Effectiveness and acceptability beliefs regarding logical consequences and mild punishments

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ABSTRACT

Using hypothetical scenarios of rule-breaking situations, this study contrasted two behavioral limitation (BLIMIT) strategies that differ in terms of their connection to the transgression-induced problem (logical consequences vs. mild punishments, compared to no BLIMIT). A total of 215 children (*M* age = 10.42) and their mothers rated the effectiveness and acceptability of these strategies, when preceded by different discipline climates (autonomy-supportive [AS] vs. controlling). Mothers rated logical consequences as the most effective and acceptable strategy in both climates and perceived BLIMIT strategies more positively in AS climates. A significant interaction also revealed that all differences between BLIMIT strategies were accentuated in AS climates. Children believed that logical consequences and mild punishments were equally effective and more effective than no BLIMIT, but they rated logical consequences as more acceptable. Children also perceived BLIMIT strategies more positively in AS climates. However, for children, climates did not moderate the effect of BLIMIT strategies.

As primary authority figures, parents are entrusted with the important role of socializing their children. There are two principal goals of socialization: compliance and value internalization. While the internalization of values is crucial for the maintenance of socially acceptable behaviors in the absence of authority figures, compliance is necessary for social skill learning and the prevention of antisocial behaviors (Patterson & Fisher, 2002). While researchers (Baumrind, 2012; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Grusec & Davidov, 2010) agree that non-coercive authority exertion is an integral part of optimal parenting in the control domain of socialization, exactly what constitutes the optimal way to exert authority after a rule transgression remains unclear. Part of the dilemma is due to the fact that some authority exertion practices seem most effective to obtain compliance (e.g., power assertion), while others are best to promote value internalization (e.g., inductive reasoning, responsiveness; Baumrind, 2012; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Given that both compliance and value internalization are desirable socialization goals depending on context, it has been argued that mild punishments (i.e., unpleasant non-physical sanctions; Larzelere, Cox, & Mandara, 2013), paired with inductive reasoning (i.e.,

highlighting the effects of transgression on others) and responsiveness (i.e., being attentive to child feelings and needs), constitute the optimal way for parents to respond to rule transgressions (Baumrind, 2012). Yet, mild punishments have also been linked to negative child outcomes (Gershoff et al., 2010), which suggests that the combination of authority exertion practices presently recommended, and specifically its component that limits child behaviors, may not be optimal for child development. Additional research on alternative behavioral limitation (BLIMIT) strategies is thus imperative to unravel more optimal ones.

The present study began this investigation by examining logical consequences as a new BLIMIT strategy that seems promising for limiting children's behavioral repertoire while preventing the negative outcomes typically linked to mild punishments. Logical consequences refer to behavioral limitations that address the transgression-induced problem and require children to take responsibility for their actions (Ginott, 1965). This BLIMIT strategy was first proposed by Ginott (1965) as part of a parenting workshop that seems effective to induce positive change in school-aged children's behaviors (Joussemet, Mageau, & Koestner, 2014). However, because this workshop includes a

large number of authority exertion practices, the unique impact of logical consequences on child outcomes (perceptions or behaviors) has never been empirically tested. Importantly, this strategy has never been specifically compared to mild punishments, even though mild punishments are currently the recommended way to limit children's behaviors (e.g., Baumrind, 2012).

To determine the relative value of logical consequences and mild punishments, the present study compared these BLIMIT strategies to a no BLIMIT condition using hypothetical scenarios, and tested their impact on school-aged children's and mothers' effectiveness and acceptability beliefs. The no BLIMIT condition was operationalized as repeating the rule following persistent disobedience. Moreover, given that researchers propose that inductive reasoning and responsiveness moderate the impact of punishments (Baumrind, 2012), we crossed the three BLIMIT conditions with two discipline climates, an autonomy-supportive (AS) climate that included rationales and acknowledgement of feelings, two behaviors reflecting reasoning and responsiveness respectively, and a controlling (CTL) climate characterized by guilt-inductions and threats (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

We thus presented all three BLIMIT strategies twice in a counter-balanced order, once after AS verbalizations and once after CTL ones, for a total of six combinations of authority exertion practices. We chose this experimental design because it allowed us to systematically vary different factors that could impact mothers' and children's perceptions (Barter & Renold, 2000). Understanding these factors is important because mothers' beliefs regarding parenting practices indicate their willingness to employ these practices (Hamilton, Spinks, White, Kavanagh, & Walsh, 2016), while children's beliefs predict their compliance and internalization as well as mediate the impact of actual parenting on child outcomes (Darling, Cumsille, & Martínez, 2007; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Lansford et al., 2010).

1. BLIMIT strategies

Mild punishments and logical consequences represent two qualitatively different BLIMIT strategies. BLIMIT strategies in turn may be viewed as a subcategory of authority exertion practices that specifically limits children's behavioral repertoire, where parents take advantage of the fact that they have greater control over resources than their children to stop inappropriate behaviors and obtain appropriate ones. While some BLIMIT strategies include harsh and coercive behavioral constraints, neither mild punishments nor logical consequences are applied in a coercive fashion.

1.1. Mild punishments

In the parenting context, mild punishments refer to unpleasant non-physical behavioral constraints or deprivation of privileges, meant to either suppress undesirable behaviors or make children comply with a broken rule (Larzelere et al., 2013). Examples of mild punishments are prohibiting the use of a certain toy, forbidding participation in a given activity, or imposing chores. Usually introduced with sentences such as "*Since you did/didn't do this, you must/can't*" or "*As a punishment/consequence, you need to*", these unpleasant behavioral limitations are typically imposed to make children "mind" so that they will direct their attention to their parent's message and act accordingly (Baumrind, 2012).

Research on mild punishments has mostly focused on their impact on children's behaviors, emotions and motivations. In those specific cases where children refuse to obey, mild punishments imposed shortly after the transgression and paired with inductive reasoning have been shown to be more effective in promoting compliance than relying solely on reasoning or positive reinforcements (Patterson & Fisher, 2002). However, research also suggests that although mild punishments promote compliance, they could prevent internalization of values even

when paired with practices meant to promote this socialization goal (e.g., inductive reasoning). Specifically, mild punishments encourage children to fear parental authority (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997) and to focus more on how to please authority figures than on the values underlying parental requests (Grolnick, 2003). As such, this BLIMIT strategy encourages children to comply but for controlled reasons (e.g., to avoid losing privileges) and not for autonomous ones (e.g., self-endorsed values; Kremer, Smith, & Lawrence, 2010). There is also evidence that some forms of mild punishments (i.e., time outs) are linked to greater child anxiety, while others are not (i.e., taking away privileges; Gershoff et al., 2010). These studies suggest that mild punishments could interfere with internalization as well as have other detrimental effects on child development. Considering these potential pitfalls, identifying alternative BLIMIT strategies is crucial to better support parents in their socialization role.

1.2. Toward an alternative BLIMIT strategy

Grusec and Goodnow (1994) proposed that to promote the internalization of societal rules, authority exertion practices must be perceived as legitimate or acceptable by children. Subsequent research has focused on children's acceptability beliefs regarding verbal influence, coercive practices or parental authority in general; together, these studies provide clues on the characteristics that optimal BLIMIT strategies are likely to have. One factor that has been shown to influence children's perceptions of authority exertion practices is coercion. Specifically, children perceive coercive practices such as love withdrawal and shaming as less acceptable than the use of reasoning (Helwig, To, Wang, Liu, & Yang, 2014). As an additional factor influencing children's perceptions, research anchored in Social Domain Theory (Smetana, 2011) shows that the social domain in which the transgression occurs (i.e., conventional, prudential, moral and personal) influences the degree to which children will perceive their parents' authority as legitimate. It is now well-established that both children and teenagers perceive parental authority as illegitimate when it concerns personal issues and preferences (personal domain) but that legitimacy increases for non-personal concerns, such as another person's rights/welfare (moral domain), the child's own safety/welfare (prudential domain) and contextually determined norms (conventional domain; Smetana, Wong, Ball, & Yau, 2014). Given this research, it seems important to investigate BLIMIT strategies that are non-coercive and in domains other than the personal one.

Of particular interest for the present study, research also suggests that the presence of a logical connection between reasoning, one form of authority exertion, and the transgression-induced problem increases children's acceptability beliefs regarding this strategy. For example, school-aged children perceive reasoning that is related to the transgression's social domain (e.g., discussing the welfare of others following a moral transgression) as more acceptable than reasoning that is unrelated (e.g., discussing social conventions following a moral transgression; Nucci, 1984). Several authors also proposed that a logical connection to the transgression-induced problem is also important when it comes to BLIMIT strategies (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Accordingly, the present study focuses on the link between BLIMIT strategies and the transgression-induced problem to distinguish logical consequences from mild punishments.

1.3. Logical consequences

Ginott (1965) argued that parents can increase the link between BLIMIT strategies and the transgression-induced problem by using logical consequences. Logical consequences refer to behavioral limitations that directly address the transgression-induced problem and require children to take responsibility for their actions. Children are typically required to take responsibility by either engaging in active problem-solving (e.g., offer reparation; change their behavior) or by