



Parental harsh discipline in mainland China: Prevalence, frequency, and coexistence[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the prevalence, frequency, and coexistence of psychological aggression (PA), corporal punishment (CP), and severe physical abuse (SPA) in mainland China. Using a sample of 2,518 father–mother dyads of 3–15-year-old children, the findings revealed that parental harsh discipline was prevalent in mainland China. The rates of harsh discipline in the current study fell in the middle of the ranges of rates found in other studies. Harsh discipline was most likely directed at boys or children aged 7 years and committed by mothers, young fathers, or high and low socioeconomic status (SES) parents. The prevalence of maternal and paternal PA and CP declined with the children's age. Maternal and paternal SPA first increased and then decreased with child age. The frequency of the three types of maternal and paternal harsh discipline fluctuated depending on the age of the children. In addition, approximately 50% of the mothers and fathers who reported using severe forms of disciplinary practices also engaged in less severe forms of harsh disciplinary practices against their children. SPA generally coexisted with CP and PA, and CP was usually accompanied by PA; however, PA was more likely to occur independently compared with CP and SPA. Moreover, maternal harsh discipline coexisted with paternal harsh discipline to some extent. The coexistence decreased with increasing severity of parental harsh discipline and differed according to child gender. These findings highlight the importance of studying these three types of parental harsh discipline simultaneously and intervening in harsh discipline by mothers and fathers within the same family.

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Introduction

Many children throughout the world experience various forms of parental harsh discipline (e.g., psychological aggression, corporal punishment, and physical abuse) (Gershoff, 2008; Ghatte, Hazel, Creighton, Finch, & Field, 2003; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Tang, 2006). Although considerable research has documented the prevalence, frequency, and associated factors of parental harsh discipline, research examining this issue is still rare in China, especially in mainland China, where harsh parental discipline is one of the most prevalent disciplinary techniques (Lansford et al., 2005; Xing, Wang, Zhang, He, & Zhang, 2011; Yen et al., 2008).

Traditional Chinese cultures tend to perceive harsh parenting behaviors as an indication of parental involvement, concern, and love, as indicated by the Chinese proverb, “Beating and scolding is the emblem of love” (Chao, 1994; Hou, Yu, Ting, Sze, & Fang, 2011; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000). Therefore, Chinese parents may adopt more harsh disciplinary

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practices to motivate their children to achieve high academic, social, and moral goals and the culturally valued goal of filial piety (Chao, 1994; Lin & Fu, 1990; Tang, 1998). Several studies in Chinese samples, however, have shown that parental harsh discipline may lead to negative effects on children, such as aggression, delinquency, anxiety, and depression (Gershoff et al., 2010; Xing et al., 2011; Xing & Wang, 2012). Given this evidence regarding the negative effects of parental harsh discipline, Chinese parents who frequently employ harsh discipline should be encouraged to shift from harsh disciplinary practices to other, nonviolent forms of child discipline.

It should be noted that research on issues surrounding parental harsh discipline in mainland China has mainly focused on physical aggression (Ma, Chen, Xiao, Wang, & Zhang, 2011; Xing et al., 2011; Xing & Wang, 2012). In contrast, studies on parental psychological aggression are relatively limited (Liu, Wang, & Xing, 2011). Furthermore, previous studies on parental physical aggression that have been conducted in mainland China have had a major focus on physical aggression toward elementary school students (Ma et al., 2011; Xing et al., 2011; Xing & Wang, 2012), and research examining physical aggression toward children in earlier (or later) developmental periods is scarce. Therefore, the main aim of the current study was to explore the basic characteristics of different types of parental harsh discipline among a broad age range of children in mainland China.

Belsky's (1984, 1993) process model of parenting has indicated that parental harsh discipline is associated with individual and relational influences such as the characteristics of the child, characteristics of the parent, and characteristics of the family. These characteristics are known to be associated with the use of harsh discipline by Western parents (Gámez-Guadix, Straus, Carrobes, Muñoz-Rivas, & Almendros, 2010; McKee et al., 2007; Pinderhughes, Dorge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Straus & Field, 2003; Straus & Stewart, 1999) and therefore might also be associated with harsh discipline by Chinese parents. Hence, we also examined the extent to which parental harsh discipline varies based on the characteristics of parents, children, and families, such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status (SES). The information on how the demographic risk factors could influence parental harsh discipline can enhance our understanding of the social structural determinants of parental harsh discipline in ecological models and also provide empirical data for interventions designed to reduce the risk of parental harsh discipline. For example, if there are gender, age, or SES differences in the prevalence or frequency of parental harsh discipline, steps to reduce harsh discipline could be structured to reflect the life circumstances and culture of these groups.

According to Straus and colleagues (1998), parental harsh discipline includes psychological aggression (PA), corporal punishment (CP), severe physical abuse (SPA), and very severe physical abuse. It is important to recognize that each type of parental harsh discipline rarely occurs in isolation as a "pure" form of parental aggression and is often combined with other discipline strategies (Gershoff, 2002; Tang, 2006). Indeed, Miller-Perrin, Perrin, and Kocur (2009) provided evidence of a high correlation between parental PA, CP, and SPA (>0.55), which is consistent with previous research showing that psychological aggression frequently overlaps with physical aggression and that corporal punishment is often combined with threats and other verbally violent behaviors (Gershoff, 2002; Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980; Jackson, Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn, & Blake, 1998; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991). However, few studies have examined whether and to what extent the three types of parental harsh discipline coexist in China. Therefore, the second aim of the present study was to explore the coexistence of different types of parental harsh discipline.

From a systems perspective, a family is a complex system composed of a set of interrelated elements, including not only individuals but also dyads (e.g., husband–wife, mother–child, father–child dyads; Lewis, 2005). Concerning the relationship between different types of dyads, the spillover hypothesis suggests that different dyadic relationships are interrelated with one another within the same family (Barnett, Deng, Mills-Koonce, Willoughby, & Cox, 2008; Cummings & Davies, 2002). To date, it has been established that the influences of a spouse through his or her contributions to disciplinary practices are critical to the other spouse's disciplinary practices. For example, Harper, Brown, Arias, and Brody (2006) found a positive association between paternal CP and maternal CP. Similarly, Capaldi, Pears, Kerr, and Owen (2008) also found that father's harsh disciplinary practices were predicted by the mother's negative disciplinary practices. However, the abovementioned research suggesting the coexistence of maternal and paternal harsh discipline was conducted in Western settings; little is known about this issue in Chinese societies. Hence, the third aim of the present study was to explore the coexistence of maternal and paternal harsh discipline in China.

In summary, the current study involved the independent collection of data from a large sample of mothers and fathers with 3–15-year-old children and the examination of the prevalence, frequency, and coexistence of three types of maternal and paternal harsh discipline. This study offers a more comprehensive description of the characteristics of parental harsh discipline in mainland China, enriches previous studies with Chinese samples, and promotes cross-cultural comparisons.

Method

Procedure

The children and their parents were recruited from two public kindergartens and two public schools in the city of Jinan, located in Shandong Province in eastern China. After obtaining parental informed consent, two packets (one for the mother and one for the father) containing the parental questionnaires were sent home with the children. In the attached instructions, the parents were directed to complete the questionnaires separately at home and not to share their answers. The parents

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