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***DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES WITH CHILDREN:  
PARENTAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION,  
ATTITUDES, AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS***

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Although parenting is one of the most important roles undertaken during an individual's lifetime, the amount of information and education that parents receive for this role is variable and often minimal. Parenting behaviors are influenced by a variety of factors and conditions such as knowledge levels, and parenting abilities vary with parents' own childhood experiences, value systems, education levels, and other life experiences. One ongoing parenting issue is the management of and appropriate response to child misbehavior. A review of the topics of discipline and physical punishment are discussed in this article in relation to definitions, practice, and outcomes. A study of parents' attitudes regarding physical punishment and their sources and needs for related parenting education are presented. Findings from this study ( $N = 170$ ) indicate that parents receive parenting information from a variety of sources, most frequently through discussions with other parents, books on parenting, and their own experiences. The topics identified most frequently by respondents are age-appropriate disciplinary responses and expected child development and behaviors. These areas of information should be made available on a wide basis to parents of young children.

Parenting is one of the most important, challenging, and rewarding roles undertaken during an individual's lifetime. Parenting behaviors are influenced by a variety of factors and conditions. Belsky (1984) proposes that the determinants of parenting are directly influenced by the parent, the

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child, the broader social context, and the interrelationships of these influences. However, within the parent factor of this equation, knowledge levels and abilities of parents vary with their own childhood experiences, value systems, education levels, and other life experiences. This article focuses on the parenting issue of disciplinary responses to child misbehavior and presents the findings of a study of parents of young children regarding their sources of parenting information, current attitudes regarding the use of physical punishment, and their needs for related parenting education.

The terms *discipline* and *punishment* are frequently used interchangeably, although they do not have the same meaning. Discipline generally involves instruction and guidance, whereas punishment is intended to suppress responses of the child that are viewed as undesirable by the parent (Holden, 2002). Although punishment, either physical or non-physical, may be considered to be part of an overall disciplinary response or as a means of achieving discipline (Gershoff, 2002a), it is also important to distinguish between physical and nonphysical methods of punishment. Nonphysical punishments would include removal of privileges such as watching TV as a consequence to misbehavior. If done in conjunction with instruction and guidance regarding the misbehavior and highlighting preferred behaviors, the punishment can be considered part of a disciplinary response.

### **PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT**

In a similar manner, physical punishment also may be part of a parental disciplinary response or it may be used in relative isolation, without teaching and guidance, as an attempt to stop undesired behavior. A common definition of physical punishment used in the related literature 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” (Straus, 1995, p. 75). There is evidence that the use of physical discipline is linked with a number of negative child behaviors and experiences associated with parental corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2002b) such as aggression (Patterson, 1982; Steinmetz, 1979), mental health problems (Lasky, 1993; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996), and perhaps most concerning, its role in the emergence of child physical abuse and its related morbidity and mortality (Gil, 1979; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, 1994; Vasta, 1982).

The Canadian Incidence Study of Child Maltreatment in Canada (Trocmé et al., 2001), reported that 69% of substantiated physical abuse cases were as the result of inappropriate punishment. Very young children are particularly vulnerable to injury as a result of physical punishment because they

do not have the physical capability to withstand the force that might be associated with it; yet young children aged 3 to 4 years comprise one of the peak age ranges for receiving physical punishment. This result may be because parents find verbal control, such as reasoning or ordering, to be ineffective with children of this age group (Gelles & Straus, 1979).

Despite such findings, physical punishment is not uncommon in North America, where more than 90% of American parents reported having used it (Straus, 1991), and 93% reported having received it as children (Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, & Babonis, 1994). Estimates of Canadian parents who have spanked their children have ranged from 70% (Durrant & Rose-Krasnor, 1995) to 88% (Lenton, 1990). Although it has been argued that societal sanctioning and the prevalence of physical punishment contribute to the incidence of child physical abuse (Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Straus, 1994), no large-scale public education programs in North America currently are directed toward reducing or eliminating this practice. There are parenting programs that focus on nonphysical disciplinary strategies available for interested parents, usually for a fee, but in all likelihood these parents have already decided not to use physical punishment and are therefore seeking alternatives.

### ***Parental Use of Physical Punishment***

Considering the findings of negative developmental outcomes associated with the use of physical punishment, numerous studies have examined why parents use it. A number of factors affect decision making in this area and these can be either pre-existing factors, such as the parent's own childhood experiences, or situational factors that occur in the immediate time frame surrounding the behavioral transgression, such as the type of child misbehavior.

A number of pre-existing factors are associated with the parental use of physical punishment. These include experience with physical punishment during the parents' own childhood (Graziano, Hamblen, & Plante, 1996), knowledge level of child development (Graziano et al., 1996), socioeconomic level (Daro, 1988), education level (Ateah & Durrant, 2001), and religious ideology (Ellison, Barkowski, & Segal, 1996). Parents who are not unaware of the expected behaviors at stages of child development, such as autonomous and willful behavior in toddlers, may mistake such behavior as active defiance or disobedience. These violations are found to be most likely to result in parental physical punishment (Graziano et al., 1996). Another pre-existing factor associated with parental use of physical punishment is attitude toward its use, which was found to be a significant predictor by Jackson et al. (1999). Intercorrelations among attitudes, intentions, and practices of physical punishment have

been reported by Holden and Zambarano (1992). Ateah and Durrant (2001) found that, among a number of distal and situational factors, attitude is the best predictor of maternal use of physical punishment.

A number of situational factors, those occurring in the immediate time frame to the misbehavior, also have been associated with parental use of physical punishment. These situational factors include type of child transgression and parental affective state. Certain types of misbehavior such as self-endangerment (Durrant, 1994), antisocial acts such as harming another child (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995), and violating property rights of others have been more associated with physical punishment use than breaches of convention, such as children's refusal to clean up their rooms (Durrant, 1994). In addition, parents who believe that a child misbehaved intentionally are more likely to utilize physical punishment than parents who believe that the child's behavior was unintentional (Rose-Krasnor, Durrant, & Broberg, 1997).

Parental affect preceding or following the child's transgression also affects the type and intensity of the parent's response (Cohen, 1996). Parental anger following the transgression predicted parental use of physical punishment in a study by Ateah and Durrant (2001). Straus (1996) found that 44% of respondents indicated that over half of their physical punishment use was due to losing control of their emotions.

### ***PURPOSE OF THE STUDY/RESEARCH QUESTIONS***

The purpose of this study was to collect data that could provide a foundation on which to construct effective public education programming aimed at decreasing the use of physical punishment; promoting age-appropriate, effective, nonphysical disciplinary strategies; and ultimately decreasing rates of negative developmental outcomes, such as physical abuse. Two research questions were examined.

1. What is the relationship between parents' sources of parental information regarding disciplinary responses to children and their attitude toward the use of physical punishment?
2. What are the education and information needs and preferences of parents of young children with regard to parenting such as child development, discipline, and anger management strategies?

### ***METHOD***

A cross-sectional survey design was used for this study. Data were collected in spring 2002. Subjects were selected through convenience sampling of 9 day care facilities that represented different areas of a large

metropolitan area in Canada. Day care settings were used so that parents who have at least one preschool-age child would be contacted. As preschool-aged children are the ones most likely to exhibit behaviors that result in physical punishment (Jackson et al., 1999), parents with children in this age group were sought. A total of 584 questionnaires were distributed to parents whose children were attending the day care facilities and 170 were returned, resulting in a 29% return rate. To increase the participation rate, participants were offered a \$10 reimbursement for participation, which was mailed upon receipt of the completed questionnaire.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The majority of respondents (87.6%) were the mothers of the target child; the remainder were fathers. Fully 98% of the respondents were biological parents of the child. The mean age of participants was 34.2 years with a range of 17–53 years. Analysis of education level found that whereas 31.9% had a high school diploma or less, more than half (53.8%) had completed postsecondary education of some type such as a college diploma or undergraduate degree, and 14% of respondents had completed a graduate degree. More than one-third (34.7%) of respondents reported total family income (before taxes) of at least \$40,000; 32.3% reported an income between \$40,000 and \$75,000, and 22.9% reported income of more than \$75,000. The remaining participants (10%) did not respond to this question. The majority of respondents (67.1%) were either married or cohabiting, and the remainder of the sample identified themselves as single, separated, divorced, widowed, or other. The mean number of children per participant was 1.7, ranging from 1 to 7 children.

### *Measures*

In addition to the demographic questions, the survey also included questions on sources of information on general parenting (e.g., other parents, own parents, books), child discipline, and anger management. In addition, parents were questioned as to the preferred sources and formats of parenting education and were asked to identify topics in parenting that should be made available on a wide-scale basis to parents of young children.

To measure respondents' attitudes toward physical punishment, the *Attitudes Toward Spanking/Slapping My Child Questionnaire* (ATS) (Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995) was used. This tool assesses attitudes of parents toward spanking their young children. The ATS is a 10-item Likert-type questionnaire measuring agreement with statements about the appropriateness of spanking on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items include such statements as: "Spanking is a normal

part of my parenting,” and “Overall, I believe spanking is a bad disciplinary technique.” Some items are phrased negatively to control for response set. Scale totals have a possible range from 10 to 70. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward use of the “common” forms of physical punishment. Median Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .89 to .91 for five independent samples of parents, and test-retest correlations over a 3-week period averaged .76 for a sample of 20 mothers. Validity was assessed through the correlation of subjects’ scores with their reported weekly rates of spanking ( $r = .73$ ) (G.W. Holden, 2001).

### ***Procedure***

The directors of selected day care facilities from all areas of Winnipeg, Canada, were contacted by a research assistant to request their participation in this study. Those who agreed to participate (in consultation with their boards of directors) distributed the questionnaires, including stamped and addressed envelopes for return of the questionnaire. Once the questionnaires were returned, a research assistant entered the data for statistical analysis and qualitative responses were entered into a word processing program, categorized, and filed separately to maintain confidentiality. Upon receipt of the survey, a \$10 compensation was mailed to participants.

### ***ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS***

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba Ethics Committee prior to data collection. To obtain informed consent by each participant, a disclaimer/information letter was given with the questionnaire package to each potential participant. This letter included information about the purpose of the study, the volunteer nature of participation, the option to refuse to answer any questions, anonymity and confidentiality considerations, and security of the data. In addition, potential participants were informed that if, as a result of information contained in the response the researcher is made aware that a child has been or is at risk of physical injury, the researcher is obligated by law to report that information to the appropriate agency. Further, potential participants were informed that by completing and sending back the questionnaire, they had given consent to participate in the study.

### ***RESULTS***

Respondents were asked to identify the main source(s) of their parenting knowledge in the areas of child development and expected behaviors,

disciplining children for misbehavior, and managing anger at children (self-anger management). These findings are summarized in Table 1. The sources of parent knowledge about child development and discipline most frequently identified by respondents (over 60% in all cases) were from discussions with other parents, parenting books, and respondents' own experiences. The source of information on self-anger management identified most frequently by respondents was their own experiences (67%), followed by discussions with other parents (37%), and books on parenting (36%).

Of the 170 participants, 159 completed the ATS questionnaire. The mean score was 23.1. A series of *t*-tests were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean ATS score between individuals who identified a particular source of their information on disciplinary responses with children, compared with those who did not indicate that source of information. As presented in Table 2, there were no significant differences in these scores, although the difference in the ATS mean score approached significance for those parents who responded that their information on disciplinary strategies was obtained through parenting classes, compared with those who did not obtain this information through parenting classes.

Respondents were asked to identify the parenting topics that they believed should be made available on a wide scale basis to young parents. These findings are presented in Table 3. Both age-appropriate disciplinary responses and expected child development and behaviors were identified by at least 90% of respondents, followed by nutrition and self-anger management techniques identified by approximately three-quarters of the respondents. In addition, information on age-appropriate toys, child-proofing homes, and immunization were all identified by over half of the respondents. One respondent commented, "Raising children is always trying but parents must keep their cool and deal with their children appropriately."

**Table 1. Main sources of knowledge on parenting topics (*N* = 170)**

Source of knowledge	Parenting topic		
	Child development	Discipline	Anger management
Other parents	117 (69%)	104 (61%)	63 (37%)
Own parents	68 (40%)	70 (41%)	37 (22%)
Parenting books	121 (71%)	109 (64%)	61 (36%)
Television	37 (22%)	32 (19%)	31 (18%)
Parenting class	36 (21%)	31 (18%)	26 (15%)
Magazines	73 (43%)	54 (32%)	41 (24%)
By experience	111 (65%)	107 (63%)	114 (67%)

**Table 2. Source of disciplinary knowledge and attitude toward physical punishment ( $N = 159$ )**

Source of knowledge on discipline	ATS mean score for applicable source		
	Yes	No	<i>t</i>
Other parents	22.5	24.1	0.79
Own parents	23.8	22.5	0.63
Parenting books	22.6	24.0	-0.70
Television	21.2	23.6	-0.93
Parenting classes	19.3	23.7	-1.69
Magazines	24.3	22.5	0.87
By experience	24.0	21.5	1.21

ATS = Attitude Toward Spanking/Slapping Scale (Holden et al., 1995).

Spanking just teaches children that hitting is OK.” In addition, respondents were asked to identify other topics that should be available on a wide-scale basis to parents of young children. Some of the topics included information about community resources available to parents, toilet training, improving children’s self-esteem, and general child health.

Some comments added by parents are: “What I find is a lack of the opportunity to download to others. . . . I am the only stay at home Mom on the street,” and “There should be more parent groups/centres that you can go to or find out information from,” and “Sometimes you don’t realize that your child is growing older and you tend to treat him/her younger than what he/she really is.”

Respondents were asked to identify the best ways for them to receive parenting education and information. These results are presented in Table

**Table 3. Topics believed should be made available to parents on a wide-scale basis ( $N = 170$ )**

Topics	Number (percentage)
Expected child development and behaviors	153 (90%)
Age-appropriate disciplinary responses	155 (91%)
Self-anger management	126 (74%)
Immunization	97 (57%)
Infant and child nutrition	128 (75%)
Age-appropriate toys and games	104 (61%)
Childproofing your home	102 (60%)

**Table 4. The best ways to receive parenting information and education (N = 170)**

Method	Number (percentage)
Books on parenting	111 (65%)
Discussions with other parents	104 (61%)
My own experiences	77 (45%)
Magazine articles	73 (43%)
Pediatrician	65 (38%)
Parenting classes	53 (31%)
Pamphlets	48 (28%)
My parents (mother and/or father)	41 (24%)
Television	41 (24%)
Public health nurse	31 (18%)
Videos	31 (18%)
Computer program	17 (10%)

4. The most frequent responses were books on parenting (64%) and discussions with other parents (61%).

Comments included: "There needs to be more of a network for first-time parents to learn about opportunities for getting out with their babies and meeting other new parents in the neighborhood . . . can be a very isolating experience," and "I find I'm most receptive to child-rearing strategies when they come from people I know and believe to have good judgment."

Other methods identified as the best ways to receive parenting information were one's own experiences, magazine articles (each identified by over 40% of respondents), and pediatricians, parenting classes, and pamphlets (approximately 33% each), followed by one's own parents, television, public health nurses, videos and computer disks.

Respondents' commented: "I wish there was a course for new parents. They make us go to prenatal classes but we also need postnatal classes on these topics," and "I think public health nurses should visit once or twice per month."

Additional possible sources noted by respondents were through the Internet and by attending presentations by professionals at public schools.

## **DISCUSSION**

Because there are no wide-scale parent education programs available to these parents, it is not surprising that sources of information on child development and disciplinary responses were identified as being received

through discussions with other parents, parenting books, and through personal experience. In addition, these topics were identified by over 90% of respondents as those that should be made available to parents of young children on a wide scale.

The sources of information about and education received about disciplinary responses with children were examined to determine if there was any effect on attitude toward use of physical punishment with children, specifically spanking/slapping. Mean scores of the ATS scale were compared between parents who indicated use of a source of information on disciplining children and those of parents who did not identify that specific source. There was no significant difference between any source, with only one source even approaching significance in mean differences ( $t(159) = -1.69, p = .09$ ). Respondents who had learned about disciplinary responses with children at parenting classes had lower mean scores on the ATS scale than those who did not indicate they received such information from parenting classes. It may be that such parenting classes are effective in providing information regarding the appropriateness of nonphysical punishment with children. However, it may also be that parents who seek out parenting classes are less likely to support or use physical punishment as a disciplinary strategy with children, and are seeking to learn more about alternatives.

Although the results of this study provide some insight into the experiences and needs of parenting information for a group of parents with young children, the findings cannot be generalized because the study was not conducted on a random sample of parents of young children. The higher-than-expected education and income levels are evidence that parents with these backgrounds are likely overrepresented in this sample. It is also possible that at least some form of systematic self-selection process related to parents' practice or beliefs about physical punishment may have occurred in parents who did not participate, because these parents may have reviewed the questionnaire and may have felt uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss their attitudes toward physical punishment, particularly those who use it with their children.

Compared with the topics of child development and disciplinary strategies, knowledge about self-anger management was reported as resulting primarily from individuals' own experiences. As anger in response to child misbehavior has been found to be a determinant of physical punishment use (Ateah & Durrant, 2001; Graziano et al., 1996), this topic can be considered an essential component of parent education in disciplinary responses with children. Young children in particular can be extremely frustrating to care for and it may help parents to choose nonphysical disciplinary responses if they are not able to control their emotions.

My findings indicate that parents are most interested in receiving

parenting information in printed form and in discussions with other parents. Presenting information on expected child development and behaviors, effective and age-appropriate nonphysical disciplinary strategies, and anger-management techniques to parents in a small group format in which parents have ample opportunity to discuss issues and compare experiences may be one of the most effective formats for program delivery.

Whether in the hospital or community setting, nurses are in an ideal position to promote nonphysical disciplinary measures, to develop educational programs, and to deliver them to parents or help parents find such programs and resources in their areas. Parents want to know how to respond to their children in ways that will best benefit them. One of the first steps should be to rethink the use of physical punishment as an option with children. In order for this to occur, nurses and other health care providers must first educate themselves on the risks of physical punishment and learn about the more appropriate and effective nonphysical alternatives.

Generally, parents want to do the best for their children, but sometimes they do not have the resources or knowledge regarding what should be expected from their children and what is the most appropriate responses to their misbehavior. Caring for young children also is very time-consuming and whether both parents or one parent works outside the home or if one is a single parent, there is little time to seek out resources and programming. Findings indicate that parents want more programming in these key areas in ways that they find most helpful.

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