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# Variation in African American parents' use of early childhood physical discipline

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## Abstract

Physical discipline is endorsed by a majority of adults in the U.S. including African American (AA) parents who have high rates of endorsement. Although many studies have examined physical discipline use among AA families, few have considered how early childhood physical discipline varies within the population. Individuals within a cultural group may differ in their engagement in cultural practices (Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, AA families' characteristics and their contexts, which are shaped by the interaction of social position, racism, and segregation (García Coll et al., 1996), likely influence how AA families physically discipline their young children. This study examined variation in early childhood physical discipline among AA families living in low-income communities and relations with demographic and contextual factors. Year 1 data from 310 AA parents living in three regionally distinct low-income communities were used from a sequential longitudinal intervention program study of the development and prevention of conduct disorder. Latent class analyses were conducted using parents' responses on a measure, of the frequency of overall physical discipline, spanking, and hitting during prekindergarten and kindergarten. The associations between latent classes and six demographic and contextual factors were examined using the Bolck, Croon, and Hagenaars (BCH) method. The factors were: child gender (59% male); marital status (51% never married); parental education (66% high school graduates and beyond); income (mean = \$16.66K, S.D. = 12.50), family stress, and perception of neighborhood safety. Measures included the Family Information Form, Life Changes, and the Neighborhood Questionnaire. After considering two to seven class solutions, five physical discipline classes or sub-groups were identified. Classes were defined by discipline frequency ('Infrequent', 'Weekly', 'Monthly', 'Almost-Every-Day' and 'Weekly-All') as well as by discipline type (only parents in the 'Weekly-All' class hit their children). Significant associations were found between class membership, and child gender, marital status, income, and perception of neighborhood safety. Girls were more likely to be physically disciplined infrequently,  $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 11.88, p = .05$ . The 'Weekly' class had significantly fewer married parents than all classes except 'Almost-Every-Day',  $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 21.56, p < .001$ . Parents in the 'Almost-Every-Day' class had a significantly lower income than parents in all other classes except "Weekly-All",  $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 10.88, p = .03$ . Finally, parents in the "Almost-Every-Day" class perceived their neighborhood as significantly less safe compared to those in all other classes except the 'Weekly-All' class,  $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 14.13, p = .01$ . These findings suggest that AA families vary in physical discipline during early childhood; this variation may result in sub-groups with different demographic characteristics. Associations between frequent discipline classes and perceptions of neighborhood safety implies that some AA parents may use physical discipline to protect their children from being harmed if they believe their communities are unsafe. Future research should qualitatively examine how AA parents respond to unsafe neighborhoods in their parenting behaviors, including physical discipline.



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**“The parents are in a dilemma whether to forgo disciplining their children or to leave it up to law enforcement. Should we be apathetic, lax or indifferent and let the courts send our unruly children to jail or should we as parents do our duty and appropriately discipline our children?”**

- John E. Jones, president of the Fayette County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 2012

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## Introduction

- Physical discipline is “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (Straus & Donnelly, 2009, p. 4). Around 70-80% of adults in the United States endorse the use of physical discipline in the United States (Lee, Grogan-Kaylor, & Berger, 2014) and its use tends to peak around age 5 (Zolotor et al., 2011).
- African American parents endorse physical discipline at a higher rate (85%) and spank children more frequently than other ethnic groups (Day et al., 1998; Gershoff et al., 2012). Their reasons for using physical discipline may include the belief that if they use physical discipline to teach their children to respect authority and follow laws, their children may avoid harsh and deadly consequences associated with Black children’s misbehavior (e.g. suspensions and police arrests) and reach adulthood unscathed (Lansford, 2010).
- Physical discipline is linked to physical child maltreatment, especially among young children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016) yet there is no clear and universal agreement in the U.S. regarding the line between the two (Renteln, 2010). Therefore, more research is needed to understand the phenomenon of physical discipline.
- Research on African American parents’ use of early childhood physical discipline rarely considers that parents vary in their use of this disciplinary practice (e.g., intensity and duration) (Straus & Stewart, 1999). Furthermore, African American families’ characteristics and their contexts, which are shaped by the interaction of social position, racism, and segregation (García Coll et al., 1996), likely influence how they physically discipline young children. Boys are more likely to be physically disciplined (Day et al., 1998). Parents with low socio-economic status, experiencing high levels of stress, and/or are single parents are more likely to use physical discipline (Pinderhughes et al., 2000). Lastly, there may be a link between community violence and physical discipline use (Molnar et al., 2003).
- Understanding variation in physical discipline use and associated factors may help practitioners improve their identification of physical maltreatment risk and ensure that parenting resources are provided to African American families most at risk.

## Objectives

This study examined the variation in physical discipline use among African-American parents, and associated demographic and contextual factors.

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## Participants

- **310 AA caregivers** from the normative and control groups from The Fast Track Project, which is a sequential longitudinal intervention program study of the development and prevention of conduct disorder, were used. Around 62% had children from the control group and 38% from the normative group.
- Around 97% of caregivers were female and 92% were biological parents. They were recruited from schools in three “high risk” communities in Durham, NC (54%), Seattle, WA (30%), and Nashville, TN (16%).

## Measures (To review the measures, go <http://fasttrackproject.org/>)

Constructs	Measures	Description
Early Childhood Physical Discipline	Developmental History (Dodge, Bates, & Petit, 1990)	Physical discipline undefined <i>Frequency (re-coded)</i> : Never, < 1x/month, 1x/month, 2-3x/month-1x/week, and 2-3x/week - almost every day
	Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979)	Physical discipline -> spanking, spanking with something, hitting, and hitting with something. Frequency same as Developmental History
Parents' Marital Status	Family Information Form (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (CPPRG), 1990)	Marital status
Parental Education	Family Information Form	Years of education the parents have
Income	Family Information Form	Range from ranging from \$6K to \$58K; centered on \$6K
Parental Stress	Life Changes measure (Dodge et al., 1990)	<i>Summary score</i> : whether they experienced any of of 20 stressors and if they had a major or minor effect
Perception of Neighborhood Safety	Neighborhood Questionnaire (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group [CPPRG], 1991)	<i>Subscale score</i> neighborhood satisfaction, safety, crime, drug use and selling, and police-resident relationships

## Analyses

- **Latent Class Analysis (LCA)** was used to identify groups of parents who were similar in the types of physical discipline they used and/or the frequency in which they used physical discipline in Mplus. Two to seven class solutions were considered using several information criteria (Akaike Information Criterion (AIC); Bayesian Information Criterion(BIC) and the Sample Size-Adjusted BIC (SSA-BIC)) and two likelihood ratio tests (Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood test (VLMR-LMR), and the Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT)).
- **The Bolck, Croon, and Hageaars (BCH) method**, which compares the equality of the means of the class-specific external variable means using Wald chi-square tests (Bakk & Vermunt, 2016), was used to investigate the relations between the physical discipline latent classes and the demographic and contextual predictors in Mplus.
- **Weighted Least Squares Estimation with Mean and Variance (WLSMV)** was used to address missing data (< 1%).

### Descriptives for Demographic and Contextual Factors

Factors	N	Descriptives			
Child Gender	310	59%	male		
Parent's Marital Status	211	51%	Never married	1% Widowed	
		23%	Separated/Divorced	4% Unknown	
		21%	Married		
Parental Education (# of years of education)	310	0.3%	1-6 years	19%	13-15 years
		9%	7-9 years	4%	16-17 years
		24%	10-11 years	1%	18+ years
		42%	12 years		
Family Stress (# of events experienced)	309	13%	0-3	11%	10.01-12
		13%	3.01-5	11%	12.01-14.6
		12%	5.01-7	14%	14.61-19
		16%	7.01-10	10%	19.01+
Income		M = \$16.66K (S.D. = 12.50)			
Perception of Neighborhood Safety	304	M = 27.69 (S.D. = 13.22)			

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## Results

Five latent classes of early childhood physical discipline were identified

Discipline Latent Classes	N	Description
Infrequent Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting	83	Physically disciplined, spanking, and spanking with something less than once a month and did not hit
Weekly Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting	79	Physically disciplined, spanked, and spanked with something weekly, but did not hit
Monthly Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting	78	Physically disciplined, spanking, and spanking with something monthly but did not hit
Almost Every Day Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting	47	Physical discipline, spanked, and spanked with something almost every day, but never hit
Weekly Overall Physical Discipline, Spanking and Hitting	23	Physically disciplined, spanked, spanked with something, <u>hit</u> , and <u>hit with something</u> on a weekly basis

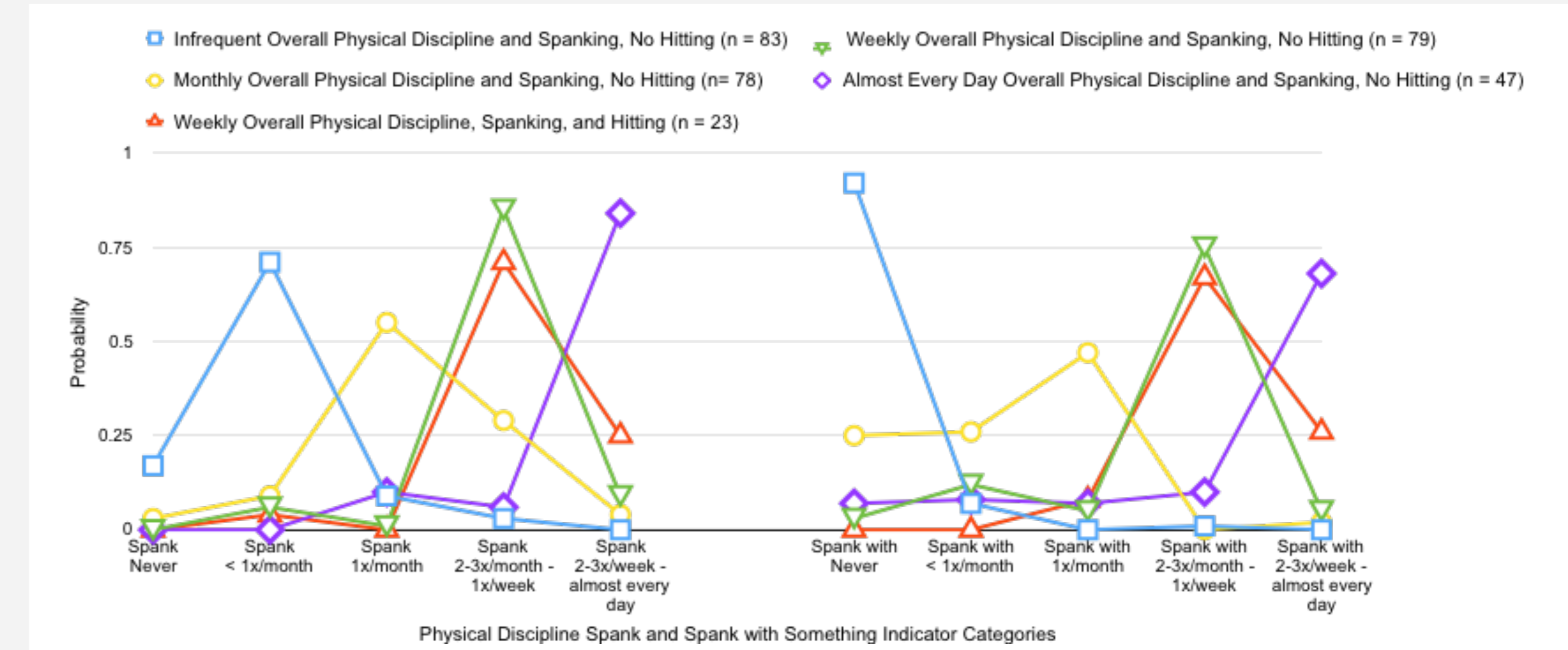


Figure 2. Comparison of probabilities for kindergarten frequency of spank and spank with something within each of the discipline latent classes

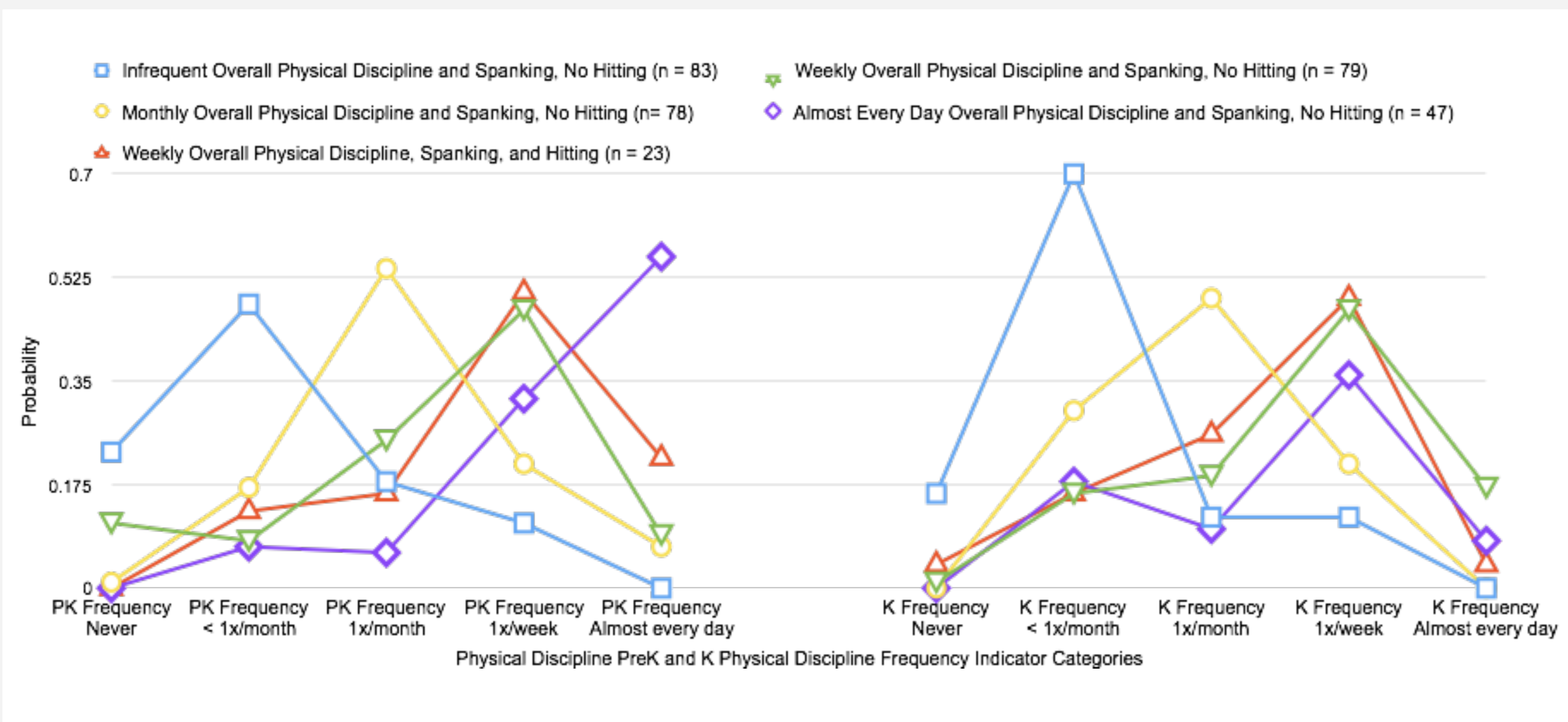


Figure 1. Comparison of probabilities for each prekindergarten and kindergarten overall discipline frequency category within each of the discipline latent classes

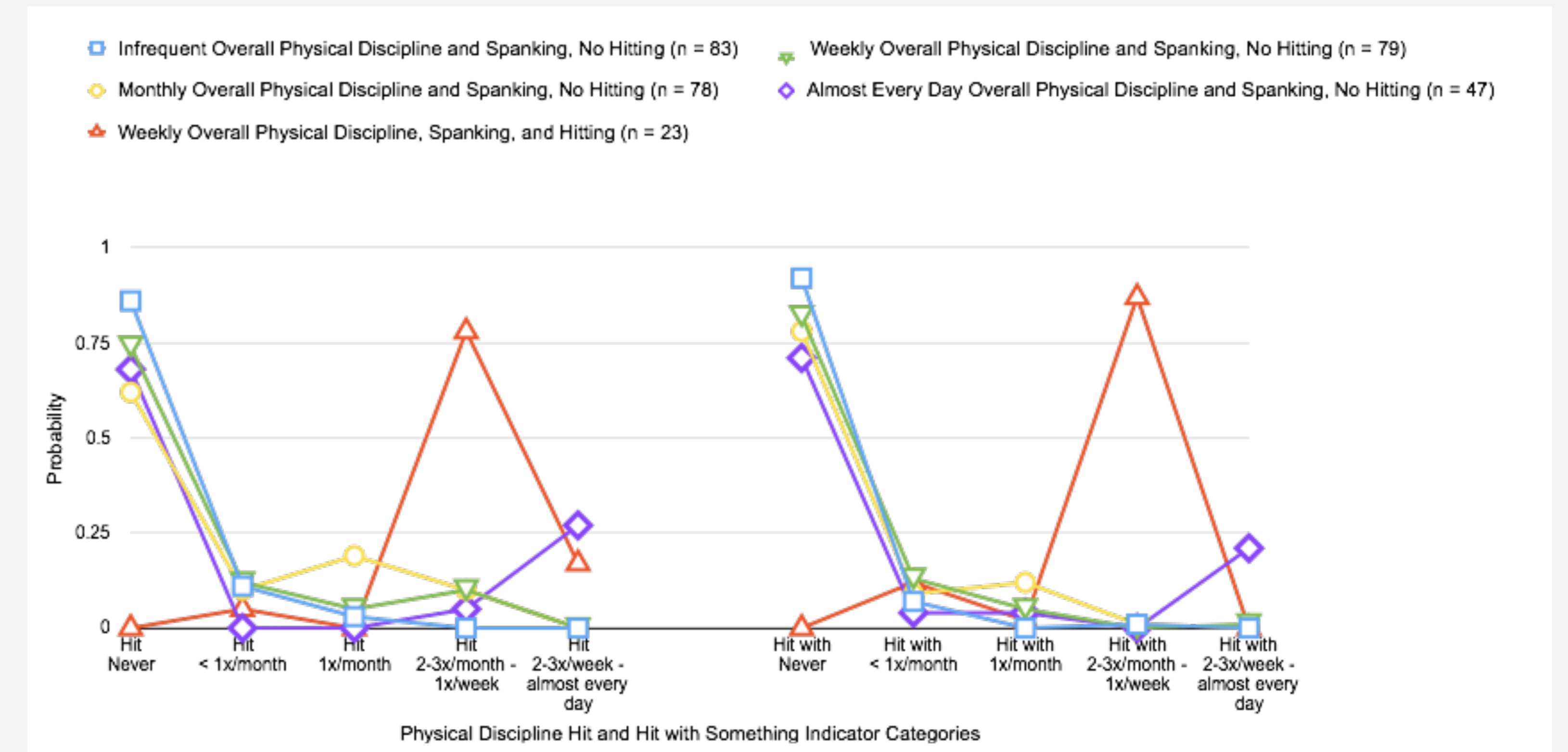


Figure 3. Comparison of probabilities for kindergarten frequency of hit and hit with something within each of the discipline latent classes

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## Associations with Latent Classes of Early Childhood Discipline Among African American Families

Factors	Associations with Physical Discipline Latent Class Membership
Child gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significantly <b>more girls</b> in the '<i>Infrequent Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' class than in the '<i>Weekly Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' and '<i>Almost Every Day Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>', <math>\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 11.88, p = .05</math>.</li> </ul>
Marital status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'<i>Weekly Overall Physical Discipline, Spanking, and Hitting</i>' class had significantly <b>fewer married parents</b> than all classes except the '<i>Almost Every Day Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' class, <math>\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 21.56, p &lt; .001</math>.</li> <li>'<i>Weekly Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' had significantly <b>more parents who had never been married</b> than the '<i>Infrequent Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' class, <math>\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 10.43, p = .03</math>.</li> </ul>
Parents' income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents in the '<i>Almost Every Day Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' class had <b>income that was significantly less</b> than parents in all other classes except '<i>Weekly Overall Physical Discipline, Spanking, Hitting</i>'.</li> </ul>
Perception of Neighborhood Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents in the '<i>Almost Every Day Overall Physical Discipline and Spanking, No Hitting</i>' class <b>perceived their neighborhood as significantly less safe</b> compared to those in all the other classes except '<i>Weekly Overall Physical Discipline, Spanking, Hitting</i>', <math>\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 14.13, p = .01</math></li> </ul>
Family Stress	No significant associations with physical discipline class membership, $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 6.63, p = .16$ .
Parents' education	No significant associations with physical discipline class membership, $\chi^2(4, N = 310) = 8.39, p = .07$ .

## Key Takeaways

- Using LCA resulted in the identification of physical discipline patterns among AA parents defined by discipline frequency and type. There was variation in the use of physical discipline among African American parents.
- Married parents were less likely to use physical discipline more than once a month, whereas parents who never married were more likely to discipline their children weekly.
- Parents who used physical discipline most frequently had a significantly lower income than those who used discipline less frequently.
- Parents who used physical discipline almost every day perceived their neighborhood as significantly less safe compared to almost all parents except those who used discipline weekly.

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## Limitations

- The timing of physical discipline during early childhood could have been more specific.
- The definition of physical discipline was subject to interpretation by parents.
- Replication is needed to determine if physical discipline and physical maltreatment are consistently and accurately measured in this population, and can be identified in other African American samples.

## Implications

- African American families vary in physical discipline during early childhood and this variation may result in sub-groups with different demographic characteristics.
- More investigation is needed to understand the relations between the parenting challenges African American parents face and their disciplinary responses.
- African American parents who perceive their neighborhood as unsafe may use physical discipline as a strategy to protect their children. To reduce physical discipline use, practitioners and policymakers should consider parenting and child maltreatment prevention interventions that also focus on improving the safety of the neighborhoods and communities in which low-income African American children live in.

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