

African American Mothers' Self-Described Discipline Strategies With Young Children in 1992 and 2012

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In this qualitative descriptive study, 30 young, unmarried, low-income African American mothers in Memphis, TN, were interviewed in 2011–2012 about their discipline strategies with their 12- to 19-month-old children. Using content analyses, their strategies were described and compared with those from a similar sample in 1992. Findings suggest both continuity and change during that 20-year period. More mothers in 2011–2012 described the use of distraction and time out, suggesting a wider variety of strategies than were used in 1992. These findings may help clinicians to better understand disciplinary methods in young low-income African American mothers such as these in Memphis. Approaching mothers in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner will help them focus on effective, developmentally appropriate strategies consistent with their own parenting goals. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2015) 29, 28-37.

KEY WORDS

African American, children, discipline, behavior problems, parenting

Recent research on parenting in African American (AA) families has resulted in a more nuanced understanding of parenting processes in this population. Most of the evidence has come from higher risk, low-income, urban AA families, often headed by never-married adolescents (Ispa et al., 2013; Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001; Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, 2008; Oberlander & Black, 2011). Within this higher risk group, however, questions still remain about how to best tailor

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Conflicts of interest: Harriet J. Kitzman reports that the sample for this qualitative study was drawn from children involved in a randomized clinical trial with longitudinal follow up (R01 DA 021624), for which she has served as co-PI.

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interventions and preventive efforts. Studies of discipline and control have often focused on specific forms of discipline such as spanking and seldom have included AA parents' own descriptions of their disciplinary strategies. A qualitative analysis was recently conducted toward this purpose, using archival data from 1992 interviews of mothers with very young children in the Memphis New Mothers Study, in Memphis, Tennessee (LeCuyer, Christensen, Kearney & Kitzman, 2011). The most common disciplinary strategy described by mothers was a combination of verbal teaching or telling in conjunction with nonabusive physical strategies. Those data were collected in 1992, however, leaving questions about present-day mothers' disciplinary practices and whether changes have occurred since then.

This article presents data from a second qualitative study conducted with 30 young, low-income, unmarried, urban AA mothers in Memphis, Tennessee, in 2011–2012. A qualitative descriptive design was again used to describe and summarize mothers' strategies and reasons for their use of these strategies and to present examples in their own words. Percentages of mothers describing disciplinary strategies or themes are presented and compared with the 1992 sample. These data may further assist professionals as they seek to build rapport with, and provide support for, present-day mothers seeking assistance with their parenting skills in relation to discipline.

METHOD

Sample

Data were obtained through interviews conducted in 2011–2012 with 30 AA low-income mothers in Memphis, TN. All participants were daughters of mothers in the longitudinal Memphis New Mothers Study, a clinical trial of nurse visitation services (Kitzman et al., 1997). Participants were recruited purposively from a 17-year follow-up study based on their infants' age until a sample of 30 participants was obtained. Because not all mothers in the larger sample in 1992 were interviewed, participants in the current sample were not necessarily daughters of those mothers interviewed in 1992 (LeCuyer et al., 2011). Of the participants in the current sample, 27 had been infants of mothers who participated in the low-dose intervention group in 1992 (no nurse visitation), and three had been infants in the higher dose group (received nurse visitation prenatally and through 24 months; Kitzman et al., 1997). The larger number of participants from the no-visitation group in the current sample was most likely due to two reasons: fewer first-generation mothers were originally assigned to the relatively more expensive nurse-visitation group, based on power analyses and prior efficacy of the intervention (Olds et al., 2004); and more second-generation mothers from the no-visitation group happened to meet inclusion criteria (based on their infant's age) during the

current study recruitment period. All participants in the current sample (from both intervention groups) had participated in follow-up data collection in the larger study when first-born infants were aged 4.5, 6, 9, 12, and 17 + years. Participants from both intervention groups described similar strategies, and thus all were included in the analysis.

In the current sample, 23 mothers had been first-born infants in the 1992 study, six were second-born, and one mother was third-born. All mothers were unmarried and had a low income ($m = 37\%$ of poverty level; median = 25%; based on the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau), and most mothers had some high school education ($m = 11.3$ years of education; range, 9 to 12 years). At the time of the current interview, mothers' ages averaged 19.1 years (range, 16 to 20 years), and their infants were aged 11 to 24 months. In the 1992 sample, mothers had mean incomes at 46% of poverty level (median, 31%; U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). Their average age was 17.74 years (13 to 27 years), and their infants were aged 12 to 19 months. They had an average of 10 years of education (range, 6 to 15 years).

The sample size of 30 participants for the new set of interviews was smaller than that of the original interview group ($n = 51$), raising the possibility that the second sample might be inadequate to achieve saturation of themes. No new themes about discipline emerged from the last few transcripts, however, indicating that saturation or redundancy was achieved. A standard interview was again used, including questions producing "shadowed data" (i.e., mothers were asked about and commented on other mothers' behavior), tapping into views and behaviors beyond those of the 30 participants (Morse, 2000).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using a semistructured 1-hour interview administered by research staff in project offices in downtown Memphis. The setting and interview were very similar to the 1992 interview (LeCuyer et al., 2011) with the addition of several standard prompts. These prompts elicited details about disciplinary methods, including whether participants saw punishment as different from discipline and how effective their disciplinary methods were. As in the 1992 interview, beginning questions focused on mothering and babies in general, feeding, and sleeping practices, followed by questions about discipline and play. Analyses focused on answers to seven questions about children's behavioral regulation and discipline and two questions about play, because play was often mentioned in the context of discipline. A final question asked how participants would respond to a vignette about an active 1-year-old who had destroyed some of a young mother's personal property (see the Appendix). The first author trained three female African American project interviewers for this interview

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