

Parental Discipline and Abuse Potential Affects on Child Depression, Anxiety, and Attributions

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Abstract:

The current study investigated differences in children's emotional functioning as a product of their parents' reported disciplinary practices and child abuse potential. Families with no known history of abuse were recruited to ascertain whether depressogenic attributional style and depressive or anxious symptomatology was evident in children of parents who used harsher physical punishment and who had higher abuse potential. Forty-two New Zealand children ages 8–12 participated with their parents. Child-report measures of depression, anxiety, and attributional style were compared with parents' responses on physical discipline scenarios and child abuse potential. Children's anxiety symptoms were higher in those children whose parents obtained higher abuse potential scores and had harsher discipline practices. Children's depressive symptoms and some components of maladaptive attributional style were also found in families with higher abuse potential. Results suggest emotional difficulties similar to those of maltreated children even without identifiable abuse.

Key Words: child anxiety, child attributional style, child depression, child maltreatment, corporal punishment, physical discipline.

Article:

Since the recognition in 1962 of the seriousness of child physical abuse (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962), child mal-treatment has received heightened media and scholarly attention. Abuse estimates soared following the implementation of mandatory reporting laws in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Lindsey, 1994). Moreover, anonymous surveys demonstrate the virtually universal practice of parental physical discipline of children and even more severe parent-child violence.

The media typically spotlight the most brutal and fatal instances of child abuse, neglecting that most cases of maltreatment emerge from the routine practice of physical discipline strategies. Physical abuse often results from an unintended escalation while administering physical punishment for perceived child transgressions (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1983), and maltreatment is often conceptualized as on a continuum with physical discipline (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999; Whipple & Richey, 1997). Although physical discipline and child abuse can be considered variants of parental aggression, abusive behavior is generally deemed unacceptable, whereas public opinion regarding corporal punishment is clearly divided. This debate over the usefulness of physical punishment has persisted for generations despite support from experts (e.g., Straus, 2001a, 2001b) regarding the need to discontinue all forms of family violence. In light of calls to end all legalized forms of corporal punishment toward children (e.g., Hammarberg & Newell, 2002), researchers must address this controversy over physical punishment by compiling further evidence regarding the immediate and long-term functioning of children receiving *any* physical punishment. The risk factors are considered similar for both child physical abuse and physical punishment (Straus, 1983). Consequently, it is important to ascertain whether the effects of physical abuse and physical discipline overlap.

To date, the evidence indicates that child maltreatment is characterized as detrimental to victims, resulting in both short-term and long-term sequelae in psychosocial and cognitive functioning (e.g., Fantazzo, 1990; Starr & Wolfe, 1991). Thus physically abused children are more likely than nonabused children to demonstrate such

characteristics as oppositionality, behavior problems, depression, fearfulness, social withdrawal, and lower self-esteem. For example, abused children were found to be more likely to display higher levels of depressive symptomatology and hopelessness as well as lower levels of self-esteem than comparison groups (Kazdin, Moser, Colbus, & Bell, 1985). Another study confirmed increased depression and hopelessness in children with abuse histories as well as a tendency toward an external locus of control (Allen & Tarnowski, 1989). Moreover, a more maladaptive, depressogenic attributional style was reported for abused children (Cerezo & Frias, 1994). Thus children who are victims of abuse display many signs reflective of internalizing disorders.

Some indications in the research, however, point to negative outcomes ensuing from corporal punishment in the absence of parental behaviors injurious enough to qualify as abusive (e.g., Straus & Kantor, 1994). Child maltreatment research has often relied on research designs that assess children after the fact when confirmed abuse has already occurred. Retrospective research strategies, however, are typically subject to recall biases and errors. It remains unclear whether problematic symptoms manifested in some abused children actually appear in nonclinical samples of children who have received less serious forms of parental aggression, such as physical punishment. Theoretically, some of the emotional and behavioral difficulties associated with physical child abuse may develop primarily as a function of parents' harsher disciplinary styles and attitudes. Thus the difficulties experienced by children may differ depending on whether they grow up with more versus less physical discipline.

Research has indeed supported a relationship between childhood history of harsh discipline and adult psychopathology (Holmes & Robins, 1988), although by using retrospective research designs. Another study demonstrated that the more severe the discipline experienced by the child, the more aggressively the child behaves (i.e., externalizing behavior problems; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992), although these researchers did not find a relationship between physical discipline and internalizing behavior problems. Another study supported discipline as a significant predictor of behavior problems in children (Brenner & Fox, 1998). One dissertation indicated higher depression and anxiety symptoms for those children categorized in high discipline risk groups (Dingwall, 1997).

Yet noticeably more research, as well as public discussion, has centered on the influence of physical discipline leading to aggressive and externalizing behavior problems via social learning. The preponderance of research literature ties corporal punishment to aggressive behavior (e.g., Straus, 2001b), whereas the association of physical punishment with internalizing problems remains less apparent in the literature. Although the connection between physical discipline and aggression is clearly meaningful to both family and society, research continues to overlook its association with the emotional life of the child. Anecdotally, we hear of children's subjective reports of distress at physical discipline (e.g., Willow & Hyder, 1998), although actual empirical research investigating the child's internal experience of discipline is lacking.

Whereas both child and adolescent boys reportedly demonstrate more disruptive behavior and externalizing difficulties compared with girls (e.g., Crijnen, Achenbach, & Verhulst, 1997), several studies of prepubertal children have not detected gender differences in depression or attributional style (e.g., Joiner & Wagner, 1995; Thompson, Kaslow, Weiss, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Indeed, an interesting line of inquiry has begun to investigate the emergence of gender differences in depression and anxiety during adolescence (Hayward & Sanborn, 2002). Thus, comparing the internalizing processes for prepubertal boys and girls growing up with harsh physical disciplinarians would be meaningful.

Some components of the internalizing domain mirroring those drawn from the child maltreatment literature (including depression, anxiety, and attributional style) may be particularly important to investigate in children receiving physical punishment. Although some research has included symptoms of depression and anxiety, depressogenic attributional style—a risk factor for depression as conceptualized by Abramson and colleagues (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978)—has been relatively neglected in research on the physical discipline of children. Maladaptive attributions, as delineated in the learned helplessness model of depression, could potentially develop in response to uncontrollable physical discipline,

which may in turn lead to depressive or anxious symptomatology in children. Further, of particular interest in the current study was the element of internal locus of control, given that findings in the maltreatment literature (Allen & Tarnowski, 1989) suggest that physical discipline is likely to be perceived as outside of the child's control. In addition, research on attributional style has concentrated on children's explanation of both positive and negative events in their lives, with support across samples that both are relevant to children's depression (Gladstone & Kaslow, 1996; Joiner & Wagner, 1995; Thompson et al., 1998). Both are relevant as well in maltreated children (Kress & Vandenberg, 1998; Runyon & Kenny, 2002).

The current study investigated several symptoms linked to internalizing dimensions in an attempt to determine whether a nonclinical sample of children receiving physical discipline demonstrates difficulties typically associated with child abuse victims. Children whose parents hold more physically abusive attitudes and those who engage in harsher discipline were compared with lower risk parents. Families with no established history of abuse were selected in order to assess whether increased depressive or anxious symptomatology was detected in children whose parents had a harsher discipline style and abusive attitudes. Moreover, to examine how discipline attitudes and practices may relate to how children explain events in their own lives, children's attributional style was also examined, specifically their explanations for both positive and negative events as well as how they internalize responsibility, that is, locus of control.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE ($N = 42$)

Characteristics	% or <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> or <i>SD</i>
Parent gender		
Mothers	93%	39
Fathers	7%	3
Parent age	38.67	5.43
Child gender		
Girls	33%	14
Boys	67%	28
Child age	10 years, 11 months	1 year, 3 months
Ethnicity		
Pakeha	88.1%	37
Maori	2.4%	1
Other	9.5%	4
Partnered		
Yes	76%	32
No	24%	10
No. of children in home	2.81	1.06
Annual family income (\$)		
<14,999	10%	4
15,000–29,999	34%	14
30,000–44,999	24%	10
>45,000	32%	13

METHOD

Participants

Forty-two children and their parents were recruited from schools in Dunedin, New Zealand, as part of a larger study of parents not identified as abusive (see Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999); the focus was on discipline beliefs and abuse potential. Two randomly selected schools in Dunedin were approached, with one classroom per appropriate grade level receiving consent forms. Caregivers in this larger study were parents who returned consent forms sent home from their child's classroom, with about half of all distributed forms returned to the school. All families in the larger study with a child between the ages of 8 and 12 were invited to participate in the current study. Nearly every child in the defined age range was available for participation at the time of his or her parents' participation. Sample demographics appear in Table 1, with the sample involving predominantly mothers of Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) children. Approximately one fourth of the children in the sample were living in single-parent homes (parents without a partner). The obtained sample is comparable

to the ethnic distribution and family composition expected for Dunedin, and the annual family income, in New Zealand dollars, is comparable with the national income distribution reported by the New Zealand Census (Department of Statistics New Zealand, 1992).

Parent Measures

The *Child Abuse Potential Inventory* (Milner, 1986) is a 160-item self-report measure involving attitudes and beliefs believed to be predictive of physical child abuse potential. One of the most frequently used measures to screen for physical abuse, the Child Abuse Potential Inventory assesses parental characteristics associated with physically abusive parents, although the measure does not tap their specific behavioral responses while delivering discipline. Each item presents a statement with which subjects indicate agreement or disagreement. Of these items, 77 contribute to the abuse scale score and its six factors, and the remaining items serve either as distractors/fillers or provide a means of detecting distortion biases. With respect to internal consistency of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory, corrected split-half reliability was reported as .96, and Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficient was reported as .92 (Milner). Retest reliabilities ranged from .91 after 1 day to .75 after 3 months (Milner). As a screening tool for abusive behavior, studies have suggested a correct classification rate of 89.2% of confirmed child abusers and 96.3% of control subjects (Milner, Gold, & Wimberley, 1986).

Discipline Scenarios. To supplement the Child Abuse Potential Inventory with a measure specifically geared toward discipline behavior, parents also read 12 brief scenarios depicting physical discipline of a young child 8 years or younger. Scenarios were developed for another study (see Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999), based on consultation with New Zealand child protective services workers, and were 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* (hitting 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 probably warrant further investigation. Scenarios were intentionally created to portray discipline techniques that would not be obviously abusive, which several earlier reports have utilized (e.g., Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1993), because nearly all respondents would consider extreme violence (e.g., burning) inappropriate, thereby reducing variability and increasing socially desirable responses. 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). When children are considered to be misbehaving, they are more likely to be blamed for discipline decisions (Muller et al.). Scenarios were purposely constructed to be gender-neutral with regard to both the child and adult in the scenario, as this factor can effect ratings (e.g., Herzberger & Tennen, 1985). Two sample scenarios are as follows:

- **Borderline abusive/nonculpable:** A child is helping a parent wash dishes. While the child is drying one of the nice china plates, the soapy dish slips and falls, breaking on the floor. The parent strikes the child several times on the back and buttocks with a belt, saying the child 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 a 7-point Likert scale, reporting on how frequently they use similar physical punishment on their own children (*Practices*), from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*often*). To generate a total score across the 12 scenarios, subscores on each of the three levels (based on the four scenarios per level) were weighted paralleling the 7-point severity level; mild scenarios were weighted 1, moderate scenarios weighted 4, and borderline abusive scenarios weighted 7. In this manner, higher total scores on practices represent *more* severe discipline behavior.

Child Measures

The *Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire* (Kaslow, Tannenbaum, & Seligman, 1978; Seligman et al., 1984) is a 48-item forced-choice measure designed to assess attributional style in children ages 8 to 18 years. Children select one of two options that best explains why a hypothetical situation in each item would have happened to them. The hypothetical situations vary along the three attributional dimensions of internality, stability, and globality, with half of the items involving negative outcomes and half positive outcomes. For example, there are eight internal-positive items and eight internal-negative items. This measure yields dimensional scores across positive and negative events (Internal Total, Stable Total, and Global Total); a score across all positive events for a Positive Total; a score across all negative events for a Negative Total; as well as a Total Composite score calculated by subtracting the Negative Total score from the Positive Total score. Lower Positive Total scores and higher Negative Total scores correspond to more maladaptive attributional styles; lower Internal Total scores correspond to externalizing locus of control. The Positive and Negative totals indicate attributions depending on the valence of the situation. For the present study, the Children's Attributional Style Positive Total and Negative Total scores were examined, along with the more specific index for locus of control, Internal Total.

With respect to psychometric characteristics, moderate internal consistency has been reported for the Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire Total Composite, Positive Total, and Negative Total scores (.73, .71, and .66, respectively; Seligman et al., 1984). Temporal stability over 6 months ranges from .71 for the Positive Total and .80 for the Negative Total (Seligman et al.). The Total Composite, Positive Total, and Negative Total has been correlated with indices of depression (e.g., Thompson et al., 1998), consistent with the learned helplessness model.

The *Children's Depression Inventory* (Kovacs, 1983, 1985) is a 27-item self-report measure, the most widely used instrument gauging childhood depressive symptoms, and is suitable for children ages 8–17 years. Each item presents three statements representing graded levels of depressive severity, valued from 0 to 2. Higher total scores are indicative of more severe depressive symptomatology. Kazdin (1990) reported that the Children's Depression Inventory has moderate test-retest stability, high internal consistency, and concurrent validity with other depression measures. High coefficient alphas have been reported for both children and adolescents, ranging from .83 to .94 (Saylor, Finch, Spirito, & Bennett, 1984; Smucker, Craighead, Craighead, & Green, 1986).

The *Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale—Revised* (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978, 1985) is a 37-item self-report measure of anxiety symptoms for children ages 6–19 years. Each item is presented in a *yes/no* format. The total score, indicative of the overall anxiety level, is converted to a standardized *T*-score that adjusts for age and gender differences. Nine items contribute to the Lie scale, designed to detect social desirability responses. The Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale—Revised total score correlates more highly with internalizing than externalizing behaviors, and its internal consistency is reported at .82 (Reynolds, 1982; Reynolds & Richmond, 1985).

Procedure

A convenient time for a session in the child's home was arranged by telephone upon receipt of a consent form. For parents, instructions and individual items for both the Child Abuse Potential Inventory and the Practices measure were presented on a computer screen, with the 12 scenarios appearing in random order. Parents entered all responses to questions anonymously, and to further facilitate privacy, their responses did not appear on the computer screen as they entered them. The computerized procedures were implemented in order to maximize participants' reporting accuracy and to minimize social desirability responding. While parents completed their portion of the study, children were taken to a quiet place in their home to complete the measures. The three questionnaires were administered in a counterbalanced order. Items were read aloud to the child respondents while they read along and wrote their answers privately on a separate form. After completing the forms, the children were given either a \$2 video rental coupon or a \$2 video game voucher as a token of appreciation for their participation.

RESULTS

All analyses were conducted using the SPSS 11.0 for Windows statistical package. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the total scores of the parent report measures (Child Abuse Potential Inventory and the Practices measure), as well as the child questionnaires (Children's Depression Inventory, Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale—Revised and Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire). All obtained mean scores on these measures were within normal limits (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR TOTAL SAMPLE AND BY GROUPS AND GROUP DIFFERENCES ON CHILD REPORT MEASURES ($N = 42$)

	Total Sample <i>M (SD)</i>	High CAPI <i>M (SD)</i>	Low CAPI <i>M (SD)</i>	High Practices <i>M (SD)</i>	Low Practices <i>M (SD)</i>
CDI total	9.29 (6.50)	11.86 (6.03)	6.71 (6.03)**	11.38 (7.76)	7.19 (4.14)*
CMAS-R total	50.00 (11.14)	55.24 (8.93)	44.76 (10.81)***	54.05 (11.83)	45.95 (8.94)**
CASQ Negative total	4.57 (4.49)	8.29 (2.87)	7.71 (2.70)	8.05 (2.60)	7.95 (2.99)
Positive total	12.69 (3.29)	11.76 (3.24)	13.62 (3.15)	12.38 (2.60)	13.00 (3.91)
Internal total	7.98 (1.94)	7.29 (1.42)	8.67 (2.17)**	7.90 (1.55)	8.05 (2.31)
CAPI Abuse scale	100.38 (89.67)				
Discipline practices ^a	67.22 (21.17)				

Note: CAPI = Child Abuse Potential Inventory; CDI = Children's Depression Inventory; CMAS-R = Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale—Revised; CASQ = Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire.

^aMean score based on weighted sum across 12 scenarios.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

An examination of demographic differences on the child report measures indicated no significant gender differences on any of the three questionnaires (all $p > .05$). Similarly, no significant associations were found between any of the three child report measures and child age (all $r > .05$). Insufficient variability by ethnicity did not allow analyses for this variable. Consequently, the full sample was utilized without any covariates required in order to examine differences in parental group discipline attitudes and practices.

Parents were divided by median split based on their abuse potential scores into two groups: high Child Abuse Potential Inventory and low Child Abuse Potential Inventory scorers, representing parents at high and low risk in terms of their attitudes and beliefs predictive of physically abusive behavior. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine between-group differences for the following dependent variables: Children's Depression Inventory total, Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale—Revised total, and the Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire dimensions of interest, Positive Total, Negative Total, and Internal Total. Results from this MANOVA were significant, $F(5, 36) = 498.7, p \leq .001$. Subsequent analyses (see Table 2 for means) indicated that the two abuse potential groups differed on the children's anxiety total scores, $F(1, 40) = 11.7, p \leq .001$; depression total scores, $F(1, 40) = 7.64, p \leq .01$; and attributional style Internal Total scores, $F(1, 40) = 5.94, p \leq .01$. Additionally, the two Child Abuse Potential Inventory groups were marginally different on the attributional style Positive Total, $F(1, 40) = 3.54, p = .06$. No significant differences between abuse potential groups were observed on the attributional style Negative Total scores ($p > .05$).

Parents were then also divided by median split scores on their discipline scenarios practices scores, which represents a behavioral indication of actual discipline practices. High Practices scorers were those who engaged in harsher discipline practices compared with parents in the Low Practices group. A MANOVA examining differences between these two groups of parents across the six dependent variables was significant, $F(5, 36) = 517.0, p \leq .001$. A closer examination of which variables were significantly different between High Practices and Low Practices groups did not find any significant differences due to attributional style scores (all $p > .05$). Analyses indicated significant differences between the two practices groups, however, on children's anxiety total scores, $F(1, 40) = 6.26, p \leq .01$, and on children's depression total scores, $F(1, 40) = 4.76, p \leq .05$.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined whether parents with more physically abusive attitudes and harsher discipline practices had children with more signs of internalizing symptoms than children of lower risk parents. Forty-two

parent-child dyads from a New Zealand sample of children were assessed in their homes. A nonclinical sample was targeted in order to determine whether differences in childhood depression, anxiety, and attributional style would be evident in families with no established history of maltreatment. Current findings suggest some interesting differences in children of parents who use more severe physical discipline and hold more attitudes supportive of physical abuse.

Most consistency was found in the results on children's self-reported anxiety. Children of parents with more physically abusive attitudes and beliefs, as measured by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory, reported more anxious symptomatology than children with parents who had low scores on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory. Similarly, children of parents using less severe physical discipline techniques reported lower anxiety than did children of harsher disciplinarians. Similar findings of higher anxiety in children were obtained from high discipline parent groups in previous research (Dingwall, 1997). Therefore, the current findings provide evidence that children growing up in families with more severe discipline may experience more anxiety symptoms.

Similarly, parents who held more physically abusive attitudes also had children who were more likely to report depressive symptoms than children of parents with low child abuse potential. Consistent with this finding, parents who were practicing more harsh discipline also had children with higher depression scores. Such results parallel those encountered in the maltreatment literature (e.g., Kazdin et al., 1985), suggesting that children evidence signs of depression and anxiety, both internalizing difficulties, even when physical abuse has not been identified.

With respect to depressogenic attributional style, which is theorized as a potential risk factor for depression, the findings were more complex. No differences emerged on children's attributional style based on their parents' classification on severity of parental practice of discipline. Children did appear to externalize—that is, feel less in control—if they were growing up with a parent who had more physically abusive attitudes. Although not statistically significant, an interesting trend was observed: the high risk parents had children with more maladaptive attributions, particularly for positive events. Although attributional style for both positive and negative events has been shown to relate to children's depression (e.g., Joiner & Wagner, 1995; Thompson et al., 1998), in the current study the maladaptive attributional tendency toward negative events did not appear relevant. The present findings support those of an earlier study involving abused children, indicating that these children exhibit an external locus of control (Allen & Tarnowski, 1989). Moreover, such an external locus of control could contribute to a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness (Abramson et al., 1989). Results from the current study suggest that when faced with uncontrollable physical discipline, children may be inclined to develop maladaptive explanatory cognitions. Given the mixed results on attributional style, further investigation of the characteristics of locus of control and what explanatory approach is relevant for children receiving physical punishment would be intriguing.

The present findings reflect some differences in results between parental attitudes and parental practices, consistent with the truism that attitudes are not necessarily representative of actual behavior. Consequently, future research designs should incorporate multiple approaches, examining parents' disciplinary behavior as well as their philosophical approach. For example, perhaps differences in child depression based on the parent's Child Abuse Potential Inventory score imply that children are more depressed in the context of a larger belief system adopted by their parents, rather than that their depression is related to the parents' concrete behaviors. Unfortunately, such nuances can only be evaluated if future studies employ comprehensive assessments of parents' discipline approaches.

Future research should also address some of the limitations of the current study, and should especially involve a larger, more gender-balanced sample to confirm the absence of gender differences in internalizing processes, as found in the current study as well as in earlier research (e.g., Thompson et al., 1998). The current volunteer sample likely represents the most internally motivated families, and thus more heterogenous, potentially externally motivated, samples should be sought. Moreover, because these measures were designed for North

American use, this work should be replicated with a U.S. sample, as there may be limitations on the use of such measures in a non-U.S. sample (Rodriguez & Pehi, 1998).

The present sample intentionally involved a group of families not identified as abusive. Another research step could compare children who have never been identified as abused with children for whom abuse has been substantiated. Using a suitable comparison sample and controlling for demographic variables, researchers could examine whether these children differ with regard to internalizing problems. Ideally, two sources of information would again be utilized, separating the indices of child internalizing difficulties from those assessing parent discipline, in order to minimize source bias.

Finally, the current study is limited by difficulties intrinsic to its research design. Decades of research on the association between corporal punishment and aggression have suffered from similar drawbacks using cross-sectional samples (Straus, 2001b). Although some internalizing difficulties were detected in those using harsher parenting discipline practices in the current research, it is theoretically possible that parents respond more harshly as a *consequence* of their children's exhibiting internalizing problems, or as a consequence of some other, unidentified variable. As the investigation of internalizing processes in children experiencing corporal punishment matures, future research should incorporate a longitudinal design, assessing changes in emotional functioning of children over time, as well as changes in parental discipline in response to child behavior. Obviously, such designs are burdensome for a number of reasons, although ultimately such an avenue could respond to the realities of how parental physical discipline evolves.

Nonetheless, the results of the present study provide preliminary indications that parents' physical punishment relates to some aspects of a child's emotional well-being even without identified physical abuse. Hence the current findings extend the research on corporal punishment into the realm of internalizing difficulties beyond what has already been implicated for children learning to become violent adults. Longitudinal research in the future may reveal that nonabusive physical discipline may adversely influence the short- and long-term emotional functioning of children; sophisticated research may even pinpoint which symptoms of psychopathology appear only in response to physical child abuse incidents. Continued research on parents' use of physical discipline has implications for more serious forms of family violence, given that corporal punishment is often a precursor for child abuse. Future work clarifying these issues would provide guidance to professionals and parents alike as we continue the debate over the use of corporal punishment in the home.

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