Children's Aggression toward Parents and Discipline Methods Used by Mothers and Fathers of University Students

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Background
• Extensive research indicating that corporal punishment increases child aggression ($d=.36$ in childhood, $d=.57$ in adulthood)
• Most prior research on discipline has measured child aggression against peers, siblings, or people outside family, rarely against parents
• Past child aggression is biggest predictor of aggression against parent, but recent aggressive punishment by parents significantly increases risk
• Social learning theory
• Patterson: coercive family process

Gershoff, 2002; Pagani et al., 2004; Patterson, 1982

Study Goals
• Compare parental discipline received by children who do and do not report physical aggression against mothers and fathers
• Evaluate role of parent sex (as disciplinarian and recipient of aggression)

Coercive Family Process

Child misbehaves

Parent attempts to discipline

Parent desists

Child escalates

Hypotheses
• Parents of aggressive children use power-assertive discipline methods more often than parents of non-aggressive children
• Parents of aggressive children use inductive discipline methods less often

Thanks
• NIMH grant T32MH15161
• University of New Hampshire
• Murray Straus and Family Research Laboratory colleagues
• Nicola Graham-Kevan

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http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/IPS.htm

Paper presented to International Family Aggression Society Preston, United Kingdom, 18 March 2008
Method
- University of New Hampshire site of International Parenting Study
  - #1 of 40 nations
- University students received extra credit for participation
- Reported retrospectively on discipline and aggression toward parents at age 10
- N=654
- Average age 19.0 (1.7), 98% age 22 or younger
- 29% male
- 93% White

Measures: Child to Parent Aggression
- Conflict Tactics Scales – Child-Parent (CTS-CP)
- Physical aggression toward mothers & fathers
  - Slapped or punched
  - Hit with something that could hurt
  - Kicked or bit
- Frequency at age 10: 0 to more than 20 times
  Based on CTS-PC (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998)

Measures: Discipline
Adult-recall Dimensions of Discipline Inventory
- 5-part self-report questionnaire
  A. Demographics
  B. Child misbehavior examples and frequency
  C. 26 discipline behaviors (x2 for mother and father)
    11 response choices: never to 2x/day
  D. 23 items (x2 for mother and father) about discipline mode (e.g., impulsivity, consistency) and context (e.g., conflict with other parent, perceived ineffectiveness)
  E. Respondent’s appraisal of 26 discipline behaviors
  (Straus & Fauchier, 2008)

Power-Assertive Discipline Items
- Corporal Punishment
  - Shake or grab
  - Spank, smack
  - Use object
  - Wash mouth with soap
- Psychological Aggression
  - Shout or yell
  - Try to make child feel ashamed or guilty
  - Hold back affection
  - Call child names
- Deprivation of Privileges
  - Take away allowance, toys, or other privileges
  - Send to bed without meal
  - Withhold privileges until child does something
  - Ground child or restrict activities outside home
- Penalty Tasks and Restorative Behavior
  - Give child extra chores as a consequence

Inductive Discipline Items
- Diversion
  - Give child something else to do
- Explain/Teach
  - Explain rules
  - Show or demonstrate right thing to do
- Reward
  - Praise
- Monitoring
  - Tell child parent is watching or checking
  - Check on child to tell that doing a good job
- Penalty Tasks and Restorative Behavior
  - Make child apologize

Types of Aggressive Children
- 90% Non-Aggressive
- 10% Aggressive
Types of Aggressive Children

- 90% None
- 10% Physical Aggression Toward Parents
- 5% Mother Only
- 2% Father Only
- 3% Both Parents

Physical Aggression Toward Parents

- 90% None
- 3% Mother Only
- 2% Father Only
- 5% Both Parents

Mother’s Power-Assertive Discipline

- Yearly Discipline Frequency
- $F(3,645) = 5.18, p < .01; \text{both > none}$

Mother’s Corporal Punishment

- Yearly Discipline Frequency
- $F(3,646) = 6.39, p < .001; \text{MO and both > none}$

Prevalence of CP by Mother

- $F(3,646) = 5.36, p < .01; \text{MO and both > none}$

Mother’s Psychological Aggression

- $F(3,645) = 3.95, p < .01; \text{MO > none}$
Recap of Power-Assertive Results

- Consistent with hypothesis, power-assertive discipline related to child aggression toward parents
- Higher prevalence of corporal punishment for aggressive children
  - Almost all FO children received corporal punishment during reporting year
Four Types of Families: Non-Aggressive Children

- 90% of cases
- Low power-assertive discipline by both parents
  - 1/3 prevalence of corporal punishment by each parent
  - Corporal punishment an average of once per month by each parent
  - Psychologically aggressive discipline once per week by each parent
- Moderate inductive discipline by mothers (daily) and fathers (5x/week)

Four Types of Families: Children Aggressive Toward Mothers

- 3% of cases
- High power-assertive discipline by mothers, low by fathers
  - 3/4 prevalence of corporal punishment by mothers, 1/2 by fathers
  - Corporal punishment twice per week by mothers, once per month by fathers
  - Psychologically aggressive discipline 5 times per week by mothers, once per week by fathers
- Moderate inductive discipline by mothers and fathers (daily)
- Fathers similar to fathers of non-aggressive children

Four Types of Families: Children Aggressive Toward Fathers

- 2% of cases
- Moderate power-assertive discipline by mothers, high by fathers
  - 2/3 prevalence of corporal punishment by mothers, almost 100% prevalence by fathers
  - Corporal punishment once per week by mothers, more than twice per week by fathers
  - Psychologically aggressive discipline once per week by mothers, five times per week by fathers
- Very high inductive discipline by mothers (2x/day) and fathers (1.5x/day)

Four Types of Families: Children Aggressive Toward Both Parents

- 5% of cases
- High power-assertive discipline by mothers and fathers
  - Over 1/2 prevalence of corporal punishment by mothers, 2/3 prevalence by fathers
  - Corporal punishment 1.5x per week by mothers, almost once per week by fathers
  - Psychologically aggressive discipline three times per week by mothers, four times per week by fathers
- Low inductive discipline by mothers (4x/week) and fathers (3x/week)

Recap of Inductive Results

- Similar pattern for mothers’ and fathers’ discipline, regardless of whom child is aggressive toward
- Moderate inductive discipline for none and MO children, very similar
- High inductive discipline for FO children
- Low inductive discipline for children who hit both parents

Father’s Inductive Discipline

- F(3,637) = 3.26, p < .05; FO > both
**What’s Next?**

- Larger N using other sites of International Parenting Study
- Other factors that distinguish the four types of families
  - Why do MO families look more like those with non-aggressive children?
- Other data sets: cross-reporter and longitudinal investigations
- Clinical samples (wait a few minutes...)

**Conclusions, cont’d**

- Small but important minority (10%)
- Examining child aggression toward one parent at a time leads to different pattern of results
- Clinically, child aggression toward parents (especially fathers) may serve as marker for large constellation of problems: conduct disorder, impaired parenting, family violence

**Conclusions**

- Children hit the parents who are aggressive toward them; OR, parents are aggressive toward children who hit them
- Chicken and egg problem
  - Regardless, either direction = trouble
- May be different mechanisms for mother-only vs. father-only vs. both

**Four Types of Families**

**What Else Characterizes the 4 Types?**

- Differences in expected direction (both or FO & both in bad direction)
  - Interparental violence
  - Child misbehavior
  - Perceived ineffectiveness
  - Inconsistency
  - Cognitive framing
  - Responsiveness
  - Warmth
  - People outside family encouraging child to hit back
  - Criminal history in late adolescence (incl. seriously attacking)

But...

- Impulsiveness: MO mothers high, FO fathers high