

Predictors of parents' physical disciplinary practices

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Abstract:

Objective: This study examined how childhood history of discipline (1) related to ratings of how severe and typical punishments were; and (2) predicted parents' use of discipline techniques. The influence of child culpability on these ratings was also investigated.

Method: Ninety-nine New Zealand parents rated 12 physical discipline scenarios varying in discipline severity and perceived child culpability. Parents judged how severe and typical they considered the disciplines depicted in the scenarios and reported on how often they had experienced such discipline as children and how often they had used them with their own children.

Results: When the child was perceived to be at fault, parents rated the discipline depicted as less severe, considered the technique more typical, reported they had been similarly disciplined more frequently, and applied such discipline to their child more frequently. Childhood history of a discipline was related to the parent's use of that method, and the parents judged techniques they used with their own children as less severe and more typical of methods of discipline. History of discipline and severity judgments were the best predictors of parents' disciplinary practices.

Conclusions: Although the findings support the cycle of violence theory, more complex potential pathways to abusive parenting, including the variables in this study, are proposed.

Author Keywords: Physical discipline; Discipline history; Culpability

Index Terms: parental behavior

Article:

Child abuse statistics in the United States estimate that over one million cases are *substantiated* every year, which translates into approximately one in every 22 children ([US Bureau of the Census, 1996](#)). More disturbing is the fact that this statistic exists in the face of overwhelming evidence of underreporting of child abuse. Anonymous surveys consistently demonstrate that parental physical discipline of children, including more severe forms of violence, is ubiquitous across many cultures. Although the media typically portrays the most brutal and fatal instances of child abuse, often overlooked are the more familiar cases arising from the inappropriate use of everyday discipline techniques. Indeed, estimates for New Zealand indicate that 96% of surveyed parents reported that they had hit their child at some time in their life, with the vast majority of both parents considering physical punishment of children acceptable ([Ritchie & Ritchie, 1993](#)).

Invariably, the question of what constitutes permissible physical punishment arises for caretakers, legislators, and human services personnel. The line between physical punishment and child abuse is arguably thin and ambiguous to many parents. Given that both physical punishment and abuse can be considered forms of aggression, their distinction may be conceptualized as one of differences in degree, with abuse representing one point on a continuum ([Graziano & Namaste, 1990](#)). Indeed, physical abuse often occurs as a result of an unintended progression along this continuum ([Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1983](#)). Although child abuse clearly differs from physical punishment, etiological variables appear to overlap ([Straus, 1983](#)).

Consequently, understanding factors that influence parents' physical discipline decision-making can clarify how abusive behavior occurs further along the continuum. For instance, one of the factors that appears to mediate

judgements of physical discipline severity is the perceived culpability of the child. When a child is considered to be misbehaving, they are more likely to be blamed for discipline decisions ([Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1993](#)). Therefore, harsher discipline is rated as less severe than when the child is not seen as provoking the parent ([Kelder, McNamara, Carlson, & Lynn, 1991](#)). Hence, children who are perceived to be culpable would be more likely to be recipients of abusive parenting.

Another factor that impacts upon judgments about the appropriateness of physical discipline is the rater's own childhood experiences. The intergenerational transmission of violence hypothesis proposes that parents abused as children are likely to be abusive to their own children ([Curtis, 1963](#)). Similar intergenerational patterns emerge for physical discipline across the continuum ([Straus, 1983](#)). Despite considerable popularity of this hypothesis, the research is often flawed and the mechanisms that directly operate in this transmission remain unclear ([Widom, 1989](#)).

Studies with nonparents support that those with a childhood history of more severe discipline rate that form of discipline as more appropriate and deserved ([Herzberger](#) and [Kelder](#)). Indeed, such subjects who received physical discipline report their intentions to engage in these discipline practices when they have children ([Graziano & Namaste, 1990](#)). Nationally representative surveys of parents have also reported relatively high rates of childhood abuse in parents who abuse their own children ([Straus, 1979](#)), and "ordinary" physical punishment as a child relates to parents' more frequent use of abusive discipline with their children ([Straus, 1983](#)).

One possible theory to account for this intergenerational transmission involves social learning theory, whereby aggressive behavior is modeled and thus normalized for the child ([Wolfe, Katell, & Drabman, 1982](#)). Some support for this normalizing process comes from abusive parents considering physical discipline more acceptable than their nonabusive counterparts ([Kelley, Grace, & Elliott, 1990](#)). However, this process of normalizing discipline actions is less understood or researched, although this mechanism may serve to allow parents to justify their discipline decisions.

The purpose of the current study was to combine several of these factors to predict parents' use of specific physical discipline strategies. Using discipline scenarios, parents judged how severe and typical they considered the described discipline and reported on whether they had personally experienced such discipline as children and implemented them with their own children. Perceived child culpability was expected to affect parent ratings of severity and typicality, as well as their assessment of the frequency with which they received similar discipline and administer similar discipline. Moreover, parent ratings of severity, typicality, and history were expected to predict parents' reported discipline practices.

Method

Participants

Ninety-nine parents (79% mothers, 21% fathers) were recruited from four primary and middle schools in Dunedin, New Zealand. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 52 years ($M = 38.3$, $SD = 5.3$). Based on subjects' self-identification, the ethnic composition of the sample was 83.8% Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) with the remainder nonPakeha (Maori, Asian, Other). Consistent with the distribution reported by the 1991 New Zealand Census ([Department of Statistics, 1992](#)), participants' annual family income was distributed across income brackets in the following pattern: less than \$14,999, 8.4%; \$15,000–\$29,999, 29.5%; \$30,000–\$44,999, 32.6%; and more than \$45,000, 29.5%. In the current sample, 79.5% of the respondents were raising their children with a partner, and 74% of the families had two or three children (ranging from one to eight children).

Measure

Participants read 12 brief scenarios depicting physical discipline of a young child 8 years or younger. Scenarios were developed based on consultation with New Zealand child protective services workers, designed to vary in

terms of three specified severity levels of discipline, with two punishment techniques at each level: Mild (slap on hand, poking the child), Moderate (spanking, pulling the child up by the arm), and Borderline Abusive (hit with an object such as a belt or wooden spoon). The final category, Borderline Abusive, reflected a severity level with perceived ambiguity for parents about whether the behavior would be abusive although child welfare indicated these would possibly warrant investigation. Scenarios were created to portray discipline techniques that would not be obviously abusive, which several earlier reports have utilized (e.g., [Muller et al., 1993](#)), because nearly all respondents would consider extreme violence inappropriate (e.g., burning), thereby reducing variability and increasing social desirability responding. In addition, half of the scenarios depicted the children as misbehaving (i.e., perceived culpability), such as punching a sick sibling, whereas the other six scenarios portrayed the child as blameless (e.g., accidentally dropping toys in a newly cleaned area). Scenarios were purposely constructed to be gender neutral with regards to both the child and adult, as this factor can effect ratings (e.g., [Herzberger & Tennen, 1985b](#)). Two sample scenarios are as follows:

Borderline abusive/nonculpable

A child is helping their parent wash dishes. While drying one of the nice china plates, the soapy dish slips out of the child's hands and falls, breaking on the floor. The parent strikes the child with their belt several times on their back and buttocks, telling the child they should be more careful.

Mild/culpable

A parent is watching television and the kids are bickering on a nearby sofa. Having already asked them to stop fighting, the parent turns around and slaps the children's knees, telling them to stop fighting. Parents were asked to rate each scenario on four 7-point likert scales in two stages. In the first presentation of a scenario, they were asked to rate the level of the discipline (Severity), from mild (1) to severe (7), as well as how typical they considered the punishment (Typical), from typical (1) to not typical (7). After their response on these two questions for all scenarios, the scenarios were repeated and they were asked to report on how frequently they were punished in a similar manner (History), from not at all (1) to often (7), as well as how frequently they used that punishment on their own children (Practice), from not at all (1) to often (7). Parents' ratings were requested in this two stage process to minimize potential response bias in their ratings of severity and typicality based on their personal experience with such techniques.

Procedure

Parents received notices from their child's school describing a study about parenting practices and discipline. Interested parents returned a contact information sheet and were subsequently scheduled for a computer session conducted in their home at a time convenient for them. Instructions and scenarios were presented on a computer screen, and the 12 scenarios appeared in random order. Participants entered the responses anonymously, and their responses did not appear on the computer screen as they entered them to further facilitate privacy. These procedures were implemented in order to maximize accurate reporting and minimize social desirability responding.

Results

All analyses were conducted using the SPSS for Windows statistical package. Mean scores and standard deviations for parent ratings on each of the four questions appear in [Table 1](#), presented by severity level (based on four scenarios for each question), culpability (based on six scenarios for each question), and total (across all 12 scenarios). As would be expected, these scores indicate that respondents considered mild techniques to be less severe than moderate ones, which were in turn considered less severe than borderline abusive. However, subjects on average rated even the mild discipline techniques at the midpoint of the 7-point severity level continuum (an average of 4.57 per scenario), suggesting they considered even mild discipline relatively severe. Preliminary analyses indicated no age or gender effects on any of the ratings (all $p > .05$), and thus subsequent analyses were performed for the entire sample of parents.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Parents' Scenario Ratings ($N = 99$)

	Severity ^c		Typical		History		Practice	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Mild ^a	18.3	(4.2)	15.0	(4.8)	9.7	(5.5)	7.6	(3.2)
Moderate ^a	21.1	(4.1)	15.7	(5.2)	8.5	(5.2)	6.6	(2.9)
Borderline ^a	26.1	(2.3)	19.7	(5.8)	7.7	(5.7)	5.0	(2.0)
Culpable ^b	30.1	(5.4)	22.8	(6.9)	14.6	(8.3)	10.9	(4.4)
Non-culpable ^b	35.5	(4.2)	27.6	(7.3)	11.4	(7.2)	8.3	(2.7)
Total	65.5	(8.7)	50.4	(13.4)	26.0	(15.2)	19.2	(6.8)

^a Score based on the parents' ratings summed across the four scenarios in each severity level (with 7-point likert scale for each scenario).

^b Score based on parents' ratings summed across the six scenarios for each child culpability categorization (with 7-point likert scale for each scenario).

^c Columns refer to parents' responses on the four questions following each scenario.

[Full-size table](#) (14K)

[Table 1](#) also confirms that perceived child culpability influenced ratings on all four questions on the discipline scenarios. When the child is perceived to be at fault, parents judged harsher physical discipline as less severe, $t(98) = -13.36, p < .001$, and parents believed such discipline is more typical, $t(98) = 10.04, p < .001$. Moreover, when the child is portrayed as culpable, parents reported they had been disciplined in a similar manner more often, $t(98) = 9.91, p < .001$, and parents administered such discipline in similar situations more often, $t(98) = 9.12, p < .001$.

With regard to the associations among the ratings (see [Table 2](#) for correlations), several of the predicted relationships were confirmed. In particular, childhood history of receiving a discipline technique was positively correlated with the parent's use of that particular discipline with their own children ($r = .43, p < .001$). Similarly, parents judged discipline techniques they actually used as less severe ($r = -.35, p < .001$) and more typical ($r = -.26, p < .01$). Moreover, disciplines considered more typical were those that were rated mild ($r = .22, p < .05$) and those they more frequently experienced themselves ($r = -.20, p < .05$).

Table 2. Correlations and Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Parents' Ratings of Severity, Typicality, and History Predicting Actual Practice

	Practice	Typical	Severity	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	^a <i>R</i> ²
History	.43 * * *	-.20*	-.08	.168	.380	.18 * * *
Severity	-.35 * * *	.22*		-.234	-.296	.11 * * *
Typical	-.26 * *			.006	-.116	.01
Intercept = 33.097						
						^b <i>R</i> ² = .28
						Adjusted <i>R</i> ² = .27
						<i>R</i> = .53

$p \leq .05$;

$p \leq .01$;

$p \leq .001$.

^a Incremental change in *R*².

^b Multiple correlation coefficients *R*², adjusted *R*², and *R* reported for included variables History and Severity (Typicality excluded).

[Full-size table](#) (8K)

Multiple hierarchical regression analyses were then performed to attempt to determine the best predictors of parents' reported disciplinary practices. A summary of these findings appears in [Table 2](#), which includes the correlations between variables, the unstandardized regression coefficients (β) and intercept, the standardized regression coefficients (β weights), the semipartial correlations (sr^2), and for the variables kept in the final regression model, the multiple correlation coefficient (R), the squared multiple correlation coefficient (R^2), and the adjusted squared multiple correlation (adjusted R^2). Entering the three ratings (History, Severity, and Typical, in order of the magnitude of their association with Practice) as the independent variables to predict Practice, these analyses revealed that history of discipline and perception of severity were both significant predictors of actual practice of discipline techniques ($R^2 = .28, p < .001$). Thus, history of discipline contributed significant unique variance ($sr^2 = .43$), as did severity ($sr^2 = .11$), but typicality did not reliably improve R^2 .

Discussion

The present study evaluated parents' ratings of physical discipline scenarios varying in discipline severity and perceived child culpability. Parents' ratings of the severity and typicality of disciplines as well as their personal history of such disciplines were expected to predict their use of those techniques with their own children.

Consistent with the intergenerational transmission of violence theory, childhood history of receiving a discipline technique was significantly correlated with the parents' use of that particular discipline with their own children. These results are consistent with studies involving nonparent students' predictions of what disciplines they intend to use ([Graziano & Namaste, 1990](#)) as well as national surveys of family violence (e.g., [Straus, 1979](#)). Parents also considered discipline techniques that they use on their children to be less severe and more typical. Regression analyses indicated that parents' report of childhood experience with the discipline technique, as well as their rating of its severity, were both significant predictors of the parents' use of the specific discipline technique with their own children. Because typicality did not contribute significant unique variance to discipline practice, how typical or normal a discipline is judged does not appear to determine whether the parent will implement the discipline technique.

Perceived culpability also significantly influenced parent ratings. When a child is perceived to be misbehaving, parents judge physical discipline to be less severe and believe such discipline is more typical. Furthermore, parents who perceive children to be culpable report that they more frequently received similar discipline and more often administer such physical discipline with their own children. Such findings are consistent with research on nonparents' judgments of blame in discipline situations (e.g., [Kelder et al., 1991](#)). If children are perceived as provocative and misbehaving by their caretakers, they appear more likely to receive physical discipline which could become abusive. Indeed, abusive parents are more likely to view their children as misbehaving and problematic than comparison parents ([Milner & Dopke, 1997](#)), and abusive parents evaluate minor transgressions more negatively ([Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993](#)). What appears most critical, then, is the *perception* of culpability, which would influence discipline decisions.

Conclusions from this study are limited by the fact that the sample included a motivated group of parents from Dunedin, New Zealand, which may not represent New Zealanders overall or other cultural groups. In fact, this group of parents judged all the disciplines as more severe than the professional standards, rating even mild scenarios as moderately severe. Similar results have been found in earlier research ([Kean & Dukes, 1991](#)), and these higher severity ratings may reflect changing social attitudes, social desirability biases, or possibly the unrepresentativeness of this low-risk sample. Several measures were employed to minimize social desirability responding, including the use of scenarios with discipline techniques that were not conspicuously abusive, but concerns about such reporting biases are typically present in this research area. Furthermore, as is common of research in this field, reliance on self-reports of history of discipline is subject to retrospective bias and self-reported use of discipline is subject to social desirability bias (see [Widom, 1989](#) for a review of methodological concerns).

Additionally, the sample of subjects in this study was not a selection of identified abusive parents, presumably representing a group of nonabusive parents. Thus, the applicability of these results to at-risk or substantiated abusive parents is unclear. The rationale for involving nonidentified or typical parents stems from the belief that the potential to become physically abusive towards a child in a given situation lies on a continuum, with studies of normal parents lending insights that may apply to their peers at greater risk to abuse.

Overall, these findings lend support to the cycle of violence theory, showing a direct relation between history and practice of specific discipline techniques. Nonetheless, as is often emphasized, history of discipline is clearly not a sufficient factor to account for abusive behavior. Based on the results of the current study, one potential pathway can be proposed for the decision to use a particular discipline technique. Personal experience of the specific discipline style enables the parent to consider the technique less severe. If their own child is then perceived to be misbehaving, the parent may feel more justified in implementing that discipline method. However, other factors not assessed in this study likely play a role, and clearly a wide array of determinants contribute to abusive behavior (see [Belsky, 1993](#) for review). The experience of harsh discipline likely impacts upon the child not only in their appraisal of that action but in their self-appraisal and development of coping skills, and difficulties in these areas relate to abusive parenting ([Milner & Dopke, 1997](#)). Consequently, because of these deficits, when a stressed parent is confronted with a child who is perceived to be misbehaving, using a familiar technique may seem most expedient. Future research will need to probe further such potential pathways that turn physical discipline into abusive parenting, evaluating how different processes combine to result in particular discipline decisions.

Résumé

French abstract not available at time of publication.

Resumen

Objetivo: Este trabajo estudia cómo la historia de disciplina en la niñez (1) relacionada con puntajes de cuán severos y típicos fueran los castigos, y (2) el uso predictivo de las técnicas disciplinarias parentales. Se investigó también la influencia de la culpabilidad infantil en estos puntajes.

Método: Noventa y nueve padres en Nueva Zelanda evaluaron 12 escenarios de disciplina física que variaban en severidad de la disciplina y la culpabilidad infantil percibida. Los padres juzgaron cuán severos y típicos ellos consideraban las medidas disciplinarias que mostraban en los escenarios y reportaron la frecuencia con que ellos habían vivido esa experiencia disciplinaria como niños y con que frecuencia la habían usado con sus propios hijos.

Resultados: Cuando el niño era percibido en falta, los padres evaluaban la disciplina señalada como menos severa, consideraban la técnica más típica, reportaban que ellos habían sido disciplinados de forma semejante con más frecuencia, y le aplicaban esta disciplina a su hijo más frecuentemente. La experiencia infantil de una disciplina se relacionó con el uso parental de ese método, y los padres juzgaban las técnicas que ellos usaban con sus propios hijos como menos severas y métodos más típicos de disciplina. La experiencia de juicios sobre la disciplina y la severidad de esta fueron los mejores predictores de las prácticas disciplinarias parentales.

Conclusiones: A pesar de que los resultados apoyan la teoría del ciclo de violencia, se propusieron alternativas potenciales más complejas a la crianza abusiva, influyendo las variables de este estudio.

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