices, as well as practices that appear somewhat unique to this demographic. We found that African immigrant parents used corporal discipline, persuasive discipline, and a hybrid of the two, as well as emerging practices involving transnational fostering and emotional isolation of children who persistently misbehaved. These practices, in their totality, appeared to be influenced by the transnational experiences of parents and precepts that are traceable to Canada's legal and educational systems. We present theoretical, policy, and service implications of our findings, including a recommendation to incorporate sociocultural dimensions of child discipline into Canadian child welfare policies and practices.

1. Introduction

The goal of child discipline is to instill acceptable behavior, values, and a sense of self-control (UNICEF, 2010). However, the strategies employed to achieve this goal vary considerably across cultures, families, and individuals, with distinctions often drawn between corporal and non-corporal methods of discipline (Clark, 2004; Douglas, 2006; UNICEF, 2010). Child discipline has thus

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become one of the most contentious topics in academic and policy discourses across the globe, more so in light of its public health implications. Corporal discipline involving spanking and pinching, but also more severe practices as kicking and slapping (Meinck, Cosma, Mikton, & Baban, 2017), has already received widespread condemnation from children's rights advocates, due to its tendency to produce negative social and health outcomes. The existing literature points to a causal link between corporal discipline and aggressive, antisocial, criminal, and delinquent behaviors among children (Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2014; Lorber & Slep, 2015). The health impacts of corporal discipline are also burdensome, and include bodily injury, depression, mental illness, cognitive problems, and suicidal ideations (Font & Cage, 2018; Pierce et al., 2017).

Aided by evidence of adverse social and health impacts, children's rights advocates have been successful in pushing for legislation that outlaws corporal discipline in 50 countries (as of 2016), including immigrant-receiving countries such as Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands, and Norway (Lansford et al., 2017). In 2003, child rights activists in Canada attempted to follow a similar path when the Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law brought before the Supreme Court a landmark case seeking to secure a ban on corporal discipline (Bailey, 2003). The Foundation's action, known as the "spanking case," challenged the constitutionality of Section 4.3 of the *Criminal Code of Canada*, which permits parents and teachers' discretionary use of reasonable corrective force in matters of child discipline (Bailey, 2003). Part of Section 4.3 of the *Criminal Code* states that "Every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances." The Foundation sought a declaration on whether the exemption of parents and teachers from criminal sanctions in matters of child discipline contravenes children's rights to protection under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Although the court ruled in favor of parents' right to use correctional force, the case has created uncertainties, particularly among immigrant families, around what is and is not acceptable child discipline. This ambiguity persists, despite the Supreme Court's attempt in 2004 to clarify the meaning of reasonable "corrective force." The criteria defining reasonable corrective force, as contained in the court ruling, have been provided elsewhere in the literature (Durrant, Fallon, Lefebvre, & Allan, 2017).

Despite the efforts of children's rights advocates and the subsequent promulgation of laws banning its use in several countries, corporal discipline is still common in some cultures (Kolhatkar & Berkowitz, 2014), and milder forms of the practice have received support from key influential authors. Baumrind (1997), for example, argues that non-abusive forms of corporal discipline are unlikely to generate long-term adverse consequences. Rather, such practices may serve to assert parental authority and address child misbehaviors in the short-term, while providing a basis for long-term cultivation of acceptable values when combined with appropriate conversation. Baumrind has therefore called for a clear distinction between child abuse and corrective, non-abusive corporal discipline. Wilson (2002) has been more assertive in his support of this stance, declaring corporal discipline to be a more effective deterrent against child misbehaviors. He goes further to suggest that children subjected to corporal discipline are quicker to reform and less likely to reoffend, since fear of physical pain deters misbehavior. To Wilson (2002), the backlash against corporal discipline is hypocritical, since pain from corporal discipline is not more invasive of children's personhood than persuasive methods that indoctrinate, shame, and rob children of their sense of self. Larzelere (1996) also reviewed studies on non-abusive corporal discipline and countered the popular view that the practice produces predominantly adverse social and health outcomes for children. Of the 35 studies reviewed, 9 were found to contain beneficial child outcomes, 12 had detrimental outcomes, and 14 had neutral outcomes, suggesting that proposals for a worldwide ban of corporal discipline have overstated their case. Larzelere further argues that the research that reports predominantly detrimental outcomes tends to conflate abusive and non-abusive forms of corporal discipline. Research favoring non-abusive corporal discipline has not eluded the attention of lawmakers. In 1999, the states of Arkansas and Arizona passed legislation affirming parents and teachers' rights to use non-abusive corporal discipline (Straus, 2001). Counter-criticism of the concept of non-abusive corporal discipline includes arguments suggesting that all forms of physical punishment, regardless of severity, can have negative implications for children's development (see Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Winstok, 2014), including long-lasting psychological damage (Clark, 2004). Recent studies have also linked spanking, considered by many to be non-abusive, to poor cognitive performance and adverse adult mental health, behavioral, and social outcomes (Afifi et al., 2017; Ferguson, 2013; Sarmiento, Denice, & Rudolf, 2017). Even threats of hitting or insults, with no obvious physical pain, may still have the effect of contributing to mental disorders in adulthood (Taillieu, Brownridge, Sareen, & Afifi, 2016). Davis (1996) describes such verbal threats as a form of 'aggressive communication' that has the unintended consequence of producing 'psychological pain.'

Child discipline thus remains a highly controversial topic (Baumrind, 1996; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), particularly for immigrant groups whose worldviews and cultural experiences may render them less likely to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive discipline, as defined in Western legal and regulatory frameworks. Much of the controversy surrounding child discipline seems to revolve around cultural desirability of specific child outcomes. In Western cultures, where cultivating a sense of autonomy is critically important and desirable (Yagmurulu & Sanson, 2009), persuasive disciplinary methods tend to have wider resonance among parents, as opposed to non-Western, collectivist cultures that use corporal discipline as a means to enforce compliance with established norms and traditions (Pearson & Rao, 2003). However, these cultural distinctions can be blurry for immigrants as they juggle traditional and Western parenting values (Kwak, 2003). Some parents may adopt the parenting values and practices of the host society, while others may seek to maintain their traditional practices (Yagmurulu & Sanson, 2009). A third group, we suggest, may seek to incorporate both traditional and Western practices.

In Canada, the issue of child discipline can be very complicated for immigrant families, where contradictory laws both permit and prohibit certain disciplinary practices. For example, while the *Criminal Code* permits the use of reasonable force under certain circumstances, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* seems to be at odds with such provisions. Even in the absence of such legal contradictions, the determination of "reasonable force" remains a qualitative judgment. In addition to these complexities, immigrant and refugee families face numerous challenges that affect the way they raise their children. Newcomer families are more likely than

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