Early Childhood Discipline: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This paper is comprised of a literature review concerning early childhood discipline. The paper specifically highlights discipline with regard to American children as the rift between cultures is significant enough, which creates the necessity for a mono-cultural examination. The discourse covers historical perspectives, generational theories, gender issues, parental styles, the methods of discipline, and corporal punishment. Corporal punishment addresses the history and manner of the debate, beliefs and practices, corporal punishment in public schools, in religion, and a conflation of the issues. Spanking and current legislation pending in one State for curtailing use of it by parents for their children under 3 is discussed.

Early Childhood

Discipline

Corporal Punishment

Spanking

Literature Review
Early Childhood Discipline

Child discipline is a popular topic. With millions of children being reared at any given time, there is little wonder as to why. Despite the prevalence of occurrence in this area, however, there is no clear consensus regarding guiding principles. On the contrary, when one studies the aspect of corporal punishment (i.e., physically disciplining children), the topic is full of controversy.

In writing this paper, we are establishing three delimitations to early childhood discipline. The literature is so vast we are arbitrarily choosing to focus only on certain aspects of early child discipline. The delimited areas may be addressed at times as they relate to the main topic, but they are not the paper’s focus.

First, the focus is on the early child. Adolescents obviously continue to need discipline in their lives from parents and others, but this topic is beyond the scope of the course for which the paper is written.

Second, the focus is on American children. Research obviously has been conducted on children outside of the United States regarding early childhood discipline. Some research, such as that by Solis-Camara and Fox (1995) working with Mexican and American mothers, has shown some similarities in mother’s parenting styles.

Similarly, Erbacher (2002) found differences in that Greek parents tend to focus on children more than American parents do. The results of the study showed that more Americans recall receiving corporal punishment as children than do their Greek counterparts.

Still, while similarities exist across cultures, so do differences. For example, Curran (2002) notes that physical punishment is outlawed in Sweden and Norway. Curran
indicates that Sweden and Norway are just two of nine nations that lawfully prohibit the use of corporal punishment by parents in relation to children. In sum, the culture differences are viewed as significant enough to choose only American children as the focus for this particular paper.

Third, the focus of this paper is not child abuse. It is acknowledged that child abuse and early childhood discipline are related topics which affect each other (Graziano, 1994). Although incidences of reported abuse among middle-class Americans have appeared to level-off in recent years (Knutson and Selner, 1994), the issue is still one which warrants research and attention. It is not included in this paper, however, for two reasons. One is that defining “discipline” and defining “abuse” can be a very difficult differentiation to make from the literature. The reason is simply pragmatic. That is, the topic of child abuse would deserve an entire paper, in its own right, given the complexities and vast amount of literature on the subject.

**Historical Perspectives**

Two authors present overviews of childhood discipline as they relate to historical perspectives. Forehand and McKinney (1993) provide four trends in American discipline practices. The first was a movement from strict to lax discipline which sent mixed messages to young children. The second involved the authority for expertise in the area of childhood discipline. Specifically, the authority was transferred from Puritan religious teachings to “experts” in the social science fields. The third was legislative efforts focusing on children’s rights. This continues currently with debate on corporal punishment. USA Today, January 25, 2007, wrote that California is now trying to legislate a ban on spanking of children under age 3. The fourth trend was the change that
fathers experienced in childrearing and discipline as women have entered into the work
place.

Andero and Stewart (2002) state that corporal punishment has been a type of child
discipline since colonial times. These authors note that this form of discipline is traced
back to England, which is currently the only European state still allowing corporal
punishment.

Taylor (1987) presented an overview of childrearing attitudes in 19th century
Western cultures. She reports that it was during this time period that Western countries
(this is the term she uses, but in the article she makes direct reference only to the United
States, England, and Australia) shifted from a predominantly corporal punishment view
of child rearing to one of providing loving, moral rebukes. Reasons for this shift include
the lessening of religious influence on day-to-day life, mankind being viewed as good and
perfectible (rather than depraved), medical theories and research showing fragility in the
human body, the influence of temperance literature depicting child physical abuse, and
the dynamics involved with generational immigrants (especially in large cities with
crowded populations). Taylor concludes that this time period saw “the transformation of
many Western societies from patriarchal, religion-based communities to paternalistic (but
still patriarchal), state-based communities” (p. 431).

Generational Theories

There are generational theories that suggest parents discipline their children
according to practices their parents used. Bower-Russa, Knutson, and Winebarger (2001)
also concluded from their study on disciplinary history that individuals, when asked to
rate whether a certain action, such as hitting or slapping, was abusive/non-abusive, those
who had experienced the same form of discipline as children were less likely to rate the action as abusive. In this paradigm, therefore, the “rod” becomes passed (figuratively speaking) like a baton from one generation to the next. The compilation of families across the United States doing this results in the current discipline of children milieu.

A study by Kennedy (1995) did show a significant relationship between the use of corporal punishment and whether or not corporal punishment was administered by one’s parents. It is significant to note, however, that the sample Kennedy used in this study were men and women from the rural South. Given the transgenerational racial prejudice and other cultural aspects of this area of the country, it is difficult to know to what degree one can generalize these data to Americans living in other areas of the country.

Although the transgenerational nature of corporal punishment may be somewhat tenuous, verbal and physical abuse apparently is more identifiable. Hemenway, Solnick, and Carter (1994) showed a relatively consistent relationship between verbal and physical abuses and having been verbally or physically abused as children themselves. The encouraging news from their data, however, showed that most people who were verbally or physically abused as children did not grow-up to abuse their own children. Therefore, choices, rather than predestination, are salient factors in assisting people from abusive backgrounds.

Gender Issues

Relative to gender issues in early childhood discipline, two findings appear in the literature. The first relates to corporal punishment in the schools, and the second relates to gender issues of compliance. Shaw and Braden (1990) analyzed 6,244 discipline files which showed a small, yet statistically significant relationship between race and corporal
punishment in school. More germane to this paper, however, is the fact that they also found a significant relationship between gender and corporal punishment. In particular, boys were swatted more frequently than girls. This finding also held true after controlling for the severity and frequency of “punishable behaviors” by boys and girls.

In sum, although apparent compliance is not that discrepant between boys and girls, the likelihood of being swatted in school for non-compliance is greater for boys—and more severe for boys when it occurs. Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1998), at the same time note, however, that boys are more likely to show physical aggression and that girls are more likely to show relational aggression (e.g. exclusion of peers, gossiping, etc.). Thus, the swats that boys receive may be related to the types of non-compliance that they show—rather than the amount of non-compliance.

Erden and Wolfgang (2004) showed that teachers are likely to have different discipline philosophies in view of gender and appropriateness of behaviors in various discipline situations. A special note is awareness of this inequality of response to gender issues and discipline needs to be addressed in teacher training programs.

Also, Straus (2001) concluded from his survey of several studies that boys are not only disciplined physically more in schools, but also in the home. While boys may receive more discipline, Straus has concluded that many parents believe they should “toughen up” their boys and make ladies out of their girls. Straus also believes that parents encourage misbehavior in their boys referring to the child as a “little devil.” This difference in discipline styles reflects the biased views of parents in America as they believe for their son to grow to be a man, they must use corporal punishment more frequently. Straus does admit that corporal punishment has decreased over the years but
still notes that in the second National Family Violence Survey boys were physically punished more often than girls.

Another additional gender difference emerged from the literature studied for this paper. The difference relates to how boys and girls “perceive” parental discipline. Barnett, Quackenbush, and Sinisi (1996) examined factors affecting children’s perceptions of power assertion, love withdrawal, and induction methods of parental discipline styles. In their study, boys rated power assertion and love withdrawal as reflecting more parental sensitivity and fairness than girls did. Girls, on the other hand, tended to rate the inductive approach more favorably than the boys did. They conclude: “The present pattern of gender-linked results, considered in the context of earlier finding, suggests the following generalization: Just as power assertion and induction may be perceived as more justifiable for males and females, respectively, power assertion and induction may be perceived as more justifiable to males and females, respectively” (p. 421 emphasis original).

It should be noted that gender differences between boys and girls is difficult to generalize and can be even more difficult to make accurate inferences. Socialization and sex-role stereotyping processes are undoubtedly at work, for example. As previously seen, these differences may alter with variables such as different regions of the United States. Gender differences between boys and girls vis-à-vis early childhood discipline is a complex issue--and could justifiably warrant an entire paper by itself.

**Corporal Punishment**

As stated earlier, the most controversial issue addressed in the literature, and consequently in this paper, is corporal punishment. This issue is controversial to such an
extent that some prominent writers (who, in this context, are highly motivated to sell books--or at least their publishers are) skirt the issue. The point is that with as controversial and sometimes emotionally-charged as this topic has historically been, and it is unlikely that a panacea or complete solution anytime soon.

Beliefs and Practices of Parents Regarding Corporal Discipline

Everyone agrees that “harsh” physical discipline should not be exercised on children (McCord, 1997). At the same time, however, Furnham (1995) reports that most parents believe that an occasional mild spanking does not cause any permanent damage to children. In fact, Straus (1991) found that 84% of a national sample of adults believed a “good, hard spanking is sometimes necessary.” Relatively consistent with these “beliefs,” Straus and Donnelly (1993) report that most adults do exercise corporal punishment with toddlers, and about half of early adolescents receive such discipline (at least on an occasional basis). Similarly, Saadeh (2002) also found that between 70% and 90% of parents spank their children intermittently. A survey by Dietz (2000) found that almost half of parents had spanked their child at least once during the past year. Over half of those parents reported that they had corporally punished their child at least six times during that year.

A study conducted by Holden, Coleman, and Schmidt (1995) involved 39 college-educated mothers (aged 22-41 years old) of 20 boys and 19 girls (35-37 months old). The mothers were contacted via pre-and-post home interviews and daily phone interviews regarding the discipline events during the given 14 day period. The majority of the mothers reported spanking an average of 2.5 times per week. Of 537 “serious” child misbehavior incidents, 88 of them ended in spanking.
In sum, data suggest that most parents approve of the notion of spanking. Further, most parents indeed do spank their children—to varying degrees and in varying amounts. But the literature is also clear, however, that not all “experts” concur that this should be the prevalent protocol.

Corporal Punishment and Anti-social Behavior

Straus and Donnelly (1993), for example, assert that although corporal punishment is intended to curb anti-social behavior, the opposite often results. Gershoff (2002) shares the position statement for the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) on corporal punishment, and the effects on increasing antisocial behavior (ex. Stealing), downhill spiral of relational trust, developing depression, and/or detrimental development of cognitive abilities.

This assertion is also made in a widely-cited article by Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims (1997) in which the authors show a link between spanking and antisocial behavior (ASB). Data was collected from a national sample of 807 mothers (children were 6-9 years old) from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child Supplement. After controlling for previous anti-social behaviors, family socio-economic status, sex of the children, and the extent to which homes provided emotional support and cognitive stimulation, the researchers found a significant relationship between parents’ spanking their children and increased subsequent antisocial behavior by their children. They conclude: “When parents use corporal punishment to reduce ASB, the long-term effect tends to be the opposite. The findings suggest that if parents replace corporal punishment with nonviolent modes of discipline, it could reduce the risk of ASB among children and reduce the level of violence in American society” (p. 761). It is noteworthy that because
Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims’ article was published in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, a journal published by the American Medical Association (AMA), the media sometimes ascribed this as the “AMA opinion” (see Schulte, 1997). Actually, all three authors are Ph.D. researchers and university professors (at the University of New Hampshire and Texas Christian University)––and are in no way connected with the American Medical Association or profession.

**Corporal Punishment in Public Schools**

Another area where corporal discipline becomes controversial relates to the school setting. Andero and Stewart (2002) report that under common law teachers are allowed to administer corporal punishment; however, certain school districts deem it illegal. Ferraro & Weinreich (2006) report 23 states allowed “reasonable” corporal punishment as a disciplinary technique in public schools. Mason (2000) reports that a majority of a sample of middle school administrators chose not to use corporal punishment, even when the law allows for it.

This would seem to paint a relatively favorable picture for swatting unruly children in public schools. But again, the subject is very controversial. Andero and Stewart (2002) note that school is the only public institution which still allows physical punishment. Corporal punishment has been banned from prisons and military institutions. Eggleton (2001) reports that research has shown corporal punishment in schools to be ineffective and produce negative self-concepts in the children. Staley (1994) reports similar feelings by day care workers regarding the use of corporal punishment by workers in day care milieu. Romeo (1996) summarizes what she believes teachers’ sentiments to
be: “Ultimately, as long as CO is permitted in schools, everyone loses. Educators should be teaching and modeling the principle that hands are not for hitting” (p. 230).

In sum, an interesting clash emerges. On the one hand, parents generally support the notion and practice of spanking with their own children; and to a lesser degree, they support it in the public school. Teachers and experts, on the other hand, however, tend to be far less supportive of corporal punishment--both in an out of public school.

Corporal Punishment and Religion

Ellison and Sherkat (1993) note that conservative protestant Christians tend to have some of the most strongly-held beliefs as well as accompanied actions regarding corporal discipline. Specifically, they tend to believe in it and practice it.

A research study conducted by Wade and Kendler (2001) showed that the frequency of religious attendance was the only variable likely to predict the use of corporal punishment in the home. Specifically, their study with identical twins evidenced that parents who regularly attended church used physical discipline more frequently as a discipline for their children.

Wiehe (1990) compared 423 persons affiliated with religious denominations which emphasized a “literal” belief in the Bible with 458 persons who were affiliated with religious denominations which did not subscribe to a literal interpretation of the Bible relative to their child discipline practices. He found that persons who were affiliated with denominations which believed that the Bible should be applied and practiced literally were statistically more likely to hold to positive attitudes about corporal discipline than were the non-literal denomination affiliates.
Ellison, Bartkowski, and Segal (1996) examined data from the National Survey of Families and Households, a large probability sample, relative to parental practices of child discipline. They found that parents affiliated with conservative protestant denominations reported greater incidences of using corporal discipline than other parents did. The authors concluded: “This association appears to be due to the fact that these parents tend to believe (1) that the Bible is inerrant and (2) that the Bible contains the answers to all human problems and concerns. The link between these aspects of theological conservatism and spanking withstands controls for parental evaluation of obedience, as well as a host of sociodemographic variables” (p. 663).

In sum, simply being “religious” may not be the best predictor of how one will views corporal discipline of children. That is, if a person views Biblical injunctions simply as prudent and interesting proverbs about child rearing for cultures gone by (Carey, 1994), then one is less likely to use spanking as a discipline technique than if one believes Biblical principles to be the basis of all life and practice (Swindoll, 1988). In the former case, other Biblical principles such as embracing the rights of God’s redeemed creatures (Oosterhuis, 1993) will subsume principles which call for exercising corporal discipline.

Synthesizing the Issue of Corporal Punishment

It seems appropriate now to draw some conclusions and/or attempt to synthesize the data regarding corporal discipline with children. Five particular points are made in these regards.

First, there appears to be no “one” answer to the dilemma and controversy of the topic. Serious criticisms are also leveled at the “abolish corporal discipline” conclusions
of Straus et. al.’s publications. Ambati, Ambati, and Rao (1998) fault Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sim (1997) for not controlling for variables such as school settings, presence of ADHD, and family dynamics.

Larzelere, Baumrind, and Polite (1998) have sharp criticisms for Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims. Namely, the latter authors failed to report in their literature review and/or consider in the conclusions the fact that numerous previous studies have shown beneficial effects from childhood spanking. Furthermore, the latter researchers fail to account for how muchspanking occurred in various subgroups of children. That is, occasional spankings tended to show much more positive results than parents who used frequent spankings. In sum, Straus, and his colleagues are simply not yet scientifically ready to make the all-encompassing and broad-sweeping generalizations that they are making at this time (and which as frequently cited by the media). Rather, according to critics, Straus, is looking at data through the grid of his pre-conceived notions.

Second, much of the literature appears to be looking at the issue in too broad of terms. That is, researchers are trying to assess whether all corporal punishment is good; or whether all punishment is bad. Rather, perhaps better productivity in this field can be made by attempting to assess for whom is corporal discipline good/bad; and in what situations might corporal punishment be good/bad.

For example, Gunnoe and Mariner (1997) conducted a longitudinal research study which included a relatively representative sample of parents using a multiple outcome variables assessment procedure. Among other things, they found that spanking was effective at reducing subsequent fighting for 4 to 7 years--but only for Blacks. The same
discipline technique was counterproductive overall for 8-11 year olds and for non-Hispanic European Americans.

In sum, more attention should be paid in attempting to harmonize or synthesize data relating to corporal punishment rather than polarizing conclusions in broad-sweeping ways. A multitude of discipline techniques—including spanking—can be shown “to work” in terms of producing desired results in children (Roberts and Powers, 1990). How, where, when, with whom, and why they work are much more interesting questions for researchers to pursue in this area.

Third, although it would be convenient to think that parental support would overcompensate for the distress that children feel as a result of experiencing corporal punishment, it evidently does not. Specifically, a study by Turner and Finkelhor (1996) was conducted to assess whether or not support offered to children would relieve corporal punishment distress. Their finding showed that it did not—at least not totally. Parental support was somewhat useful in relieving some psychological stress in cases where parents exercised moderate or low amounts of corporal punishment in the home. There was little improvement, however, in relieving stress in cases where there was frequent corporal punishment exercised. Once again, however, the subject of physical discipline shows itself to be complex, multifaceted, and in need of multi-variant analyses (as opposed to only macro-analysis).

Fourth, a note should be made regarding what the literature does not address regarding corporal punishment. Specifically, it is unclear as to what the ultimate goal is when one reads the literature in this area. Sometimes, it appears as though spankings are administered in order to shape the will without breaking the spirit (e.g., Dobson, 1992).
At other times, the literature suggests that discipline is designed to foster a conscience which internalizes the principles which the parents want taught (e.g., Kochanska and Thompson, 1997). The point is that researchers are likely to continue finding discrepant conclusions in the area of corporal discipline, given the fact that there is no clear consensus as to what the ultimate goal of the administration is.

Fifth, the area of corporal discipline seems to have two built-in problems which prohibit much potentially interesting research studies. One is that true-blue “experiments” can be difficult to conduct vis-à-vis children and corporal punishment (McNeil, Clemens-Mowrer, Gurwitch, and Funderburk, 1994). Randomly assigning children into two groups--half of whom will have pain inflicted on their physical bodies can be difficult to justify at times, given the stringent requirements to be met by the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Code of Ethics. Parental permission, do no malevolence, responsibility for undoing any potential damage or trauma, and other such principles mitigate against conducting serious “experimental” studies in this area.

Related to this dilemma is the problem of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) through whom most researchers must have their experimental designs approved since they involve the use of human participants. That is, even if a researcher can design an “experiment” involving the administration of corporal punishment to some children, and not to others, which passes muster of the APA Code of Ethics, and the personal moral grid of the researcher, it might not pass muster with the IRB. In fact, it seems to me like potentially few such studies might be approved by typical research university IRB. The point is that nobody--not the university nor individuals--enjoys taking research risks vis-à-vis legal responsibility for children who may become hurt in a spanking study.
Moreover, since corporal discipline is such a hot topic today, the media typically thrives on reporting any “interesting” events in this area. And children being hurt in a spanking study can easily be viewed as “interesting” to the media. Again, neither universities nor individual faculty who comprise an IRB typically relish the heat of media attention, criticism, and debate which accompanies children who might get hurt in a spanking study.

In sum, under the current modus operandi by which university researchers must operate, it is unlikely that much serious experimental research will be produced in the near future relating to early childhood discipline. This, of course, means that there will continue to be a dearth of data which allows cause-and-effect inferences to be made. Thus, the field of corporal discipline is likely to remain ambiguous and controversial for many years to come.

Parenting Styles

The parenting styles first described by Baumrind are relatively well known in human development circles. Relationships were assessed between children’s social competence and the variety of parenting styles shown by their respective parents (Baumrind, 1968; Baumrind and Black, 1967; Baumrind, 1971). Her research involved combining lengthy interviews, standardized testing, and home studies of 103 preschool children from 95 families. Baumrind then assessed the functioning-levels of children on a variety of scales, and matched these children with their parents’ child-rearing categories. She then collapsed the parenting categories into three “styles” and described how she understood the typical childhood behaviors as they related to these styles.
The authoritarian parents are controlling, rigid, and cold. They are strict and demand unquestioning obedience from their children. And above all, children are not allowed to question or cross their parents. Permissive parents provide lax and inconsistent feedback to their children. They typically are less involved in their children’s lives than other parents. Such parents also may place few limits on their children’s behaviors. The authoritative parents are firm, setting clear limits on their children’s behaviors. Although they seem to be somewhat strict, unlike authoritarian parents these people allow interaction and dialogue with their children. Explanations are given for consequences, and compromise or negotiation can occur over some issues. 

Most lecture presentations of Baumrind’s model seem to emphasize, however, that there may be occasions when each of the parenting styles could be the most apropos to the situations at hand (e.g., in an emergency or crisis—use authoritarian; when on vacation—permissive may be appropriate at times). Recently, Papps, Walker, Trimboli, and Trimboli (1995) have emphasized that Baumrind’s model (and especially the notion that the authoritative style is superior to the others) is culturally-specific. That is, authoritative parenting—including early childhood discipline—is based on the values of most Western (and Eurocentric in particular) cultures. Other ethnic groups may find the other parenting styles—or combinations of elements of them—more apropos and adaptable to their values and lifestyles.

Baumrind’s model has had a positive heuristic affect on both generating new ideas about parenting styles as well as producing research in this area. For example, Chess and Thomas (1987) describe secure, insecure, intimidated, overinterpretive, victimized, and pathological parenting; and Arnold, O’Leary, Wolff, and Acker (1993) describe laxness,
overreacting and verbosity as parenting styles. Thompson, Raynor, Cornah, Stevenson, and Songua-Barke (2001) describe four distinct parenting styles illustrated as follows: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved.

Jewell and Stark (2003) note that parents who are negligent of their child’s behaviors and activities and who show needs for further skills in parenting, are more likely to have children diagnosed with Conduct Disorder (CD). These families most often lack formation and discipline, and the children with CD report growing up with this lax, uninvolved style of parenting. The point is that researchers are active in viewing parenting behaviors (including discipline) through theoretical grids and continually deriving new models and accompanying research studies to test them.

The Manner in Which Discipline is Applied

The final aspect of early childhood discipline addressed in the literature relates to the manner in which discipline is applied by parents. Five principles emerge from the available data. First, children seem to prefer intervention from parents--rather than being ignored (Dadds, Adlington, and Christensen, 1987). They seem to be wired in a way whereby they seek attention and to know that the people responsible for them have at least a minimal level of concern for their well-being. Second, children seem to need consistency in discipline (Furman, 1986; Rizzo, 2002). Even if the consistency is unpleasant (e.g., the father who pulls his daughter’s hair), it can be preferred to more gentle, but inconsistent punitive measures (e.g., calling a child unkind names one day and using love withdrawal the next--for the same offenses). Predictability may be the key vis-à-vis early childhood development. Third, parents’ mental health affects parenting styles
and early childhood discipline (Kochanska, Kuczynski, Radke-Yarrow, and Welsh, 1987). This influence may occur through overt means such as words spoken or behaviors exercised; or it may occur through more subtle forms as in the case with parental mood disorders (Cicchetti and Toth 1998). Fourth, Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, and Pike (1996) suggest that mild punishment combined with reasoning and rationale for the discipline produce the best results vis-à-vis early childhood discipline. Fifth, Crouch and Behl (2001) concluded from their study that the level of stress a parent experiences is lessened by the parent’s belief that corporal punishment is valuable. Therefore, the beliefs of each parent significantly affect the behavior altering patterns they choose. These findings would be consistent for people (mentioned earlier in this paper) who take the Bible literally regarding discipline. That is, Proverbs Proverbs 29:15 teaches that the rod and reproof give wisdom. The implication, of course, is that one does not work without the other.

In addition to the preceding principles, the literature also suggests that parents consider the following five factors as they set out to discipline small children. First, beliefs and practices about early childhood discipline are likely to be highly influenced by the circumstances at the time when discipline is needed (Stolley and Szinovacz, 1997). This tends to hold true both at micro (e.g., amount of stress experienced at the time) as well as macro levels (e.g., socioeconomic status of parents). Regarding the latter case, mothers who rear children when they (i.e. the mothers) are younger tend to differ widely from their counterpart mothers who are older (Fox, Platz, and Bentley, 1995). Walsh (2002) also found a difference between younger and older mothers in this regard. As such, non-spanking mothers had a higher likelihood of being older and having older
children than spanking mothers. Also, those older mothers had fewer children at home than mothers who preferred spanking. A mother obtaining a college education appears to be a salient variable in predicting differences in parenting styles (Miller and Scarr, 1989; Vogel, 1992). Collett (2001) found that parents who did not complete high school show more dysfunctional discipline styles, compared with those who completed high school (Collett, 2001).

Second, Brenner and Fox (1998) indicate that generating a plan for childhood discipline (and following it) early in a child’s life is generally better than scrambling for one after behavior problems arise. In fact, as a rule of thumb, the longer child behavior problems persist without deliberate parental intervention, the more difficult it may become to extinguish the unwanted behaviors. This tends to be particularly true for “attitudes” (Dobson, 1979).

Third, more severe behaviors generally call for more severe discipline methods (Socolar and Stein, 1996). Parents typically have continuums of discipline ranging from less severe to more severe (e.g., scolding...to being “grounded” for certain lengths of time). As with adult society, punishment should generally fit the crime.

Fourth, Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, and Girmius-Brown (1987) suggest that older children should be afforded greater explanations and even bargaining or negotiating privileges than are given to younger children. This is consistent with both cognitive as well as moral developmental notions regarding children. That is, as children acquire greater capacities with regards to the complexities and consequences of their actions, it makes good developmental sense to assist them in using these abilities vis-à-vis practicing prosocial and adaptive behaviors.
Fifth, Toner (1986) indicates that disciplining children for misbehavior shortly after it occurs is more highly effective at producing parents’ desired ends than waiting until later times. He argues that developmentally, children have shorter memories; and time delays in between actions and parental reactions may result in missed learning opportunities for children.
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