

Understanding discipline - a summary

An overview of child discipline practices and their implications for family support.

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Purpose of study

Anxiety about parents' failure to control their children's behaviour is not new. But two new waves of concern have combined to point the finger of blame again at parents. More awareness of the factors affecting youth offending has led to fears that parents have lost the ability to discipline their children. At the same time, there is a greater recognition of the need to protect children from physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and an interest in the effects of physical abuse on children.

Parents today are continually subjected to scrutiny and criticism about the job they are doing in raising the next generation. Research reported in the media can become a means of undermining parents' own confidence, and offers of advice and help can appear loaded with moral disapproval of parents. Much is asserted about what parents are doing, or not doing, or should be doing. Much heat is generated about the benefits or harm of smacking. But although each parent feels they carry the burden of making sure they get it right alone, there is a body of research that can help inform their attitudes and approach to child discipline.

Understanding discipline explores what research can tell us about what works and what does not work in managing children's behaviour. It does not focus on whether children are more violent and aggressive or whether parents have lost their way in managing children's behaviour. It looks in particular at what is understood by discipline, at research on different child discipline practices, and how those practices relate to different styles of parenting. The paper brings together a range of studies over the last ten years, and takes a look at differing approaches in different communities and countries.

Key findings

- 1 There is no simple conclusion to be drawn from the research, or simple messages for parents and policy makers about physical punishment and child discipline practices. The research offers different findings depending on the particular focus of the work.
- 2 Discipline in its broadest sense can mean positively educating and guiding as well as punishing. There is confusion in the public debate between discipline and punishment, partly as a result of research studies narrowly focusing on physical punishment rather than discipline. Studies have concentrated on the more easily measured extent and severity of smacking, rather than other less easily measured ways of managing children's behaviour.

- 3 Researchers have identified different styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglectful. Authoritative parenting combines affection and firm boundaries with an encouragement of children's independence. Evidence suggests this leads to good outcomes for children.
- 4 Most parents use all sorts of parenting techniques. Praising, rewarding and paying the child attention are shown to be effective ways of helping a child behave well. The reasons for parents taking different approaches to managing their children's behaviour are subtle and complex. They include the parents' own childhood experience, the age of the child, the gender of the child, the child's and parent's personality, the levels of stress in the family and different beliefs, customs and cultural expectations. There is no clear evidence that class is a strong influence on parents supporting physical punishment.
- 5 In Britain, there has been a shift in public opinion away from believing in physical punishment as right and proper to a belief that it is not effective or the best way to respond.
- 6 Most people still use physical discipline. The physical punishment of young children in particular is still widespread; most of it mild smacking, often termed *tapping* by parents. The extent, frequency and severity of physical punishment varies widely. Parents who sometimes smack their children also use other positive and punitive methods, for example, talking and reasoning, sending them to their room or another place for "time out", or grounding them. There is growing interest in the parenting techniques termed "positive parenting", in which praise, reward and non-punitive punishments are favoured.

Physical discipline

There have been a series of studies about physical punishment, looking at force, frequency, duration and meaning to the child, family and wider community. Research has attempted to determine to what extent physical discipline can escalate into physical abuse and maltreatment, and to what extent even mild physical punishment adversely affects children.

Conclusions from the research are mixed. There appears to be evidence that children in families where physical discipline is used are more likely to be physically abused, although there is no conclusive evidence about a "ratchet" effect, whereby parents' physical punishment becomes more severe over time. Rather, the evidence suggests that physical punishment happens from anger. Equally important is the context in which physical discipline occurs. Mild smacking in the context of a loving relationship which contains a variety of discipline techniques is likely to have a different impact than smacking in the context of a hostile and violent relationship.

Research on the effect of physical punishment on children's own behaviour suggests that it does not work. A child may be more likely to comply with the parents' demands immediately, but he will not have changed his behaviour.

Children who have been physically punished are more likely, according to research, to experience behaviour and emotional problems, and may have mental health problems in later life, particularly depression. However, there is evidence that those findings do not apply in relation to mild smacking in an otherwise affectionate relationship. There is also much debate in the research community about the relative influence of the child's character, genetic make up, peer group and other factors in addition to the parents' approach to discipline.

Discipline and parenting styles

Much parenting literature is concerned with the effects of excessive punishment on children. But some research is attempting to define discipline differently; for example “*giving children guidance about how to behave in ways which will not harm other people or themselves.*”

Researchers define discipline in a variety of ways, for example:

- **positive** (focusing on good behaviour) or **negative** (focusing on bad behaviour); or
- **reactive** (seeking to prevent bad behaviour) or **proactive** (encouraging good behaviour).

Another model of understanding discipline is based on three overarching concepts:

- **Love-oriented discipline**, i.e. the withholding of affection and approval when children misbehave;
- **Power-assertive discipline**, i.e. using physical discipline, withholding privileges, grounding and verbal commands;
- **Inductive discipline**, i.e. giving children reasons for behaving in particular ways.

This research found that most parents use all techniques, but one will usually predominate. Which one is likely to depend not only on the parent, but on the child’s own temperament.

Discipline could also be seen as part of an overall parenting approach, rather than as a specific technique. Research on parenting styles highlights the skills and qualities parents need to parent successfully, and parent education programmes are developing many of these ideas. One researcher proposed that what children need from their parents is:

- basic physical care
- affection and security
- stimulation of innate potential
- guidance and control (discipline)
- responsibility and independence.

Researchers have identified four key ways of parenting, each with different characteristics, and different approaches to managing children’s behaviour:

- **authoritative** (warm, firm expectations of children, encouraging children’s independent thinking, with firm but moderate discipline)
- **authoritarian** (too little warmth and respect for the child’s individuality, and too much emphasis on making demands of children and firm discipline)
- **permissive** (too little emphasis on expectations of children)
- **neglectful** (too little warmth and involvement).

Reviews of research suggest that an authoritative approach by parents produces the best outcomes for children, as it brings together both affection and firm expectations of behaviour.

Research into parenting styles and the development of parent education programmes show a growing interest in supporting parents in positively managing their children’s behaviour. Positive parenting refers to a body of parenting skills, based on the principle that it is better for children to learn through co-operation and rewards rather than conflict and punishment, whilst not precluding the setting of boundaries. Relatively little evaluation has been done of the effectiveness of positive parenting approaches, but there is increasing interest in this way forward.

The effects on children

How do parents using physical punishment, or other ways of parenting affect children?

In human relationships, causes are multiple and inter-connected. In this complexity, finding the determining causes of particular outcomes is very difficult. The interactive and changing nature of the parent child relationship makes it hard to separate cause and effect, and there are many other factors like parents' stress and economic factors to be taken into account. The researcher is confronted with the problem of trying to establish outcomes for children from two very different research paradigms – one that emphasises the style of parenting, and the other that looks at the specifics of discipline, in particular physical discipline. The parent could be left with a confused and sometimes contradictory message from the research.

A balance to the two distinct streams of research can be found in the child development literature on socialisation, which is less focussed on analysing physical discipline, and examines how pro and antisocial behaviour develops. In this body of research some parental behaviour is shown to be more associated with prosocial behaviour than others, e.g. showing by example, or a warm and responsive relationship between child and parent. One study showed that parental rejection was closely associated with the development of aggressiveness in children. Studies of different styles of parenting have found that harsh and erratic discipline with little warmth and affection are linked with deteriorating behaviour and psychological problems in young people.

Research on the effects on children of physical punishment suggest that, taken as a whole, there is a link between physical punishment and physical abuse, in that parents who physically abuse a child are likely to have used physical punishment. If the incidence of physical punishment is reduced, there are likely to be fewer cases of child mistreatment. However, that is not to say that parents who smack their children lightly will go on to abuse them.

Research on negative outcomes for children, such as offending or drug abuse, link them with inadequate parenting skills in general, rather than specific forms of discipline. One study highlighted four areas of inadequate parenting which are predictors of youth offending:

- Parent child conflict, where the child is disobedient in response to the parent's lack of consistent discipline
- Neglect and rejection of the child
- A failure to supervise
- Disruption to family life where this is associated with emotional problems and conflict between parents.

Influencing parental attitudes towards child discipline

Support for parenting skills needs to be considered as one part of a whole raft of measures and services to support families as they wrestle with a fast-changing environment. There is some evidence that parents welcome 'parenting tips'. Parents appear to be moving from coercive approaches towards a more positive approach to child discipline, but feel in a 'skills gap'; they may welcome information about alternatives to smacking, shouting and threatening.

Evidence from abroad suggests that parental attitudes towards child discipline can be influenced, and that a national public education campaign could be successful. A campaign could help tackle the pressures, confusion and isolation parents are feeling, and accessible and mainstream support services would be needed to help parents put positive parenting into practice.

Public education campaigns would need to be well thought out and to offer genuine support to parents without undermining their confidence. The campaigns should be grounded in reality, with realistic objectives, avoiding blaming parents. Measuring the outcome of public education campaigns is difficult; one way would be to measure the incidence of physical abuse, but would be very limited in scope. A broader campaign, involving influencing child-rearing practices in general, is harder to measure, yet potentially far more significant.

It is important to recognise that the process of influencing cultural change and people's parenting styles is slow. Yet there is clearly a demand amongst parents for help with socialising and setting boundaries for their children. An incremental, non-didactic approach which emphasises the vital part that love, warmth, care and encouragement plays in managing children's behaviour may well be the most helpful way forward.

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