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Child Discipline in African American Families: Current Research Findings

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Background

- Researchers and practitioners have noted that child discipline issues are often the most problem areas of preventative guidance facing helping professionals (Foster, 2012; Yoos, Kitzman & Overacker, 1995).
- White workers in particular have expressed discomfort in broaching the topic of child discipline with African American parents (Kris & Skivenes, 2011; Gray & Nybell, 1990).

Social Science

- A dominant theme in the social science literature is that African American parents use and/or endorse the use of physical discipline more than White American parents.
- Although researchers acknowledge that negative outcomes from physical discipline seen in White American children is often not found in African American children (e.g. Baumrind et al., 2002; Deater-Deckard et al, 1996; Lansford, et al, 2004), African American parents are encouraged to use alternative disciplinary strategies to avoid potential harmful effects such as child abuse (Kris & Skivenes, 2011).

Social Science

- Several writers have cautioned against pinpointing physical discipline in child discipline investigations because children are more likely to be affected by the overall program of child discipline in families (Ispa & Halgunseth, 2004; Lansford, 2010).
- When social scientists are preoccupied with African Americans spanking or “whuppin” their children, it becomes easier for researchers to deny African American parents’ their intentional, and creative child rearing qualities, qualities that are associated with being a competent parent (Adkison-Bradley, 2011; Johnson, 2006).

Social Science

- Having a balanced and comprehensive view of child discipline in African American homes is critical for social workers who have to investigate child abuse allegations, mental health counselors who have to address parenting behaviors and courts adjudicating cases concerning appropriate parenting (Coleman, Dodge & Campbell, 2010).

Contextualized Humanistic Perspective

- How we think about African American parents is how we respond to them (Johnson, 2006).
- The contextualized humanistic perspective offers an important corrective to the typical dehumanized view of African American parents because it allows the focus to be on their intentional and creative qualities (Johnson, 2006).

Contextualized Humanistic Perspective

- This perspective enables the researcher, social worker, clinician and court to humanize African American parents and remove the automatic presumption of “parenting while Black” equals children are at substantial risk of harm (Johnson, 2006; Payne, 2015).

Child Discipline in African American Homes

Child Discipline is Diverse and Comprehensive

- African American parents employ a variety of disciplinary practices to fulfill their parenting objectives (Bradley, 1998, 2000).
- Discuss matter with child, demand child not to do it again, and withdrawal of privileges are most frequently used techniques (Bradley, 1998, 2000, 2001).
- Children are warned about inappropriate behavior (Polaha, Larzelere, Shapiro & Pettit, 2004).

Child Discipline on a Continuum

- African American parents use a hierarchal disciplinary pattern in which the second disciplinary method is more severe than their first response when addressing repeated misbehavior (Adkison-Bradley et al, 2014).
- Belt, switch, or open hand (spanking) is often used as a last resort (Bradley, 1998; Denby & Alford, 1996). Use of the belt is not significant with the income or education of the parent.

Context: Situation and Age Specific

- Spanking with open hand or belt is used when child challenged parent's authority or was disrespectful (Bradley, 1998, 2000; Adkison-Bradley et al, 2014).
- Use of the belt and switch is significant with the age of the child and context of the disciplinary situation (e.g. switch/preschool and belt/elementary age). Reserved for severe situations.

Context: Situation and Age Specific

- Parents use of more firm (threatened to use or used physical discipline) disciplinary methods in severe situations with their 12 to 14 year olds was also evident.
- Parents primarily used “discuss matter” and “withdrawal of privileges” with their adolescent and late adolescent children.
- Parents use “order child not to” consistently across age groups.

Context: Situation and Age Specific

- Parents use a “warning look” slightly more with their elementary age children than they do with their preschool and adolescent age children (Bradley, 1998, 2000).

Differences Between African American Mothers and Fathers

Research Team

- Dr. Jeffrey Terpstra, Professor, Department of Statistics
- Attorney E. Dorphine Payne, Trial Lawyer
- Jamie Burgos, Doctoral Student, Department of Statistics
- Benedict Parreno Dormitorio, Doctoral Student, Department of Statistics

2014 African American Child Discipline Study

The following research questions guided the investigation.

1. What types of disciplinary methods do African American parents use to address repeated behavior?
2. Is there a significant difference between the disciplinary methods used to address repeated misbehavior with regard to the age of the child and the context of the child's transgression?
3. Is there a gender difference in the use of disciplinary practices among African American parents?

Twelve Contextual Disciplinary Situations

| 3-5 Mild | 3-5 Moderate | 3-5 Severe |
|--|--|--|
| Since your four year old child did not finish their dinner you told them they could not have dessert. Later on that evening you walk past the kitchen and notice your child sneaking in the cabinet for cookies. | Your five year old starts to run in a busy parking lot and almost gets hit by a car. | You tell your three year old to drink their juice. Your child says, "I don't want it," and throws the cup of juice on the floor. |
| 6-11 Mild | 6-11 Moderate | 6-11 Severe |
| You overhear your seven year old using profanity while playing with friends in another room. | After telling your ten year old that they can't go swimming with their friends, you hear them mumble a nasty description about you. | Glancing into your bedroom, you notice your nine year old taking money from your wallet. |
| 12-14 Mild | 12-14 Moderate | 12-14 Severe |
| You return home from running errands one morning and find that your twelve year old has invited a friend over to the house without your permission. | Your twelve and fourteen year old children engage in a physical altercation while you are on the telephone. | After telling your thirteen year old they cannot go to a concert with their friends, your child calls you a nasty name. |
| 15-17 Mild | 15-17 Moderate | 15-17 Severe |
| Your fifteen year old goes to the mall with their friends and turns their cell phone off so you cannot call them. | While checking your sixteen year old child's Facebook page, you notice they have either uploaded a provocative ("half-naked") picture of themselves or used sexual content in describing themselves. | Your seventeen year old tells you "I don't have to listen to you" and goes into another room and slams the door behind them. |

Context: Gender Specific

- African American mothers use more intense disciplinary practices than African American fathers (across all contextual situations and income levels).
- African American mothers (low income households) primarily use techniques such as “Demand child not to do it again” as a first response and “Spanking” as second response for pre-school severe contextual situations (Adkison-Johnson et al, 2016).
- African American fathers (low income households) primarily use “discuss matter with child” as a first and second response to address preschool age misbehavior (Adkison-Johnson et al., 2016).

Context: Gender Specific

- African American mothers use the warning look significantly more than fathers across all age groups (preschool, elementary and adolescent).
- African American fathers more likely to use techniques such as “discuss matter with children” as a first and second response to repeated misbehavior.
- Differences between disciplinary practices of high income mothers and fathers are primarily associated with children over the age of 12. Mothers and fathers may perceive problematic adolescent behavior as urgent, but may respond to these specific parenting situations differently.

Both Parents in The Home

There is no difference in how mothers and fathers discipline their children.

Mothers and fathers appear to present a “united front” in addressing misbehavior.

Mothers may be charged with the role of being the “first responder” in addressing problem behaviors. Fathers, albeit, aware of the child’s disobedience and the mothers response, may assume the role as the last resort disciplinarian.

Both Parents Not in The Home

- Gender effect found in the overall examination of African American parenting was largely due to parents who did not live in the same household.
- African American mothers and fathers differed in their approach with preschool and adolescent children in that African American fathers consistently used less restrictive methods (e.g. discuss matter with child) to address repeated misbehavior.

Both Parents Not in The Home

- Several studies have affirmed that African American fathers are effective in utilizing a “discussion approach” because of their insistence on respect from their children and that their children understood (from an early age) that inappropriate behavior would not be tolerated (Coles, 2010; Daddis & Smetana, 2005; Hamer, 1997).

Both Parents Not in The Home

- These results should not be interpreted as suggesting that the use of physical or intense disciplinary methods by African American mothers be viewed as harsh, reckless or reactionary.
- African American mothers in this study used a hierarchal disciplinary pattern in which the second disciplinary method was more severe than their first response.

Elementary Age Children (6-11)

- There were no significant differences in how African American mothers and fathers disciplined their elementary age children.
- At the elementary school age , children begin to manage new encounters and people such as school, teachers, and friends.
- According to Stevenson & Arrington (2009), African American parents have to consider these normal developmental experiences along with teaching their children, possibly for the first time, about the complexities of racism.

Elementary Age Children (6-11)

- It is possible that the absence of more robust differences may reflect that African American mothers and fathers use similar disciplinary approaches to address their unique parenting demands for this particular age group.

Legal Implications for Trial Lawyers and Family Court Judges

- How a parent disciplines is one of the Court's most important considerations in determining Custody and/or placement. The Court must of course be directed by the law and the facts of a case.
- Every judge, lawyer and case worker in both processes brings his/her biases and assumptions into the case. Those biases can affect whether or not a case is even brought into Court; how a judge decides a case; how attorneys represent their client (Adkison-Johnson et al., 2016).

Disciplinary Best Practice Factors

- One of the greater mine fields through which an attorney must maneuver is the psychological assessment that assists/persuades the Court when making decisions on custody, placement, parenting time or even termination of parental rights.
- One way to address implicit bias and the complexity of child discipline in family court decisions is to utilize Disciplinary Best Practice Factors (Payne, 2014)

Disciplinary Best Practice Factors

A. What context is used when disciplining the child? What happened that led up to the event?

B. Parenting style: Determination of the range of discipline used by the parent. Instead of asking the question do you spank your child; do you use time-outs; ask what disciplinary techniques are in your arsenal? When and under what circumstances are they employed.

C. Is there an informational piece that accompanies physical discipline? Do you explain why to the child?

D. Are expectations of appropriate behavior and consequences clearly defined and communicated? If you do this, you will lose your privileges. If you do that, the punishment will be more severe.

E. How does a father/mother see what he/she does differently than what the other parent is doing?

F. Does he feel as though the two methods of discipline are complimentary to one another?

G. What are the parenting goals for the child; i.e. how does the parent want to see the child as an adult?

H. How does she intend to reach these goals and/or how does his discipline play into attaining the goals?

I. Was the child injured; if so what was the extent of the injury?

J. Was the injury a directly or indirectly caused by the parent's actions?

K. What has been some outcomes (positive or negative) as a result of your disciplinary techniques?

2016 Child Discipline Study

- Field test a psycho-educational parenting group for African American mothers and fathers with adolescent children.
- This parenting group model is based on my research that focused on the disciplinary practices of African American parents (Adkison-Johnson, 2015).
- The goal of this study/evaluation is to establish base line data regarding the effectiveness and impact of the group model on African American parents.

2016 Child Discipline Study

- This first counseling group was completed in the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology December, 2015 and the next group is scheduled for February. Preliminary findings indicated that the counseling group model assisted parents in communicating more meaningfully with their children. Parents also reported positive behavioral changes in their children.

Counseling and Legal Implications

An understanding of the overall child discipline program in African American homes can provide a framework for what is healthy and functional when addressing African American child discipline concerns.

This information is necessary in properly distinguishing child discipline from acts of child abuse.

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