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Effects of Gender on Parental Attitudes toward Punishment of Children

Lindsay R. Ludwig & Amanda J. Nocton

Hanover College

Abstract

This study was designed to examine the effect of gender on parental attitudes toward child punishment. Participants ($N = 224$) were recruited via a popular website of online psychological studies and from online parental discussion groups. Each participant read one of two scenarios about his or her hypothetical child engaging in nine misbehaviors, each classified into one of the following categories: general disrespect, harm to self, and harm to others. Participants then indicated their likelihood of using three punishments – verbal reprimand, removal of privileges, and spanking. The two scenarios differed only by gender of the child (male or female). Female participants used verbal reprimand significantly more than males ($p = .044$), but males used spanking significantly more than females ($p < .001$). Gender of child had an effect on only two infractions: boys were punished significantly more than girls for bullying a classmate ($p = .018$) and not wearing a seatbelt ($p = .018$). These findings reflect the idea that there is some gender distinction across child punishment, an issue important to recognize as it may facilitate reflections of differential treatment of children.

Effect of Gender on Attitudes toward Punishment

Social interactions between parents and children reveal a variety of child rearing techniques. One technique used by parents is reinforcement. A reinforcer is “a stimulus that strengthens behavior if it is delivered after the behavior occurs” (Mazur, 2006, p. 363). Therefore, parents might choose to praise their child or use other rewards to reinforce a desired behavior, in hopes of encouraging more constructive behavior rather than misconduct. For example, a child could receive an extra hour of television and praise for doing a chore. In this case, the parent hopes to promote this behavior in the future through reinforcement.

Reinforcement is not, however, the only method parents use to shape a child’s behavior. Another technique commonly used by parents that has received much attention is punishment, defined as “an undesirable consequence that follows a behavior and is designed to stop or change it” (Engler, 2006, p. 498). In the context of child discipline, punishment is a means of “suppressing undesired behaviors” (Holden, 2002, p. 592). Although spanking might be the punishment which most easily comes to mind, parents use several other forms of discipline. Other types of punishment include, but are not limited to, verbal reprimands and removal of privileges. While little research has been conducted on the use and effectiveness of either verbal reprimands or removal of privileges, Jay, King, and Duncan (2006) found that verbal reprimands were used more often than physical punishment in response to child cursing. Additionally, in their review of research on types of punishment, Friedman and Schonberg (1996) concluded that “noncorporal methods of discipline of children have been shown to be effective in children of all ages” (p. 853).

Yet, previous research on punishment has been overwhelmingly focused on just one type of punishment – corporal punishment. Specifically when looking at the prevalence of corporal punishment, defined by Straus (1994) as “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” (p.4), it is reported that “over 97% of American children experience physical punishment” (Straus, 2001, p.229). In accordance with this finding, Buntain-Ricklefs, Kemper, Bell, and Babonis (1994) found that 93% of the participants in their study were spanked as children. Thus, corporal punishment is a child discipline technique for a majority of parents. Perhaps the most common corporal punishment used by parents is spanking, which Friedman and Schonberg (1996) defined as “a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an open hand to the extremities or buttocks” (p. 853).

While parents use both reinforcement and punishment in their discipline strategies, the present study focused solely on punishment because of the potential negative outcomes that have been identified with it. For example, Brezina’s (1999) findings provide evidence for negative consequences of physical punishment – when a parent slaps a child, that child is more likely to become physically aggressive toward his or her parent. Furthermore, in her review of research on corporal punishment and associated child behaviors, Gershoff (2002) found relations between parental use of corporal punishment and ten undesirable outcomes including antisocial behavior, aggression, lack of moral internalization, and depression.

Other researchers argue that it is not the corporal punishment itself that causes emotional impairment, but rather the implementation of the punishment. More

specifically, “the frequency, severity, and chronicity of spanking, as well as the consistency, follow-through, and demeanor of the parent are known to affect the consequences of spanking” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 855). In accordance with this finding, Baumrind (1996) proposed that not only was implementation a factor in determining emotional harm to children, but the child’s distinctive characteristics, current developmental status, familial values, and punctual, rational responsiveness by the parent also influenced the child’s reaction.

Nevertheless, the controversy over the consequences of using corporal punishment still persists. One reason the dispute over whether or not corporal punishment is detrimental stems from disagreement about what constitutes corporal punishment. In a 1996 conference about child discipline, a general consensus among psychology researchers as to what characterizes corporal punishment was reached. At the conclusion of the day-and-a-half meeting, researchers came to define corporal punishment as “bodily punishment of any kind” (Friedman & Schonberg, 1996, p. 853), and therefore, it includes a wide range of disciplinary actions. In opposition to the earlier claim made by Gershoff, that corporal punishment has negative effects on development, Baumrind, Larzelere, and Cowan (2002) argue that her operational definition of corporal punishment “included punishment that was often too severe and was thus a proxy for the harsh, punitive discipline that is acknowledged by all experts to be detrimental to children’s well-being” (p.581). For this reason, they claim that while some forms of corporal punishment are unquestionably harmful, Gershoff’s argument is faulty as it does not consider the individual effects of different kinds of corporal punishment. Therefore, it seems that the controversy does not pertain to what is referred to as abusive or severe

forms of corporal punishment, which evidence shows does have negative consequences. Rather, the controversy is whether or not a single type of corporal punishment, spanking, has been shown to be harmful (Baumrind, Cowan, & Larzelere, 2002).

Over the past century, some disagreement has emerged on gender differences in the corporal punishment of children between mothers and fathers and between sons and daughters. These studies are reviewed below.

Effect of Parent's Gender on Punishment

In a study published in 1935, Simpson found that discipline did not depend solely on parent gender, but the gender interaction between parent and child. According to a sample of 500 five-to-nine year-old public school children, boys reported they were punished more often by their fathers and girls more by their mothers. Despite these findings, girls still ascribed more punishment to the father than the mother. This reflects the idea that despite an actual parental gender difference with regards to punishment, fathers are viewed as more aggressive than mothers.

Rothbart and Maccoby (1966) also found that discipline relied on a combination of both parent and child gender. Specifically, researchers found that mothers showed “more permissiveness and positive attention to their sons than to their daughters, fathers showing more permissiveness and positive attention to their daughters than to their sons” (p. 240). In agreement with Rothbart and Maccoby, Herzberger and Tennen (1985) conducted a similar study that examined the effect of gender on perceived appropriateness of punishment by parents implemented upon children. Their conclusions suggest that “punishment is regarded as more appropriate when it is delivered by the

same-sex parent” (p. 862). That is, punishment was more acceptable when it was the mother punishing her daughter and the father punishing his son.

Another pattern was found as to who the primary punisher is within a family. When examining spanking practices, researchers found that fathers and mothers reported spanking at the same rate; therefore, there was no effect of parental gender as it relates to child punishment (Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Lytton and Romney (1991) found that despite the time of publication, there was no main effect for parental gender in relation to child punishment.

All of the reviewed studies looked at physical punishment alone as a form of discipline. Therefore, gender differences might be found in other kinds of punishment.

Effect of Child's Gender on Punishment

Much like the research on the effect of parents' gender on punishment, most of the studies looking at the relationship between child gender and punishment focused only on physical punishment. With regards to the child's gender, past research shows boys are punished more often than girls. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) looked at many studies that had previously examined whether boys or girls were punished more. They found that across a range of ages, on average boys were punished more than girls. Additional research by Bezirgianian and Cohen (1992) also found that boys are punished more often than girls.

Type of Infraction

Another determining factor for punishing a child is the type of infraction committed. A study by Flynn (1998) looked at how college students view corporal punishment. The college students received three different age groups (3-4, 7-8, and

11-12 years old) and then received six different scenarios in which they rated whether or not corporal punishment was appropriate. The participants rated corporal punishment for more serious violations as being more acceptable than the use of corporal punishment for lesser violations. Willful harm to others was deemed as a more serious violation; whereas disregarding a parent's request was viewed as a less serious infraction. This evidence suggests that beliefs about the appropriate level of punishment may vary depending on the type of infraction.

The Present Study

The majority of past studies looked only at corporal punishment as a form of discipline, instead of a range of punishments. The goal of the present study is to examine whether or not gender differences are still prevalent in child punishment, and how the likelihood of punishment varies across types of infractions and types of punishment. The study at hand does not include those behaviors that extensive evidence indicates results in severe injury in its consideration of punishment. For this reason, the current study only looks at one form of corporal punishment – spanking, due to the ambiguous evidence about potential harm.

All participants received one of two scenarios in which a child committed a series of infractions. Every detail was the same except the gender of the child. The first topic of exploration for this study relates to the primary punisher in the family, since all previous research only looked at spanking as a form of punishment. This limitation of earlier studies suggests that parental gender differences might still exist across other punishment types.

In accordance with past research, the first hypothesis of this study is that overall, male children will receive more punishment than female children. Furthermore, when a child's infractions cause harm to themselves or others, they will receive more punishment than if their infractions reflect general disrespect. This hypothesis reflects Flynn's (1998) findings of more favorable attitudes toward punishment when a child commits serious offenses in comparison with minor non-physically injurious, threatening infractions.

Method

Participants

A total number of 290 participants took part in the online survey. Of these 290 participants, 66 were excluded from the final number of participants used for data analysis. Eight participants were deleted from the subject pool because they were less than 18 years old, and therefore, could not give legal consent for their participation. Seven other participants were removed because they appeared to be the same person. Duplicate answers were identified by same age, ethnicity, responses, comments, and receiving the same gender child in both instances. Furthermore, the internet addresses were identical and the time sequences close. Finally, 51 participants were deleted if they did not indicate their gender or respond to any of the 27 punishment questions, because any missing response would disqualify them from the repeated measures analyses. Out of the 224 remaining participants, 163 were female and 61 were males. The majority of participants were Caucasian ($N = 173$, 70.3%). Other ethnicities in the study included: African American ($N = 25$), Hispanic ($N = 19$), Asian ($N = 10$), other ($N = 6$), and 13 participants did not identify their ethnicity. Moreover, of these participants, 103 have

been or are currently parents while 121 are not parents. The participants' average age was 26.95 years old and ranged from 18-68 years of age.

Participants were recruited via a popular website of online psychological studies (Krantz, 2007) and through mass e-mails to students. Researchers also solicited participants from various parental discussion group websites found on Yahoo Groups online. The Yahoo groups include: Time to Talk, Multilingual Munchkin, and Christian Single Parents. All of the groups offer support for fellow parents and are ways for them to receive help with problems they are facing with child rearing.

Materials

Directions read by the participants informed them of the gender of their hypothetical child, which was randomly assigned, and also that their child was eight years old. They were told to assume that they, the parent, had already warned their child once about each of the infractions. Eight years was the assigned age for the hypothetical child because Flynn (1998) found that college students felt it was more appropriate to spank 7-8 year olds than 3-4 years old and 11-12 years old. Participants received a list of infractions performed by their hypothetical child and a list of punishments they could administer. Subjects were asked in the narrative to assign the likelihood that they would use each of the punishments (i.e. verbal reprimand, removal of privileges, and spanking) on a scale from 0-3 (0 not at all, 1 maybe, 2 probably, 3 definitely) for each of the infractions.

The three punishments, verbal reprimand, removal of privileges, and spanking, were chosen to incorporate a range of typical disciplinary practices. In hopes of expanding on previous studies in which different infractions were not widely looked at as

they relate to punishment, researchers incorporated three infraction categories: harm to self, harm to others, and general disrespect. Each of these categories included three specific infractions. An example of each category includes: harm to self – running into the street, harm to others – hitting a sibling or playmate, and general disrespect – talking back to the parent. However, the three infraction categories were not disclosed to the participant. Rather, the nine total infractions were intermixed so as not to reveal the categories. See *Appendix* for a list of all infractions and the story read by participants.

Procedure

The study was conducted online. Participants were told they were involved in a study examining parental attitudes toward child punishment. They were then asked to click a link indicating their informed consent. If participants agreed to partake in the study, they were then randomly assigned to one of two groups – they were told to envision they were the parent of either a son ($N= 100$) or daughter ($N= 124$).

After reading the informed consent, they were taken to a new webpage and asked basic demographic questions, including age, gender, race, and whether or not participants were parents. They were then asked to read a short narrative which mentioned the gender of the child. Following this, a table of nine infractions by three categories of punishment was presented to the participant. After rating the likelihood of each punishment for every infraction, participants had the option of leaving comments about the study. After submitting their responses, participants were presented with the debriefing form.

Results

To begin data analysis, a 2 (gender of participant) x 2 (gender of child) x 3 (type of punishment) x 9 (type of infraction) mixed ANOVA was conducted, with two

between-subject variables (gender of participant and gender of child) and two within-subject variables (type of infraction and type of punishment). The significant results discussed below are all at the $p < .05$ level. All main effects and interactions not discussed below were not significant with p -values greater than .05.

Type of Punishment (Verbal, Removing Privileges, Spanking)

Not surprisingly, there was a main effect for type of punishment, $F(2, 215) = 298.29, p < .001$. By using pairwise comparisons it was found that verbal reprimand ($M = 2.63$), removal of privileges ($M = 1.60$), and spanking ($M = .73$) were each significantly different from the others.

Gender of Parent

This study found no main effect of parent gender, $F(1,220) = .27, p = .606$. There was a significant interaction between punishment type and parental gender, $F(2,215) = 6.78, p = .001$. Simple main effects indicated that females ($M = 2.72$) used verbal reprimand significantly more than males ($M = 2.53$), $F(1,216) = 4.12, p = .044$. Whereas males ($M = 0.91$) used spanking significantly more than females ($M = 0.46$), $F(1,216) = 8.36, p = .004$. However, there was no significant difference between males ($M = 1.60$) and females ($M = 1.61$) with regards to the use of removal of privileges ($p = .888$).

There was a significant three-way interaction among parent gender, punishment, and infraction $F(16, 201) = 2.42, p = .002$. Of the nine infractions, only three showed gender differences for use of verbal reprimand. Females used verbal reprimand significantly more than males for the following infractions: hitting a sibling, teasing a classmate, and not wearing a seatbelt. But for men using spanking, there were five significant infractions. Males used spanking significantly more than females for the

following infractions: hitting a sibling, talking back, bullying a classmate, lying, and talking to a stranger. To see the means, *F*s, and *p*-values for the significant infractions please refer to *Table 1*.

Table 1.

Significant Gender Differences in Punishment across Infractions

Infraction	Male	Female	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Verbal Reprimand:					
Hitting a sibling	2.45	2.77	1, 216	6.37	0.012
Teasing a classmate	2.25	2.66	1, 216	8.83	0.003
Not wearing a seatbelt	2.50	2.82	1, 216	6.61	0.011
Spanking:					
Hitting a sibling	1.07	0.57	1, 216	9.48	0.002
Talking back	1.22	0.79	1, 216	5.03	0.026
Bullying a classmate	1.37	0.53	1, 216	24.30	< .001
Lying	1.21	0.77	1, 216	5.12	0.025
Talking to a stranger	0.73	0.34	1, 216	5.29	0.022

Note. Infractions were punished on a Likert scale of 0-3, 0-not at all and 3-definitely.

Type of Infraction

One hypothesis held that the type of infraction would play a role in how the child was punished – more punishment with infractions that could cause harm to the child or with punishment that dealt with general disrespect. However, no distinct pattern as to which type of infraction received more punishment was found. There was a significant main effect of infraction on likelihood of punishment, $F(16, 201) = 13.03, p < .001$. To see a detailed list of infractions ordered from most to least punished, refer to *Table 2*.

Table 2.

Mean Punishment Rating per Infraction

Type of infraction	Mean
Lying	1.96 _a
Bullying	1.90 _{ab}
Hitting	1.76 _{bc}
Talking Back	1.76 _{bc}
Ignoring a request	1.64 _{cd}
Running into the street	1.60 _{cd}
Not wearing a seatbelt	1.49 _{de}
Talking to a stranger	1.39 _e
Teasing	1.37 _e

Note. Infractions were punished on a Likert scale of 0-3, 0-not at all and 3-definitely. Infractions that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Gender of Child

The hypothesis that boys would be punished more than girls was neither supported nor disconfirmed. There was a marginally significant interaction between child gender and infraction type, $F(16, 201) = 1.65, p = .06$. Paired comparisons revealed only two infractions for which likelihood of punishment differed significantly by child gender. Boys ($M = 2.02$) were punished significantly more than girls ($M = 1.77$) for the infraction of bullying a classmate, $F(1, 216) = 5.68, p = .018$. Boys ($M = 1.61$) were also punished significantly more than girls ($M = 1.36$) for not wearing a seatbelt $F(1, 216) = 5.71, p = .018$. Although these were the only two infractions that differed significantly by child gender, it should be noted that for eight of the nine total infractions, participants assigned more punishment for boys than girls. The one exception was that girls ($M = 1.45$) were punished slightly more than boys ($M = 1.32$) for talking to strangers, $p = .283$.

Participant's Status as Parent

Another interesting variable that was analyzed was the demographic question of whether or not the participant was or had ever been a parent. There was a main effect of parenthood on punishment, but there was no interaction of parenthood with any other variable. Participants who said that they were currently or have been a parent punished children significantly more ($M = 1.73$) than non-parents ($M = 1.58$), $F(1,216) = 4.07$, $p = .045$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to look at the effect of gender on parental attitudes toward punishment of children. The exploratory topic presented at the beginning of the study was in regards to the primary punisher in the family. Evidence from this study was mixed – with fathers more likely to spank, mothers more likely to use verbal reprimand, and no gender difference for removal of privileges. This finding possibly reflects the idea that traditional gender roles are being somewhat maintained. Another possible implication of this finding is that parents may be unintentionally reinforcing that men are more physically aggressive while women are more verbally aggressive. Given that adult sex role stereotypes are impressed upon children as early as two years of age (Witt, 1997), future research should explore how child discipline contributes to sex role stereotypes.

The first hypothesis was that male children would receive harsher punishments than females. This hypothesis was mostly supported as males were punished more in all but one of the nine infractions. However, only two of these infractions, bullying a classmate and not wearing a seatbelt, showed significant punishment differences, making the finding weaker than expected. One possible explanation why boys receive more

punishment for bullying than girls is because male children are stereotypically viewed as more aggressive. This reasoning coincides with Bodenhausen and Wyer's (1985) study finding that stereotypical infractions were more harshly punished than nonstereotypical infractions. The one infraction that female children received higher ratings of punishment for, talking to a stranger, was not a surprising finding. With an increased prevalence of child abductions in which females are target victims, it is presumably more of a concern for parents to discourage this behavior for girls in comparison to boys.

Finally, the hypothesis dealing with the type of infraction was not supported. Note that lying, a general disrespect infraction, was rated with the highest likelihood of punishment. It is likely that this infraction received the most punishment because lying reflects dishonesty of a child, leaving a parent less in control. Through lying, a child could conceal other risky behavior on top of disrespect which may incorporate a number of the other infractions. Overall, the *general disrespect* and *harm to other* infraction categories, with the exception of teasing a classmate, were rated with the highest punishment, whereas infractions reflecting harm to self were given notably lower punishment ratings. A possible explanation for this pattern could be that parents are punishing their children to be more socially acceptable, as harm to others and general disrespect was punished the most. That is, bullying and ignoring parental requests, for example, reflect undesirable behaviors according to the cultural norm, while running into the street, for instance, only creates a threat to the individual involved rather than to outside parties. Recall Flynn's (1998) findings that willful harm to others compared to disrespect was rated as a more appropriate infraction for receiving punishment; whereas the results of this study suggest otherwise. This difference is not unexpected, as it is

possible that perceptions change from rating appropriateness, as participants did in Flynn's study, to thinking about actual implementation of punishment, as in the current study.

Limitations

Several limitations should be addressed regarding this study. First, child gender was mentioned only one time during the instructions and scenario. This presents a potential problem, because some participants may not have paid attention to this detail, possibly weakening results pertaining to child gender. Furthermore, participants self-reported their discipline practices, and it is possible the participants' reports are not accurate predictors of their behavior either because of social desirability concerns or misperceptions regarding their own behavior (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Another possible limitation was that the infraction options were limited to only nine and may have been too vague for participants to accurately decide upon an appropriate punishment. The punishment options were also limited, and those that were available to choose from might be too broad or vague. In addition, some participants indicated in the comments section of the questionnaire that they would need to decide punishments on a case by case basis rather than generalizing across all children and situations.

In response to these limitations, further research should be conducted. It may be helpful for future studies to use more specifically-worded punishments and infractions and to use a wider range of infractions. It may also be useful to examine the discrepancies among the various infractions. Specifically, analyzing why lying is rated at such a high punishment level might provide insight into parental punishing techniques.

Also, it may be beneficial to investigate why bullying and teasing received such different punishment ratings.

The continuation of research on this topic is important as it facilitates reflections of differential treatment of children between genders. Furthermore, analyzing the reasoning for punishment could aid in positive behavior alteration for both children and parents – lessening child misconduct and unnecessary discipline. Given that such a large portion of the population are parents, it is important to understand such familial dynamics as child punishment.

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Appendix

Here is a sample of the story that participants were presented with. Note that the italicized son/daughter is where the independent variable was manipulated.

Suppose that you have an 8-year-old *son/daughter* who commits each of the following infractions **after having been warned previously not to**. Choose the likelihood that you would use each of the punishments from 0-3 (0 not at all, 1 maybe, 2 probably, 3 definitely). Please be sure to assign a number for each punishment under every infraction.

Also, the following is the list of infractions the participants received to assign likelihood of punishment (for verbal reprimand, removal of privilege, and spanking) for each using a Likert scale of 0-3 (recall 0 denotes not at all, while 3 means definitely). Note that while the infractions below are divided into three categories, during the actual study all nine infractions were intermixed with hopes of concealing the category labels from participants.

Harm to self:

- running out into the street
- talking to strangers
- not wearing a seatbelt

General disrespect:

- talking back
- ignoring requests
- lying

Harm to others:

- hitting a sibling
- bullying a classmate
- teasing a classmate