



Predictors of discipline severity among at-risk toddlers

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ABSTRACT

Parental discipline is a contentious and debated topic among scholars, practitioners, and individual parents. There has been a large amount of scholarly research investigating causes, correlates, and consequences of punishment, but most of this research has focused on corporal punishment (CP) specifically. In reality, parents often use a number of discipline tactics, including verbal reprimands, removal of privileges, distraction, “time-out”, and other forms of physical discipline. The current study investigates family, parent, and child characteristics that predict the use of discipline tactics of distraction, harsh verbal punishment, and CP among young toddlers in at-risk sample, and assesses the effect of parenting classes as modified by demographic risk. Results indicate that the risk of choosing CP over less severe discipline tactics is increased with more demographic risk factors present. Parenting interventions such as attending parenting classes or group socialization events also reduced the likelihood of choosing CP over less severe discipline. The impact of parenting classes was greater among low risk parents. Implications and future directions from these results are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Parental discipline is a contentious and debated topic among scholars, practitioners, and individual parents. There has been a large amount of scholarly research investigating causes, correlates, and consequences of punishment, but most of this research has focused on corporal punishment (CP) specifically. There is a large body of research linking the use of CP with negative outcomes for children, including antisocial behavior such as aggression and delinquency (Brennar & Fox, 1998; Grogan-Kaylor, 2005a, 2005b; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000), depressive symptoms (Straus & Kantor, 1994; Turner & Muller, 2004), suicidal ideation (Straus & Kantor, 1994), and psychological distress (Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). In reality, parents often use a number of discipline tactics, including verbal reprimands, removal of privileges, distraction, “time-out”, and other forms of physical discipline. While more recent research on CP has been more mixed (Ferguson, 2013; Morris & Gibson, 2011), there is reason to believe that the use of these tactics may be more harmful to children than other forms of discipline. Despite the prevalence of this research, very few studies have investigated predictors of CP compared to other discipline tactics. The current study investigates family, parent, and child characteristics that predict the use of discipline tactics ranging from distraction to physical punishment among young toddlers in at-risk sample, specifically focusing on the effect of taking a parenting class and how this effect may vary by level of demographic risk.

Parental discipline can be conceptualized in several ways. Some researchers identify “styles” of parenting in relation to discipline. One of the most well-known of these is Baumrind’s (1966) typology of authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting/neglectful parents. This

typology focuses on the characteristics of responsiveness and demandingness that parents display; an authoritative parent is considered the most desirable type, and is characterized by high responsiveness and high demandingness (i.e. a warm, loving parent who also monitors behavior closely). Other typologies include Symonds (1939), Becker (1964), and Schaefer (1959), all who developed categories describing similar concepts of warmth/acceptance/love coupled with control versus hostility/rejection and little or extreme control. While these typologies are helpful, they leave room for variation in actual behavior within the parenting style. For this reason some researchers have proposed a greater focus on parenting tactics in particular (Socolar, 1997). It is plausible that some authoritative parents may use detrimental forms of discipline at times. As a result, there is a greater need to understand these specific behaviors and their causes and consequences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Predictors of punishment

Several studies have investigated predictors of the use of corporal punishment but very few include other forms of punishment. In general, these studies on CP find that younger children (Dietz, 2000; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007) and boys (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Dietz, 2000; Giles-Sims et al., 1995) are more likely to be spanked. Additionally, low-income (Day et al., 1998; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007), single (Day et al., 1998; Giles-Sims et al., 1995), and African-American (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007) parents are more likely to report using corporal punishment with their children.

A few past studies have included forms of discipline other than corporal punishment. Socolar, Savage, and Evans (2007) investigated the prevalence of many types of discipline using a sample of toddlers between 12 and 19 months old. They were interested in describing changes in discipline over about a two year period. Results indicated that for most parents, discipline increased during this time frame; the most common types of discipline reported were monitoring, verbal communication, and distracting (at Time 1). They also found that corporal punishment, verbal communication, timeout, removing privileges, negative demeanor, and sternness increased from Time 1 to Time 2. Socolar, Winsor, Hunter, Catellter, and Kotch (1999) also found that among older children (7–9), limit setting was the most commonly used discipline practice. Their results indicated that spanking was the most common secondary response to misbehavior; depending upon the type of misbehavior the primary responses included spanking, limit setting, and teaching or verbal assertion.

There is some support in the literature that parents who attend classes and interact with others through socialization can impact parenting in a positive way, especially with at-risk samples (Deutscher, Fewell, & Gross, 2006; Hautmann et al., 2009; Mayer & Blome, 2013). Some of the most important types of interventions are those that target emotional responsivity, especially on the part of the mother. Findings consistently indicate that programs focusing on quality of interaction between the mother and child may be the most effective at enhancing child development and reducing negative behavioral patterns (Deutscher et al., 2006). Unfortunately there are few studies of specific types of curricula.

As discussed above, many of the predictors of punishment identified by previous research are indicators of an “at-risk” household (i.e. low income, low education, single parent households, etc.). The individuals in the current study are all considered high-risk by many standards, although this study assesses differences within this group. Parents who are in high-risk categories such as these tend to have less knowledge of child development (Osofsky, Hann, & Peebles, 1993; Roosa, 1983; Stevens, 1984). Therefore, there is reason to believe that the effects of these types of interventions may vary based upon risk status.

2.2. Outcomes of punishment

As in the literature on predictors, a large amount of research investigates the outcomes of the use of CP, but little on other forms of discipline. Several meta-analyses assess the effect of CP on behavioral outcomes and conclude that CP has substantial (but small) negative effects on children (Gershoff, 2002; Paolucci & Violato, 2004). For an updated review of this literature, see Ferguson (2013), who concludes that the long-term effect of CP is relatively trivial.

The meta-analysis conducted by Larzelere and Kuhn (2005) differed from these others in one important way: they attempted to estimate the effect of CP as compared to at least one other disciplinary tactic. Few studies have included multiple discipline tactics as predictors, which limited their sample size to some degree, but nevertheless allowed the authors to evaluate impacts of multiple forms of discipline against one another. They found that conditional spanking (defined as spanking after refusal for compliance with a time-out for a 2–6 year old; in other words, a secondary response) was favorable for gaining compliance over 10 out of 13 alternative discipline techniques. This type of CP was also most successful when administered in a controlled way, rather than in anger. The outcomes of customary spanking (defined as what most consider “normative CP”) were on balance the same as any alternative tactic. Lastly, the authors did not find more long-term negative outcomes associated with physical punishment as compared to other discipline tactics, but their sample was somewhat limited because of the criteria they imposed for inclusion (must have included at least one other discipline tactic). Overall, their results indicate that CP is most detrimental when used in a more severe manner; but at the

same time the use of CP did not promote any prosocial or positive behaviors (Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005).

A few studies have assessed this by looking at discipline style rather than individual tactics. Krevans and Gibbs (1996) found that more inductive methods of discipline rather than methods that emphasized power differentials were associated with prosocial behavior. Additionally, Huang, Caughy, Lee, Miller, and Genevro (2009) found that mothers who used more comforting and less punitive styles of discipline had higher quality interaction with their children. There is also some research indicating that the use of harsh verbal punishment techniques can be more harmful than CP. Evans, Simons, and Simons (2012) found that harsh verbal punishment was a significant predictor of externalizing behavior problems, and this effect was mediated by different mechanisms based upon gender. Additionally, using CP may sometimes be effective if used under the right circumstances, especially if the alternative is little to no discipline at all (a more permissive style of parenting). Although harsh methods of discipline can be harmful, parents who are too lax and “laissez-faire” toward their child’s behavior can also impact their development of behavior problems (Parent et al., 2011; Rinaldi & Howe, 2012). Until we have more studies that investigate the use of CP in comparison to other discipline choices, we will be limited in our understanding of these effects.

2.3. The current study

Given that we know there are potential negative outcomes associated with the use of corporal punishment, it is important that we understand what factors may influence a parent to choose another discipline tactic over physical punishment. Understanding these factors more fully can help to promote the use of other discipline tactics that do not rely on physical actions, such as distraction, “time-out”, or loss of privileges. The current study attempts to do this by predicting severity of discipline using parent, family, and child characteristics. Furthermore, the sample represents a group of individuals considered at high-risk based on a number of indicators — including poverty status, teenage parenthood, single parent status, lack of education/employment, and receipt of cash assistance (Raikes, Vogel, & Love, 2012). Finally, this study also investigates the importance of parenting classes in determining discipline choices, and whether this is conditioned on level of risk status within this group. It is hypothesized that findings will corroborate the existing literature on predictors of physical punishment such as demographic risk, child characteristics, and parenting interventions but add to this literature by specifically comparing the choice of physical punishment to other forms of discipline. The current study hypothesizes that there will be differential effects of parenting interventions based upon demographic risk level, specifically predicting that those with lesser risk factors will benefit more from parenting interventions.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Data from the current study come from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation (EHSRE) 1996–2010 study (Administration for Children and Families, 2002). This study focused on 3001 low-income families across the United States. These families were chosen from those who applied to receive Early Head Start (EHS) services between July 1996 and September 1998. The study was designed to investigate the effects of EHS services. Although, participants are not representative of the national EHS programs, analyses have indicated that key variables are reflective of EHS programs as a whole during this time (Faldowski, Chazan-Cohen, Love & Vogel, 2012).

Participants came from 17 EHS sites around the country. Families were randomly selected to participate in either the EHS services or usual community services in their local area. For a complete description of the EHS data, sampling, and methodology see Faldowski, Chazan-

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