

Exposure to Harsh Parental Punishment and Later Participation in High-Risk Behaviors among Young African-American Adults

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Abstract

Harsh parental punishment does have a lasting effect on children's behavior. In fact, it can create a level of emotion in children that interferes with learning and slows down their ability to control undesirable behaviors (Carlson, 2009). The goal of the current study was to examine if there was a correlation between exposure to harsh parental punishment and later participation in risky problem behaviors. This study consisted of a total of 85 African-American participants between the ages of 18 and 27. All participants completed surveys that measured perceived severity of parental discipline and participation in high-risk behaviors. Pearson correlations revealed significant relationships between these two sets of variables among these young African-American adults.

Key words: harsh discipline, African American young adults, punishment, parental

The development of behavior from childhood into adulthood is typically associated with the parent-child relationship. Children do not—and cannot—grow up as solitary individuals; parenting constitutes an all-encompassing ecology for development (Bornstein, 2001). Discipline has been acknowledged as one of the most important factors in the child-parent relationship. Discipline is defined as - the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience (Merriam-Webster.com, 2016). Many parents believe that disciplinary actions instill morals and values into their children, therefore increasing the chance of their children becoming productive members in society.

Parents will go to great lengths to ensure that their children transition into responsible adults; consequently, many incorporate discipline, sometimes harsh, into their parenting as a necessary tool that is expected to enhance the child's ability to learn valuable lessons and to differentiate between right or wrong.

Though disciplinary actions might be carried out with good intentions, many parents do not realize that what they perceive as suitable discipline for the child might be perceived as harsh discipline from the child's perspective. Previous studies (i.e., Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber, 1995; Williamson, Borduin, & Howe; 1991) have acknowledged that harsh discipline can create potential hazards for the child, can be ineffective, and counterproductive. A history of exposure to parental harsh physical discipline has been linked to negative outcomes for children, ranging from conduct disorder to anxiety and low self-esteem (Bender et al, 2007).

Parental Discipline

There are various ways to go about disciplining children. There are non-physical ways such as time out or removal of privileges, and there are physical ways such as spanking, paddling, smacking, etc. The most common form of discipline is known as corporal punishment. According to Straus (1994), "corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior". The instruments and language of corporal punishment may involve a switch, a belt, a shoe, a hand, paddling, whipping, or spanking. However, what connects them is how often they are incorporated as parenting tools. Evidence indicates that almost all American parents use spanking and other forms of corporal punishment on children to correct misbehavior. Straus and Stewart (1999) presented data obtained from a nationally representative sample of 991 American parents and found overall prevalence rates (i.e., the percentage of parents using any type of corporal punishment during the previous year) varied according to the age of the child. These rates were reported as 35% for infants (0–12 months), 94% for preschool-aged children (3- and 4-year-old), and 13% for older adolescents (age 17). Corporal punishment tends to vary by household and by culture. Many parents incorporate different techniques and manners when using physical punishment to discipline their children. Discipline can be different in severity, duration, and frequency in different households. Among Americans, studies report more frequent corporal punishment use among African American parents (Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004 and Straus & Stewart, 1999).

African-American Child Rearing Practices

Parenting beliefs include perceptions, expectations, attributions, attitudes, knowledge, ideas, goals, and values about all aspects of child-rearing and child development (Bornstein, 2001). These beliefs tend to shape the behaviors of parents and the methodology of their parenting. It has been suggested that within African American families, an extremely high value is placed on respecting, obeying, and learning from elders in the kinship network and community (Willis, 1992). Respect has been defined in terms of showing honor and esteem to authority figures and elders or deferring to a senior's greater command of pertinent skills (Briggs, 1986). To obtain this form of respect, many African-American parental figures incorporate discipline into child-rearing. According to Barbarin (2002), African-American families tend to be more hierarchical and are more likely to be strict, to hold demanding behavioral standards, and to use physical discipline.

Though many parents discipline in the best interest of the child, many others may discipline simply out of anger and frustration targeted towards their children. One important distinction to identify is to determine whether the corporal punishment being administered is child-centered or parent-centered. Child-centered indicates that parents are purposefully using physical discipline in a controlled manner because they believe it will be in the best interest of their children, whereas parent-centered disciplining stems from a place of rage, extreme stress, or loss of control because the child's actions are interfering with the parent's needs (Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004). If the orientation of physical discipline is parent-centered, it may be an inappropriate disciplinary tactic and cause for greater concern (Whaley, 2000). It has been suggested, that both child-centered and parent-centered corporal punishment are used among African American families, depending on the family and the challenges they may be facing (Mitchell, 2008). The use of physical punishment is considered normative characteristic of parenting. However, the context in which physical discipline is carried out determines whether the outcomes will be detrimental or positive for the child developing into adulthood.

High-Risk Behaviors

High-risk behaviors in this study are defined as behaviors that potentially expose people to harm, or significant risk of harm. Typically, these behaviors include, sexual and substance use behaviors. Risky sexual behaviors are defined by the increased risk of negative outcomes such as, contracting or transmitting disease, or occurrence of unwanted pregnancy. The type of behaviors that are associated with risky sexual behaviors include having more than one sexual partner, changing sexual partners frequently, and using unreliable methods of birth control, or using birth control inconsistently.

Surveillance data show higher rates of reported sexually transmitted diseases (STDS) among some racial or ethnic minority groups when compared with rates among whites. For example, in 2012, the overall rate among blacks in the United States was 1,229.4 cases per 100,000 populations. The rate of Chlamydia among black women was over six times the rate among white women (1,613.6 and 260.5 per 100,000 females, respectively) and among black men was over eight times the rate among white men (809.2 and 95.9 cases per 100,000 males, respectively) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013).

The impact of drug use and abuse are felt more keenly in the Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities (Bachman, Safron, Sy, & Schulenberg, 1991). Among those aged 12 or older, blacks and persons from other racial and ethnic groups were equally likely to require treatment for substance use in the past year. That is, 9.1 percent of blacks (2.6 million persons) and 9.3 percent of persons from other racial and ethnic groups (20.4 million persons) required treatment for illicit drug or alcohol use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2013). The rate of illegal drug use in the last month of 2014 among African Americans ages 12 and up was 12.4%, compared to the national average of 10.2% (SAMHSA, 2015).

Harsh Punishment

Harsh punishment is defined as excessive use of any form of aggressive physical punishment (open-hand slap, spanking with belt, switch, paddle, etc.) and any form of aggressive verbal reprimanding (screaming, cursing, name calling). Almost 90% of parents surveyed reported one or more instances of harsh verbal discipline (i.e., screaming, cursing, threatening or name calling) directed at their children in the past twelve months (Strauss & Field 2003). Severe punishment used as the exclusive method of discipline on a regular basis can result in undesirable and even damaging consequences. Beyond the type of harsh discipline, the context within which harsh discipline occurs may be associated with the level of behavior problems manifested by children (McKee et al., 2007).

Harsh punishment can have negative implications. For example, a child may view punishment as an endorsement of aggression and force; consequently, learning that an authoritative figure has more power and control over a less authoritative figure. Harsh punishment can also provoke feelings of resentment, and counter-aggression, thus, may cause the child to possibly act out and participate in negative behavior. Harsh punishment can also affect the child's ability to maintain self-control; therefore, causing the child to become impulsive. Impulsivity, therefore, is the lack of desire to control undesirable behavior which can increase the chances of later participation in high-risk behavior. The the purpose of the present study, therefore, is to determine whether there is a correlation between exposure to harsh parental punishment and later participation in high-risk behavior among young African-American adults

Method

Participants:

A total of eighty five African American men and women ranging from ages 18 to 27 served as participants in the present study. Seventy five percent (n=63) of the participants identified as female and 25% (n=22) identified as male. Participants were recruited from various social network sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

Instrumentation

A demographic questionnaire consisting of questions relating to age, gender, race, and ethnic background was administered. A 28-item questionnaire adapted from a previously revised survey entitled "Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events (CARE-R)" by Katz, E., Fromme, K., & D'Amico, E. (2000) was utilized to assess past frequency and future participation in high risk behavior.

The questionnaire was designed to measure (a) drinking and drug use behavior in more detail, (b) sexual behavior with a "new" and "regular" partner, and (c) coercive sexual behavior. The Care-R has been shown to have test-and retest reliability and validity in previous studies on risky behaviors (Katz, Fromme, & D'Amico, 2000).

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS1) constructed by Straus and Hamby (1997) was used to measure parent-to-child physical assault. The CTS1 measures exposure to harsh parental punishment highlighting three variables: 1) Reasoning, 2) Psychological Aggression, and 3) Minor or Severe Physical Assault. The CTS1 has been tested for reliability and validity in previous studies assessing parent-child physical assault (Straus & Hamby, 1997). Test-retest reliability data was available from studies using the CTS1 parent-to-child physical assault scale. The coefficients ranged from .49 (McGuire & Earls, 1993) to .80 (Amato, 1991).

Procedure

Once approval was obtained from the Alabama A&M University Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were sought from across the campus, as well as various social network sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Various professors at the University were asked to provide students in their classrooms with the direct link to the online survey. Posts were also created on the media outlets previously mentioned that provided a direct link to the online survey. Data were collected through the utilization of the Survey Monkey database. Participants were provided with an Informed consent form and a brief description of the survey at the beginning. The online survey consisted of questions that pertained to Demographic background, Exposure to harsh punishment, and Past participation and future participation in risky behavior. The participants were made aware that the survey was completely voluntary as well as anonymous. There was no identifiable information required while participating in this study; therefore, participants' identities were protected.

Results

To determine if there was a correlation between participants who have been highly exposed to harsh parental punishment and their participation in high-risk behaviors Pearson r correlations were performed on the data. Table 1 shows the correlations among overall high exposure, risky drug and alcohol use, as well as, risky sex behaviors. When overall high exposure was correlated with risky drug and alcohol use the p value was 0.009. It shows there was a significant correlation between exposure to harsh punishment and risky drug and alcohol use [$r(83) = .339$; $p < .009$]. It also shows that risky drug and alcohol use significantly correlated with risky sex behaviors with a p value of 0.001 when correlated [$r(83) = .433$; $p < .001$]. There was no significant correlation between overall high exposure and risky sex behaviors [$r(83) = .125$; $p > .05$]. However, since there was a positive correlation with risky drug and alcohol use, overall high exposure and risky sex behaviors, it was thought that overall high exposure can lead to drug and alcohol use, which can then lead to risky sex behaviors. See Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations: High Exposure, Risky Drug/Alcohol, and Risky Sex

	N	High Exposure		Risky Drugs/Alcohol		Risky Sex	
Correlations		r	p	r	p	r	p
High Exposure	85	1		.339	.009	.125	.258
Risky Drugs/Alcohol	85	.339	.009	1		.433	.001
Risky Sex	85	.125	.258	.433	.001	1	

Discussion

The hypothesis that there would be a correlation between participants who have been highly exposed to harsh parental punishment and their participation in high-risk behaviors was supported. The more exposure to harsh punishment that participants reported, the more likely they were to participate in risky drug/alcohol behavior and risky sex behavior. A high exposure rate to harsh punishment correlated with high participation rates in risky drug/alcohol behaviors. Risky drug behaviors correlated with risky sexual behaviors, which therefore leads to overall high risk behaviors.

Though disciplinary actions might be carried out with good intentions, many parents do not realize that what they perceive as suitable discipline for the child might be perceived as harsh discipline from the child's perspective. Harsh discipline can create potential hazards for children, can be ineffective, and counterproductive. According to Bender et al (2007), history of exposure to parental harsh physical discipline has been linked to negative outcomes for children, ranging from conduct disorder to anxiety and low self-esteem. Therefore, it is possible that individuals who have been exposed to harsh punishment to participate in high risk behavior.

The results of this study do indicate that there is a possibility that exposure to harsh parental punishment can have adverse effects on children, thereby producing counterproductive behavior. The results, when compared to previous studies, provide some similarities and some variations. Prior research has demonstrated that adolescents who are physically abused have a range of negative outcomes (Rogosch et al., 1995; Williamson et al., 1991). Though this study focused on young adults rather than adolescents, it does reveal that young adults who have been exposed to harsh punishment are more likely to participate in risky behaviors that will lead to negative outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that parental harsh punishment can be associated with potentially harmful outcomes. Harsh punishment in this study is represented as physical punishment, and verbal aggression. Physical punishment includes being hit with an object, or being spanked, and verbal aggression includes being yelled at, threatened with physical punishment, and name calling. According to Gershoff and Grogran-Kaylor (2016), spanking was associated with unintended detrimental outcomes and was not associated with more immediate or long-term compliance, which are parents' intended outcomes when they discipline their children. Therefore, it is important for parents or households who favor physical discipline to understand the potential harms that can be associated with any forms of physical or harsh punishment, especially if physical punishment is the only discipline method being utilized. Severe punishment used as the exclusive method of discipline on a regular basis can result in undesirable and even damaging consequences (McKee et al., 2007). It is understood that discipline is an important aspect of parenting, but it is suggested that parents identify other methods such as, verbal reasoning or removal of privileges to correct undesired behavior.

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