

Parental Discipline Styles: A Study of Its Effects on the Development of Young Adults at the University Level

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Abstract

The present study examined the significance of methods of discipline used by parents and how these methods of discipline consequently affect multiple aspects of their child's development well into adulthood. Participants were young adults ranging from ages 18-55 recruited from various university psychology courses. The participants were given an online questionnaire measuring quantitative data. This questionnaire asked about methods of discipline the participant's parents used on them, if they were ever spanked as children, if they believe spanking to be harmful to children, which methods of discipline made them feel worse, and how they would rate their current level of self-esteem, and about the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Keywords: parental discipline, authoritarian, authoritative, harsh discipline, negotiation.

Introduction

Research regarding conflict-tactics used by parents is often contradictory, most significantly regarding whether there are negative effects following the use of harsh discipline and, if so, what these may be. Research suggests that the use of harsh discipline is significantly related to the use of abusive child rearing whenever the child is a parent (Steinmetz, 1977), and to the existence of conflict within families (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991). Subsequently, high amounts of conflict have been shown to negatively impact self-esteem (Pawlak & Klein, 1997).

Understanding the effects of harsh discipline on children, and more importantly if it has any long-term effects is important because parents, educators and caregivers are often unsure as to which method of discipline is best to use with children. The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between various factors important to child development, which may be influenced by the use of harsh discipline. These factors include self-esteem, parenting styles, conflict management techniques, and ultimately whether or not harsh discipline was used on the participants of this study.

Studying relationships between parenting styles and conflict management techniques is beneficial in further understanding the effects of the quality of parent-child relationships. Studying relationships between the use of harsh discipline and the child having suffered physical assault is important in determining if the severity of harsh discipline is a predictor of harsh physical and/or verbal abuse. And ultimately, studying the relationships between the use of harsh discipline and self-esteem is important because there is strong evidence that children exposed to harsh or abusive parenting are at risk for outcomes including delinquency, academic failure, difficulties with peers, and substance abuse (Simons, et al. 1991); behaviors which ultimately affect our communities.

Conflict-management techniques

Conflict-management techniques are also studied in order to determine if there is any physical or psychological maltreatment of children by their parents. The two types of conflict-management techniques examined in the present study include harsh discipline and negotiation. For the purpose of the present study, harsh discipline can be defined as corporal punishment and harsh verbal punishment which includes name-calling, profanity, and/or causing shame to child (Simons, et al. 1991; Straus, et al. 1998).

If conflict-tactics show physical and/or psychological maltreatment is present in the form of harsh discipline, it can be a significant factor negatively influencing the development of the child (Straus, Hamby,

Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). A study conducted by Turner and Finkelhor (1996) found that there were associations between the use of corporal punishment and an increased probability of physical aggression and other anti-social behavior. Although the frequency and severity of the punishment is important to take into account, research suggests that the use of corporal punishment may increase the chances of an individual resolving conflicts later in life with physical aggression and possibly causing injury (Turner & Finkelhor, 1996).

Negotiation is a conflict-management technique which, in contrast to harsh discipline, has shown to have positive effects on the development of a child and on child-parent relationships. Studies show that when negotiation is used as a conflict-management technique, a child is more likely to adopt positive behaviors and have a stronger relationship with their parents (Vereecken, Legiest, Bourdeaudhuij, & Maes, 2009). One such study, found that negotiation techniques implemented by both parent and child are crucial to a healthy and supportive relationship within the family (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Baumrind, 1991; Sternberg, 1987).

Parenting styles and conflict-management techniques

Parenting styles are defined as parenting behaviors and attitudes that set the emotional climate of parent-child interactions (Seigler, Deloache, & Eisenberg, 2006). According to a study done by Diana Baumrind (1973) there are three parenting styles, which include, authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, and permissive parenting. These styles of parenting are determined by two specific measures which are first, the degree of parental warmth, support, and acceptance a parent gives their child; and secondly, the degree of parenting control and demandingness toward the child (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). While authoritative parents tend to have a high quality relationship with their child with equal amounts of warmth and demandingness, authoritarian parents do not. Authoritarian parents tend to be high on the amount of parenting control and demandingness they exert onto their child and tend to use harsh punishment more frequently (Seigler, et al., 2006).

Parenting styles and conflicts within the family have been shown to have negative effects on the development of an individual's self-esteem as they are growing up. A study done by Diana Baumrind (1991) found that children who were raised by authoritarian parents tended to be unhappy, unfriendly, have low self-confidence, and were relatively lower in social and academic competence. The same was true as children grew to be adolescents (Baumrind, 1991).

Self-esteem and harsh discipline

The use of corporal punishment has also been linked to a wide variety of negative mental health outcomes, including internalizing characteristics such as lower self-esteem (Gershoff, 2002). A study done by Bender, Allen, McElhaney, Antonishak, Moore, Kelly, & Davis, 2007, correlated the use of harsh discipline with the ability of young adults to establish autonomy while maintaining a healthy parent-adolescent relationship. They found that the use of harsh discipline by both parents resulted in greater adolescent depression. They also found that the use of harsh discipline by mother resulted in adolescents who were less engaged and warm toward their mothers. This negative effect on the parent-adolescent relationship is found to result in adolescents reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem.

The present study

The purpose of the present study was to examine if there were any relationships between perceived parenting styles, conflict-management techniques (such as harsh discipline and negotiation), the use of physical assault, and self-esteem. The present study focused on four goals in order to analyze any relationships which may exist between these variables.

The first goal of this study was to examine if there is a relationship between perceived parenting styles from the participants and the use of harsh discipline as they were growing up. This was proposed by the hypothesis: 1.) There will be a significant positive relationship between the use of harsh discipline on an individual and having an authoritarian parent (Seigler, et al., 2006). The second goal was to examine if there is any relationship between perceived parenting styles and the use of negotiation when resolving conflicts in the family. This was proposed by the hypothesis: 2.) There will be a positive significant relationship between the use of negotiation when solving conflicts and having an authoritative parent (Seigler, et al., 2006). The third goal was to examine whether there is any relation between harsh discipline and the child having suffered physical assault from the parents, as proposed by the hypotheses: 3) There will be a significant relationship between the use of harsh discipline on an individual and

having a parent who has used physical assault on the individual (Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). The fourth goal was to examine if there is any relation between the use of harsh discipline as the participant was growing up and the participant's reported low self-esteem. This was proposed by the hypothesis: 4.) There will be a significant relationship between an individual's low self-esteem and the use of harsh discipline from their parents toward them (Gershoff, 2002).

Method

Participants

The sample of participants who completed this study consisted of 53 (39 female, 14 male) undergraduate college students. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 ($M = 18.72$, $SD = 7.77$). Five were freshman, 14 were sophomores, 16 were juniors, and 13 were seniors. Participants' racial backgrounds included White/Caucasian (75%, $n = 40$), Hispanic (19%, $n = 10$), Black/African American (2%, $n = 1$), and other or non-specified ethnic identities (4%, $n = 2$).

Procedure

All participants were college students enrolled at a public university in Boise, Idaho. The results of this study were obtained from a questionnaire created for this study. Participants were given information about the questionnaire and chose to participate by accessing the questionnaire via a website link provided to them. After giving consent, participants completed demographic information followed by various scales used to measure (a) self-esteem, (b) parenting styles, (c) conflict management techniques, and (d) harsh discipline use. The questionnaire took an average of 35 minutes to complete.

Measures

Parental authority. The students' perceived parenting style was assessed using the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991). The PAQ was developed to measure Baumrind's (1971) three parenting prototypes with 10 questions each, and it consists of 30 items per parent for a total of 60 items. Items are rated on a five-point likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*), where higher scores reflect greater amounts of parenting style. The PAQ produces authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative scores for each parent. Alpha levels for the three subscales include: authoritarian parenting for mother, $\alpha = .622$, authoritarian parenting for father, $\alpha = .596$, authoritative parenting for mother, $\alpha = .665$, authoritative parenting for father, $\alpha = .634$, permissive parenting for mother, $\alpha = .606$ and permissive parenting for father, $\alpha = .657$. A sample question regarding authoritarian parenting includes, "My mother felt that wise parents should teach their children early just who is boss in the family." A sample question for authoritative parenting includes, "As I was growing up my mother gave me clear direction for my behaviors and activities, but she was also understanding when I disagreed with her." A sample question for permissive parenting includes, "As I was growing up, my mother seldom gave me expectations and guidelines for my behavior."

Adult-Recall Conflict Tactics Scale. The CTS2 is a revised version of the original Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). Participants are instructed to respond to items assessing both their own behaviors and their parents' behaviors over the past year. For the purpose of this study, participants were instructed to respond assessing their own and their parents' behaviors during the year in which they were in eighth grade (approximately 13-14 years old). This change was made due to the participant pool which consisted of university students and many had most likely not lived with their parents for one or more years.

In this study, two of the five main subscales were used: Negotiation and Physical Assault. All subscales were further broken down into minor subscales which consisted of assessment of the mother's behavior, of the self's behavior toward their mother, of the father's behavior, and of the self's behavior toward their father. The CTS2 was scored on a scale of 0-7 (0 = *never*, 1 = *once*, 2 = *twice*...7 = *did not occur this year but has occurred in the past*) based on the frequency the behaviors occurred during that specific year. The alpha levels for the subscales include: negotiation mother, $\alpha = .659$, negotiation father, $\alpha = .645$, negotiation of self toward mother $\alpha = .604$, negotiation of self toward father, $\alpha = .615$, physical assault mother, $\alpha = .785$, physical assault father, $\alpha = .762$, physical assault of

self toward mother, $\alpha = .769$, physical assault of self toward father, $\alpha = .759$. A sample item from the CTS2 includes, “My mother showed me she cared about me even when we disagreed.”

Harsh discipline. Each individual completed a four-item Harsh Discipline Scale for each of their parents. The items were adapted from Straus et al. (1980) and asked the respondents to indicate how their mother (or father) interacted with them when they were the age of 13-14 years old. They answered statements such as “When you did something wrong, how often did your mother lose her temper and yell at you?” and indicated their level of agreement based off of a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*).

Self-esteem. Students completed a measure of global self-esteem by answering the ten-item ‘Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.’ The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale requires respondents to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with 10 statements (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself”) using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), (Rosenburg, 1965).

Results

To examine whether the use of harsh discipline significantly correlated with perceived parenting styles, the use of physical assault, and self-esteem, Pearson’s r correlation was computed between the use of harsh discipline and parenting styles, the use of physical assault by mother, the use of harsh discipline and the use of physical assault by father, and between the use of harsh discipline and self-esteem. Table 1 represents the correlations found between harsh discipline and parenting styles. Table 2 represents the correlations found between harsh discipline and self-esteem, and the correlations found between harsh discipline and the use of physical aggression.

Question-by-question analysis

The first hypothesis was that the use of harsh discipline on an individual by their parent(s) has a positive relationship with the individual’s parent being authoritarian. When examining the relationship between harsh discipline using a correlation with the Parental Authority Questionnaire, the result was a positive correlation between the use of harsh discipline and having an authoritarian mother ($r = 0.45, p = 0.005$) and a positive correlation between the use of harsh discipline and having an authoritarian father ($r = 0.406, p = 0.011$).

The second hypothesis was that the use of negotiation between the parent(s) and the individual has a positive relationship with the individual’s parent being authoritative. When examining the relationship between negotiation using a correlation with the Parental Authority questionnaire, the result is a positive correlation between the use of negotiation and having an authoritative mother ($r = 0.73, p = <0.001$) and a positive correlation between the use of harsh discipline and having an authoritative father ($r = 0.66, p = <0.001$).

The third hypothesis was that the use of harsh discipline on an individual by their parent(s) has a negative relationship with an individual’s self-esteem score. When examining the relationship between harsh discipline using a correlation with Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale, the result was no correlation between the use of harsh discipline and an individual’s self-esteem score ($r = 0.23, p = 0.17$).

Discussion

Prior research on the use of harsh discipline has not specifically addressed the relationship between the parenting style of a child’s parent and the manner in which they solve conflicts in the home. It also has not addressed as to whether this relationship between child and parent is reciprocal. In the present study, reported parenting styles and the conflict-tactics they reported as being used in their home were analyzed to see whether there was a relationship between these variables and if perhaps the parenting-style influenced the conflict management technique being implemented.

In the present study, we found parents who implemented harsh discipline as a conflict-tactic were more likely to be reported as having an authoritarian parenting style. This was found to be true for both mother and father. It was also found that a parent who implemented negotiation as a conflict-tactic was very likely to be reported as having an authoritative parenting style. In regard to self-esteem, it was found that the use of harsh discipline did not have a significant effect on the current level of self-esteem reported by the individual.

Surprisingly, it was not only found that harsh discipline was associated with authoritarian parenting, but we also found a very strong positive relationship between having an authoritarian father and having an authoritative

mother. This held true for authoritative parenting as well. This is intriguing for future studies, which may want to further analyze why parents of the same child reported having similar parenting styles.

The aforementioned findings regarding parenting styles and the relationship parents have with their children may suggest that authoritarian parenting, which is noted for having reduced warmth in the relationship a parent has with their child, may lead to less empathetic methods of discipline. Parents may want to show they have control and using harsh discipline may be their way of demanding respect from the child. They may also demand compliance with the rules and using harsh discipline may be the only way they believe they will attain it. On the other hand, an authoritative parent, who notably has more warmth in their relationship with their child, may use more subtle techniques, such as negotiation, because of the type of relationship they have with their children.

The lack of a relationship between the use of harsh discipline and self-esteem was a surprising one, given that previous studies showed that the use of corporal punishment was linked to a wide variety of negative mental health outcomes, including internalizing characteristics such as lower self-esteem (Gershoff, 2002). An explanation for this could be that while corporal punishment is a form of harsh discipline, it does not encompass every type of harsh discipline used. Therefore, when a student reported their parent used harsh discipline, we cannot know if they used corporal punishment specifically or if perhaps mostly verbal punishment was used. We could also take note that maybe harsh discipline was not severe enough to cause damage to self-esteem and perhaps the student had built resilience due to other factors aside from their relationship with their parent.

A few limitations to our study include the variability of our participants. Our participant pool was not as varied culturally. Previous studies show that culture plays a large role into how children are disciplined and what those effects are to the child. Certain countries such as Jamaica do not discourage corporal punishment or harsh discipline at all; since harsh discipline is the accepted norm, the study shows that the effects of such discipline style are not very significant (Smith & Mosby, 2003). If there was more of a cultural variation, we would be able to have results which could apply to a more general population, rather than a select population which was represented by the present study.

Other limitations would include not having input from the parents. While participants were able to answer questions regarding memories they had from childhood, the accuracy of these memories may not be as reliable without the input from the parents. A child may not remember the events as they actually occurred or may have not judged the severity of the punishment accurately. A future study which could include participation from the parents would perhaps include more complete results.

Overall, the present study found that there are significant relationships between the type of conflict-tactics used by parents and their parenting style. This is important to know for future studies which could delve more specifically into why these relationships occur. Knowledge in areas of discipline and relationships between adults and children are of value to parents, educators, and caregivers so that they may be more educated as to what are the most effective methods of discipline to use on children in order to foster a healthy development.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix for Study Variables: Discipline & Parenting Styles

Measures	Harsh Discipline Subscale	Negotiation Subscale for Mother	Negotiation Subscale for Father
Mother Authoritarian	0.45**	-0.06	-
Father Authoritarian	0.41	-	0.19
Mother Permissive	0.29	-0.12	-
Father Permissive	0.03	-	-0.18
Mother Authoritative	-0.01	0.73**	-
Father Authoritative	-0.05	-	0.66**

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Study Variables: Harsh Discipline, Physical Assault, Self-Esteem

Measures	Harsh Discipline Subscale
Physical Assault by Mother	0.29
Physical Assault by Father	0.56*
Self-Esteem Subscale	0.23

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