

## Discipline and Intergenerational Transmission

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Key Words: discipline practices, intergenerational transmission, corporal punishment

### Abstract

*The disciplinary practices that parents use on their own children affect the child throughout his or her life and influence the discipline that they plan to use with their children. This study investigated attitudes about intergenerational transmission of corporal punishment and nonphysical means of discipline by surveying 100 male and female college students ages 18-26 years of age at a Midwestern college. It was hypothesized that college students would plan to discipline their own children the same way they were disciplined as children based on the Social Learning Theory. Survey data was analyzed using frequencies, cross-tabulations, and a reliability analysis. Results indicated the majority of participants will use similar discipline practices as their parents. These results confirmed the hypothesis and were supported by the literature. Implications for practitioners include there needs to be parenting classes that address effective discipline practices. Suggestions for replication and future research are discussed.*

The way a child is disciplined has many effects on the child's physical, behavioral, and mental well-being (Bates, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, & Pettit, 2003). There is much research-based evidence of the intergenerational transmission of punishment when used as a discipline practice. Children of parents who used corporal punishment as a discipline technique tend to use corporal punishment as a discipline technique with their own children (2003). There are negative and positive perspectives on the different discipline practices from professionals and from the children receiving the discipline. For the purpose of this study, discipline is defined by Evans, Savage, and Socolar as creating an environment based on parent-child relationships that encourages positive outcomes while decreasing negative behaviors (2007). The authors reviewed the literature on different discipline practices that addressed the reasons parents use certain discipline practices and the effects of those practices on children. The authors then surveyed the perspectives of college students regarding this issue.

While gathering information for the research question- "What is the relationship between the ways college students were disciplined and how it affects the way they are planning on disciplining their own children"- the authors found it important to understand what other studies have found regarding discipline. The authors found many articles on gender-related parenting differences, however there were few on intergenerational discipline patterns. In much of the literature about discipline, there was information about corporal punishment and the effects it has on children and their development. The literature discusses how children feel about discipline practices and how harsh the punishments are that they receive. The literature in this article discusses the different types of discipline and how frequently the different types were used. Most of the surveys,

statistics, and information in this literature review helped the authors in determining variables and survey questions to ask the research sample, and the research also relates to the question about what parents or future parents determine to be effective parenting. (Coffelt, et al. 2007; Evans, Savage, & Socolar, 2007; Bates, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Lansford, & Pettit, 2003; Desbois & Konstanstareas, 2001)

Coffelt et al.(2007) talks about harsh verbal and physical discipline and the children's behaviors. This article helped with our study because it looks to see if harsh verbal and physical discipline is associated with child internal and external problems. The study found harsh discipline of each parent is significant in the context of the other parent's harsh discipline. Also that positive parenting buffers a child from the results of harsh discipline by the same or the other parent.

Evans, Savage, and Socolar (2007) discuss a study of different types of discipline with young children ages 1-3 and the changes in punishment methods that occurs between those ages. The different kinds of discipline used included, monitoring, verbal communication, modeling, ignoring, and corporal punishment, and the modes of administration included positive demeanor, negative demeanor, consistency, and follow-through. This article relates to our research question in taking a look at how discipline practices change and what discipline techniques parents use and how often.

Bates, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Lansford, and Pettit (2003) studied adolescents' attitudes about physical punishment and found that overall adolescents view physical means of punishment as negative. In families where the parents were spanked heightened the likelihood they will use spanking as a method of discipline. The article also found that children from families that use corporal punishment as means of discipline were more likely to use and endorse physical punishment.

Desbois and Konstanstareas (2001) studied about how younger children view their behavior and the harshness of the punishments they receive. The study found that children as young as four years old could make rather reliable judgments of parental disciplinary techniques.

After reviewing the literature, researchers have found many ways that parents discipline their children and that each method has different effect. What the authors did not find, however, was research that investigates whether intergenerational parenting is a reason parents discipline the way they do. Further research is needed in this area. The gap that the authors hope to fill is whether or not the method by which one was disciplined as a child will influence how one decides to discipline one's own children.

The theory the authors are using is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Muuss, 1996). This theory states that individuals learn, develop, and behave because of parent to child modeling, imitation, observational learning, media, and peers. An individual's behavior or temperament is the direct outcome of the parent's modeling and social and cultural influences on the individual. As applied to this study, this theory would predict intergenerational transmission of punishment methods – that college students will discipline their children in the same way they were disciplined by their parent or guardian.

The purpose of this study was to examine the views of college students on their parents' disciplining practices and what effects these practices may have on the participants own disciplining or future disciplining practices. The sample was comprised of college students from a small, Midwestern university. It is the authors' hope that the

results from this study will be used by parents, future parents, family therapists, family educators, day care providers, medical personnel, or any other profession working with parents and families to encourage healthy discipline practices. The central research question in this study is “What is the relationship between the ways college students were disciplined as children and how it may affect the way they are planning on disciplining their own children?” Based on the Social Learning Theory, that authors predict that parents or future parents will discipline similarly to the ways they were disciplined when they were younger. Again, this is based on the idea that individuals mimic behavior that was modeled to them when they were younger – including discipline practices.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The site of this study was at a Midwestern university. The participants included 52 female participants and 48 male participants (N=100). Six female participants were between the ages of 18-20, 33 were between ages 21-23, and eight were between the ages of 24-26. Four male participants were between the ages of 18-20, 38 were between ages 21-23, and six were between the ages of 24-26. There were 18 females and 12 males that chose corporal punishment as their parents’ discipline practice; 34 females and 36 males chose nonphysical punishment as their parents’ discipline practice.

### *Research Design*

The purpose of this survey research was to be able to generalize to a similar, larger population so that some inferences could be made about characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors of this population (Babbie, 1990). This study utilized a cross-sectional study design in that it was used to capture knowledge, or attitudes, from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The form of data collection was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly on campus due to the rapid pace of our research course, convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. The authors employed purposive, non-random sampling and aimed to sample approximately equal numbers of males and females. The authors are using nonrandom in order to be inclusive when in the classroom. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; this study has been approved by the IRB.

### *Data Collection Instrument*

In order to address the attitudes of college students about generational transmission of discipline practices, the authors designed a survey. The survey included a cover letter that contained implied information comprised of a description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known, potential risks and benefits, estimated time commitment, method of protecting confidentiality, policy on voluntary participation, contact information for the research team and the supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of two demographic questions relating to age and gender, as well as a category for discipline practice administered by parents/guardians to establish groups by which the authors could analyze data. Participants were then given eight close-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the

respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were informed by literature and theory regarding what factors relate to college students' attitudes towards discipline practices.

The authors feel that sufficient face validity has been demonstrated because each of the survey questions was connected to the subject of discipline practices and intergenerational transmission. The authors feel that the statements covered a broad range of issues surrounding discipline practices and their effectiveness and thus demonstrated adequate content validity. To increase the understandability of the survey, the authors piloted the survey to five undergraduate students. Their feedback indicated the survey was clear, concise, and ready for distribution.

### *Procedure*

Purposive sampling led the authors to collect data from classes that were specifically either predominantly female or predominantly male. We used nonrandom selection in order to be inclusive when in the classroom and to gather as much data as possible. Upon entering the classroom, one author read the implied consent form to the students while the other passed out the survey to the students participating. The authors informed the participants that participation in this study was completely voluntary, and if they wished to withdraw participation they could do at any time. The researchers instructed that completed surveys be placed in an envelope at the front of the classroom. The authors and professor for the course left the room during the survey time period to avoid placing pressure upon the students to participate, make the participants uncomfortable, or risk introducing social desirability bias. Completed surveys were stored in a secure location until data analysis.

### *Data Analysis Plan*

The data was first cleaned and then coded checked for missing data using acronyms for each variable. The first two questions on the survey were demographic variables: age and gender. The only independent variable was discipline practice (*DIS*). Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To know if the participant is planning on disciplining the same as their parents/guardians (*DSP*), if the participant viewed parents/guardians discipline as effective (*EDP*), if the trust bond was impacted due to discipline practice (*PTR*), if the participants respect for their parent was effected from discipline practice used (*PRE*), if the participant feared parents/guardian from discipline practice (*PFE*), if participant plans on using physical discipline (*PDS*), if participant plans on using nonphysical discipline (*NPD*), and if participant plans on using outside resources (*ORS*). The level of analysis in this study was the individual. Because the authors are comparing groups based on discipline practice, the data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, and mean comparisons. The authors also conducted a reliability analysis.

## **Results**

Authors conducted a reliability analysis to determine if this measure was a reliable index of the major concept – college students' attitudes on the relationship between the ways they were disciplined and how it may affect the way they are planning on disciplining their own children. A reliability analysis yielded a Chronbach's Alpha

value of .298. This value indicates that the survey items were not a reliable measure of the major concept, however if the variable *PFE* were to be removed from the survey, the reliability of the measure would increase to .51. The authors received qualitative comments at the end of a number of our surveys as well, and these comments were analyzed and themes will be discussed later in this paper.

Table 1

*Percentage Comparison Between Corporal Punishment and Non Physical Punishment Groups*

Parental Punishment Style <sup>a</sup>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>I am planning on disciplining my children the same way my parents disciplined me.</i>					
Corporal	13.3%	13.3%	23.3%	33.3%	16.7%
Non Physical	1.4%	4.3%	11.4%	40.0%	42.9%
<i>The way my parents disciplined me was effective.</i>					
Corporal	0.0%	16.7%	3.3%	50.0%	30.0%
Non Physical	1.4%	4.3%	1.4%	38.6%	54.3%
<i>The trust bond between me and my parents was not impacted by the type of discipline they used with me.</i>					
Corporal	3.3%	10.0%	20.0%	50.0%	26.7%
Non Physical	10.0%	8.6%	18.6%	24.3%	38.6%
<i>I respected the way my parents as a result of the type of discipline they used.</i>					
Corporal	10.0%	13.3%	20.0%	43.3%	13.3%
Non Physical	1.4%	1.4%	8.6%	40.0%	48.6%
<i>I feared my parents as a result of the type of discipline they used.</i>					
Corporal	23.3%	26.7%	13.3%	26.7%	10.0%
Non Physical	55.7%	15.7%	20.0%	4.3%	4.3%
<i>I am planning on using physical discipline with my children.</i>					
Corporal	13.3%	10.0%	40.0%	23.3%	13.3%
Non Physical	35.7%	31.4%	24.3%	4.3%	4.3%

I am planning on using nonphysical means of disciplining with my children.

Corporal	3.3%	3.3%	20.0%	43.3%	30.0%
Non Physical	2.9%	1.4%	4.3%	35.7%	55.7%

I am planning on using outside resources to help discipline my child (i.e. parenting programs, Family Counselor, Family Resource Center, books).

Corporal	10.0%	20.0%	40.0%	20.0%	10.0%
Non Physical	11.4%	22.9%	28.6%	25.7%	11.4%

<sup>a</sup> Corporal  $n = 30$ , Non physical  $n = 70$ .

Table 2

*Mean Comparison by Discipline Type*

	<u>DIS</u>	<u>DSP</u>	<u>EDP</u>	<u>PTR</u>	<u>PRE</u>	<u>PFE</u>	<u>PDS</u>	<u>NPD</u>	<u>ORS</u>
Corporal:									
Mean:	3.26	3.93	3.76	3.36	2.73	3.13	3.93	3.00	
SD:	1.28	1.01	1.07	1.18	1.36	1.19	0.98	1.11	
Nonphysical:									
Mean:	4.18	4.40	3.72	4.32	1.85	2.10	4.40	3.02	
SD:	0.90	0.84	1.32	.81	1.14	1.07	0.87	1.19	

*Note.* Likert Scale 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. (DIS)=Discipline practice parent/s used; (DSP) = I am planning on disciplining the way my parent/s disciplined me; (EDP)=The way my parent/s disciplined me was effective; (PTR)=The trust bond between me and my parent/s was not impacted by the type of discipline they used with me; (PRE)=I respected my parent/s as a result of the type of discipline they used; (PFE)=I feared my parent/s as a result of the type of discipline they used; (PDS)=I am planning on using physical discipline with my children; (NPD)=I am planning on using nonphysical means of disciplining my children; (ORS)=I am planning on using outside resources to help discipline my child (i.e. parenting programs, Family Counselor, Family Resource Center, Books).

## Discussion

Overall, the results of this study supported the hypothesis that college students would use the same discipline practices with their children as their parents used with them. This finding is supported by the Social Learning Theory that posited that children will develop and behave most like their parent(s) because children tend to model and imitate the people with the most influence in their lives (Muuss, 1996). The authors will first discuss each dependent variable in terms of how the results either agreed or disagreed with the literature and/or theoretical framework. Authors will then address limitations to the study, implications for future research, and concluding remarks.

In agreement with the hypothesis and the Social Learning theory, the majority of participants supported disciplining their children similar to their parents (Muuss, 1996).

A majority of our respondents also agreed that their parents' disciplining practices were effective, again supporting social learning principles. Participants responded that they maintained a trust bond between themselves and their parents through the use of discipline. This finding supports the authors' hypothesis but is in contradiction to the literature, which suggests that corporal punishment is viewed negatively by children. Additional literature supports generational transmission of corporal punishment; children whose parents used corporal punishment as a means of discipline will more likely use or support corporal punishment (Bates, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Lansford, & Pettit, 2003). Participants also feel they have a trust bond between themselves and their parents.

Much like other variables, the responses from participants were supportive of having respect for their parent(s) type of discipline practice used. This supports the hypothesis that participants respected their parents from the type of discipline they used; thus, participants will discipline like their parents and gain their children's respect according to the Social Learning Theory (Muuss, 1996). The majority of participants disagreed that they feared their parent(s) as a result of the type of discipline practices used, thus the participants will discipline the same way to not have their children fear them because of the type of discipline the participants plan on using.

Interestingly, the majority of recipients who indicated they were subjected to corporal punishment indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they feared their parents. This is interesting because results also show that the majority of participants who were the recipients of corporal punishment indicated that they were going to discipline like their parents. When asked about using corporal punishment as a discipline practice, a majority of participants who indicated they were recipients of corporal punishment indicated they were undecided about using physical discipline with their children; the research reported that using physical discipline with children causes external and internal negative effects (Desbois & Konstantareas, 2001). This result is surprising because the majority of participants stated they were going to discipline the way their parents disciplined them, using physical discipline.

Participants who did not receive corporal punishment as children indicated that they did not plan to use corporal punishment on their children, which supported the hypothesis that participants would not use physical means to discipline their children. Because this group never witnessed corporal punishment, these results also support the Social Learning Theory of intergenerational discipline practices. Surprisingly, participants who indicated that they had been subjected to corporal punishment reported that they planned to use nonphysical discipline practices. This does not support the hypothesis because most participants agreed or strongly agreed with using nonphysical means of discipline – unlike the way they were disciplined as children. The majority of participants subjected to nonphysical punishment indicated that they planned to use the same discipline strategy that was used on them, support the authors' hypothesis. Finally, participants who were subjected to corporal punishment indicated they were undecided about incorporating outside resources in disciplining their children while participants who received non-physical punishment agreed that they would seek outside resources in disciplining their children. Because of this disagreement between groups, the authors reserve judgment regarding the final hypothesis and encourage additional research.

Regarding the survey statement that participants are going to discipline their children the way their parents disciplined them, 50% of the corporal punishment category

and over 50% of the nonphysical category agreed. This supports the Social Learning theory (Muuss, 1996) that hypothesizes that children are going to use the same discipline practices as their parents. Over half the participants in both corporal punishment and non-physical punishment groups indicated that they feel their parents discipline practices were effective. This is under the umbrella of The Social Learning theory that children learn from their parents, do as their parents do, and also feel those practices are effective for them to use from generation to generation.

Analysis of qualitative data yielded several themes. Most of the comments were explaining the reason why participants answered the way that they did. Some appeared to be defending their parents and their choice of discipline practices, some were explaining their view as to why they were disciplined the way they were, and some were explaining that there was more than one discipline practice used. In relation to the authors' hypothesis, participants may be defending their parents because according to these results, the majority of our participants stated that they will use the same discipline practices and might feel they are defending themselves at the same time.

#### *Limitations*

One limitation to this survey was a small, non-diverse sample that inhibits external validity. Another limitation is the authors' decision to forego random selection because of time constraints and the number of available participants. A final limitation to this study was the inability to use this sample in longitudinal research.

#### *Implications for Practitioners*

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of students surveyed agreed that they plan to discipline their children as their parents disciplined them, supporting the idea of intergenerational transmission of discipline. Therefore, parents, family resource practitioners, family therapists, day-care providers, counselors, or teachers of parenting classes could utilize this information to increase awareness of the power of social learning and to influence healthy discipline practices by providing resources encouraging a variety of effective discipline techniques.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

The researchers recommend that future investigations utilize a larger, random, and more diverse sample to increase external validity. The authors also recommend researching which discipline practice(s) are the most effective and why. This research is providing explanations as to why people discipline the way they do, but there is a need for research regarding which discipline practice(s) are the best or most effective for their children and what criteria is being used to make these decisions apart from the intergenerational factor. If this study were to be replicated, the authors suggest either rewording or discarding the statement (*PFE*) that asked if participants feared their parents as a result of the type of discipline they used. According to a reliability analysis, Chronbach's Alpha would increase from .298 to .505 if the statement (*PFE*) were taken out of the survey. The authors speculate that this statement may be an issue because participants did not want to admit their fear of a parent(s), or felt they needed to mark the socially appropriate response.



## Conclusion

As a result of this study, the authors hope that current and future parents will take a step back and look at their discipline practices, why they are disciplining the way they are, and the possibility of using outside resources for other disciplining practice. The results of this study do support the idea of intergenerational transmission, therefore it should also be considered as an explanation for choice of discipline method in the future. The way a parent disciplines their child is very important to the well being of the child and the relationships within the family. The authors hope that current and future parents can use this study as a resource for understanding their own discipline practices.

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