

# Punishment and Reward in Parental Discipline for Children Aged 5 to 6 Years: Prevalence and Groups at Risk

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Received for publication January 20, 2014; accepted June 30, 2014.

## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** In this study we examined the use and predictors of different discipline practices by parents of children aged 5 to 6 years.

**METHODS:** We obtained cross-sectional data for a nationally representative Dutch sample of children aged 5 to 6 years within the setting of routine well-child visits provided to the entire population. A total of 1630 children participated (response rate, 84%). Before the visit, parents completed a questionnaire with questions about their approach to discipline (punishment and rewards). Chi-square tests and logistic regression analyses were used to examine associations between discipline practices and child, parent, and family factors.

**RESULTS:** Parental punishment prevalence was 21.9% for spanking and 80.3% for other punishment practices, such as time-outs. The prevalence of rewards as a discipline strategy was 32.2% for granting privileges and 86.3% for cuddling/complimenting. Multivariate logistic regression analyses showed

that spanking was more likely in families in which the mothers have low and medium levels of education and in families of non-Dutch ethnicity. Other punishment practices (eg, time-outs, verbal reprimands, and holding) were more likely in families of Dutch ethnicity. Granting privileges was more likely in families of non-Dutch ethnicity, who lived in large cities, whose income was below the poverty level, in unemployed families, and in small families. Cuddling and complimenting were more likely in families with a high maternal educational level, in families of Dutch ethnicity, and in small families.

**CONCLUSIONS:** These findings show the importance of considering social and economic factors when identifying and supporting parents with parenting/rearing challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** children; discipline; parenting practices

**ACADEMIC PEDIATRICS** 2015;15:96–102

## WHAT'S NEW

The discipline strategies spanking (to punish) and granting privileges (to reward) were more frequently used in families characterized by a number of indicators of societal adversity such as low income, low educational level, immigrant status, and unemployment.

GOOD PARENTING IS pivotal for the health and development of children.<sup>1–4</sup> An important aspect of parenting is the approach to disciplining children. The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family states that an effective discipline strategy must contain 3 elements: 1) a learning environment characterized by positive, supportive parent–child relationships, 2) proactive teaching and strengthening desired behaviors, and 3) reactive practices (time-out, removal of privileges) and punishment (eg, verbal reprimands) for decreasing or eliminating undesired behaviors. The second issue entails rewarding, which is also embedded in the wider array of techniques to modify child behavior.<sup>5</sup> Parents might use various discipline approaches: spanking or cuddling, for example. Generally, these approaches can be classified as

either punishment or reward practices. ‘Punishment’ means parental practices that aim to eliminate undesired behaviors. Examples are time-outs, removing privileges, yelling, and spanking. Yelling and spanking have been described as aversive strategies by the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>5</sup> because of the harmful effects.<sup>3,4,6</sup> However, the results of high-quality well controlled longitudinal studies indicate a trivial to very small but significant association between spanking and negative outcomes.<sup>7</sup> ‘Rewarding’ means parental practices that aim to strengthen desired behaviors. Examples are cuddling, complimenting, or granting privileges (watching television, sweets, etc).

Effective and efficient parenting support might benefit from information about the prevalence of different discipline practices. Studies of discipline practices have focused mainly on corporal punishment. These studies showed that parents particularly use corporal punishment, such as spanking, in children aged 2 to 3 years,<sup>8</sup> in first born children,<sup>9</sup> in children with a difficult temperament,<sup>9</sup> and in boys rather than girls.<sup>10,11</sup>

Turning to parental and family characteristics, evidence shows that younger parents,<sup>8–14</sup> lower socioeconomic status, more parental stress,<sup>9</sup> and marital status

(unmarried)<sup>13,15</sup> were associated with more frequent harsh disciplining. A fair amount of evidence suggests that African American parents used corporal punishment more often than Caucasian parents in the United States.<sup>6,9,11,13</sup> Little evidence has been obtained about discipline practices other than corporal punishment. We found 2 studies that investigated child, parent, and family factors associated with the use of other punishment practices for young children (4–35 months<sup>13</sup> and 12–19 months<sup>12</sup>). The first study showed that parent frustration was associated with more use of toy removal, time-outs, and explaining. Parental ethnicity (Spanish-speaking Hispanic ethnicity compared with Caucasian parents in the United States) was associated with less use of toy removal and time-outs.<sup>13</sup> The second study showed that marital status, income, and education were not predictors of any discipline practices such as verbal communication, removing privileges, time-out, or ignoring.<sup>12</sup> Studies of reward as a discipline strategy are entirely lacking.

The main aim of this study was to investigate the prevalence and predictors (child, parent, and family factors) of different discipline practices in parents of children aged 5 to 6 years. We oversampled ethnic minorities to make a proper assessment of the associations with ethnicity.

## METHODS

Data were collected between October 2002 and May 2003 within the framework of the routine preventive health assessments that are provided regularly to all Dutch children. The local Medical Ethics Committee of Leiden University Medical Center approved the study. Informed consent was not necessary; the data were anonymized before being provided to the research institute. Anonymized data can be provided by TNO to researchers on request.

## SAMPLE

The sample was obtained in a 2-stage procedure. In the first stage, a random sample of 15 Dutch Child Healthcare Services was taken from a total of 40 services. In the second, each Child Healthcare Service provided a random sample of approximately 100 children for the age group 5 to 6 years (second year of elementary school). Child Healthcare Services in 2 large cities were each asked to provide an additional sample of 200 children from the largest ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands: Moroccan, Turkish, Surinam, and Antillean. Of the parents of 1939 children (5 and 6 years old) who were eligible, 1630 participated (response rate, 84%). We excluded parents of children with incomplete parent-reported data, which resulted in a sample of 1399 parents of children (5 and 6 years old). Representativeness of the Dutch population was assessed by comparing our figures with national figures of Statistics Netherlands. The sample was representative of the total sample and representative of the Dutch population in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity.

## PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was mailed to parents along with the standard invitation for the preventive health assessment routinely

offered to all Dutch children. This questionnaire included questions about discipline practices. The completed questionnaire was returned to the Child Healthcare Physician (CHP) in a sealed envelope. The CHP forwarded the envelopes to the research institute without opening them.

The CHP then took a routine history and physically assessed each child. The CHP recorded the background characteristics of the child and family: ethnicity, child age and gender, maternal and paternal educational level and age, employment status, family composition, family size, family income, and urbanization. The country of birth of the parents was taken as the determinant of ethnic status. The educational level of each parent was the highest degree obtained by that parent. Education level was defined as low (primary school, up to 8 years of education), medium (secondary school, up to 12 years), and high (higher vocational education and university; more than 12 years). Employment was defined as having at least one parent working. Family composition focused on the number of parents in the family (2 parents or 1 parent). Family size focused on the number of children in the family (1 child, 2 children,  $\geq 3$  children). Family income was categorized as below/at poverty level ( $< 1200$  Euros earned each month) or higher ( $\geq 1200$  Euros earned each month). Urbanization was categorized as small/rural town ( $< 250,000$  inhabitants) or large city ( $\geq 250,000$  inhabitants). All data were anonymized before being sent to the research institute.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Data about discipline practices were obtained with 2 questions in the questionnaire. Parents were asked to indicate practices they generally used to punish or reward their child.

The first question was: ‘which discipline practices do you apply if your child needs to be punished?’ Parents had the following answer options: spanking (ie, slapping), holding, time-out, sending out of the room/separating, standing in the corner, withholding something (sweets, for instance), verbal reprimands (ie, firm words), or other. The second question was ‘which discipline practices do you generally apply to reward your child?’ Parents had the following answer options: cuddling, sweets, presents, staying up longer, watching television, promise of an outing, complimenting, or other. Parents were allowed to give multiple answers to each question. Each answer option will be referred to herein as an ‘item.’

## ANALYSES

To classify the punishment and rewarding practices mentioned in the questionnaire, a homogeneity analysis by means of alternating least squares was conducted. Items with a discrimination value  $> 0.30$  on the resulting dimensions were grouped as separate disciplining strategies. The analyses resulted in the punishment dimensions ‘spanking’ (a single item: spanking) and ‘other punishment’ (items: time-out, verbal reprimands, and holding), and the reward dimensions ‘cuddling/complimenting’ (items: cuddling and complimenting) and ‘granting privileges’ (items: giving presents, watching television, and promise of an outing).

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