

Factors Related to Paternal Disciplinary Practices of U.S. Families[†]

This study examined the complex process of paternal disciplinary practices and identified the factors related to paternal disciplinary practices in an examination of the effects of cumulative risk factors on the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers. The subjects for this study consisted of 200 fathers of six-year-old children attending childcare centers in Los Angeles. Self-report questionnaires were used to collect data for the following variables: 1) family background characteristics; 2) child temperament; 3) marital & job satisfaction; 4) quality of life; 5) social support; 6) intergenerational transmission of parenting; and 7) paternal disciplinary practices. Descriptive analysis, zero-order correlations, multiple regression analyses, and chi-square analyses were used for data description and analysis. This study indicates that the characteristics of the child, father, and contextual factors contribute to paternal disciplinary practices.

Parenting has been described as the most challenging and complex task of adulthood. Parents face exceptional levels of social and economic stress due to major contextual changes. The growing incidence of such significant contemporary problems with the growth of one-parent families, mothers in the labor force, and institutionalized poverty makes parenting increasingly difficult.

An important job of parents is to teach children the difference between socially desirable behavior

and inappropriate behavior. The study of parental disciplinary practices has been a central issue for decades for many parents and researchers, because young children are dependent on their parents for direction, socialization, and nurture.

Early parental disciplinary practices are recognized as important factors in the socialization of children, because disciplinary episodes between parents and toddlers occur as frequently as every 6 to 9 minutes (Power & Chapieski, 1986). This dynamic leads to the early emergence of stable patterns of interaction between parents and children. There is a significant association between parental disciplinary behaviors and the behavior of preschoolers during development. For example, inconsistent, irritable, explosive, inflexible, rigid, harsh parental discipline, and love withdrawal have been associated with problems such as antisocial and delinquent behavior, depression, child noncompliance, aggression, and irritable child temperament (Gelfand & Teti, 1990); physical discipline has been found to be associated with more problematic child outcomes (Straus, 2001). The parental use of physical discipline may be elicited by prior and current individual differences in disruptive behavior by children; in addition, associations between physical discipline and antisocial behavior may only reflect continuity in the latter (Larzelere, 2000).

Non-punitive, supportive parenting practices and parental use of reasoning with induction have been linked to higher levels of child moral reasoning, maturity, prosocial behavior, and altruism, as well as increased popularity with peers (Dekovic & Janssenes, 1992). Methods that promote choice and autonomy characterized by parental explanations and minimal

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use of power are generally found to be more effective in the facilitation of child moral internalization than methods that are reactive, harsh, and physically coercive (Kochanska & Thompson, 1997).

With the increase in dual earner households, the paternal influence in various aspects of child development is increasingly recognized. Nonetheless, most studies focus on the attention of the role of the mother in shaping the child than they have to the role of the father. As shown in a meta analysis, paternal involvement has the most positive effects when the father-child relationship is supportive (Amato & Rejac, 1994). The warmth or closeness of the father-child relationship may crucially mediate the benefits of increased involvement (Lamb, 1997). The amount of time spent with fathers and the amount of emotional support obtained from fathers were associated with lower incidences of depression, higher self-esteem, higher life satisfaction, and less delinquency (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1995). In addition, the estimated positive influence of paternal involvement on the behavior of children was similar for Caucasian, African American, and Latino fathers (Amato & Rivera, 1999).

Knowledge about how mothers and fathers differ in disciplinary strategies has recently been recognized as important in the socialization of children. The biological and socially reinforced masculine qualities of fathers predispose them to treat children differently than mothers do (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000). Holden and Zambaro (1992) found that mothers tended to approve of physical punishment less than fathers did and mothers were more accepting of alternate explanations of their children's behavior than fathers were.

This study follows the premise that it is essential to investigate the dynamic influence of multiple, contextual variables on paternal disciplinary practices. These are grouped into three major categories: child factors, parental factors, and family contextual factors.

Child factors are important contributors to parenting. Characteristics of the child such as gender, temperament, or birth order influence parental behavior (Bates, 1980). In the face of noncompliance or adverse temperament traits, parents may resort to harsh and punitive discipline strategies (Catron &

Masters, 1993).

Parental factors and various aspects of parental characteristics have been studied in relation to their disciplinary behavior. There is strong evidence that parenting attitudes and practices are also a complex result of parental age, marital status, employment status, and education level (Fox, 1995; Hashima & Amato, 1994).

Child and parental factors shape parental discipline strategies, that are important in understanding differences in parental disciplinary behaviors in consideration of the family context. The influence of family contextual factors such as the number of children living at home, family size, SES, ethnicity, cultural background, social support, stress level, and history of parenting on parental disciplinary practices has been proven (Rauh *et al.*, 1990). The research addressing the adverse effects of numerous individual risk factors for parents such as marital distress, single parent status, parental depression, chronic stress, daily responsibilities, and poverty on studies of the parent-child relationships indicates that the relationships are indeed adversely affected.

Despite the fact that previous research has focused on child disciplinary practices, most studies have examined only a few isolated variables at any one time. In addition, research has focused on unidirectional influence, resulting in limited studies that have addressed the influence of broader contextual factors on the paternal disciplinary practices of children. It is unlikely that any single factor is sufficient to examine the similarities and differences in the methods that fathers discipline their children. It is important to understand the complex multiple variables that affect discipline related interactions between children and fathers.

In order to achieve the goal of this research, the conceptual model that guided this present study (that included the diverse array of factors) and the following research questions were explored:

1. How are the child, father, and contextual factors related to paternal disciplinary practices?
2. What is the relationship between the cumulative risk factors and the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers?

Methods

Subject

A total of 300 fathers whose children attended three childcare centers in Los Angeles were recruited. The fathers of the children were informed about the research and invited to participate. The questionnaires were mailed to the homes of 300 families in January 2010. Of the 300 families, 205 families returned the questionnaires and yielded a 68.3% response rate. The final examined units of analysis were the 200 fathers of six-year-old children.

<Table 1> presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the subjects. Approximately 42.3% of the children were males, and the mean age (months) of the children was 67.12. The mean age of the fathers was 36.23 and the fathers in the sample were all highly educated. The occupational status of fathers as professional was 43% and all subjects were married. These subjects also represented different ethnic groups. 70.5% of the fathers were Euro-American and 29.5% of the fathers were Asian. The Asian fathers represented different nationalities that included Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. 50.0% of families reported an income at \$50,000 and over, 40.3% between \$25,000 and \$49,999, 9.7% at less than \$24,999.

Instrument

Paternal Disciplinary Practice The Parenting Scale developed by Arnold *et al.* (1993) measured the disciplinary practices in the fathers of young children. Two factors indicating a dysfunctional discipline style were identified: laxness and over-reactivity. The laxness factor included 11 items related to permissive discipline. The over-reactivity factor consisted of 10 items used to identify parenting mistakes such as displays of anger, meanness, and irritability.

Each of the preceding items was paired with a more effective counterpart to form the anchors of a 7-point scale. Higher scores indicated that the parent utilized a more effective disciplinary practice. The Cronbach's alpha was .89 for laxness subscale, .87 for over-reactivity subscale, and .86 for total scale.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics*

Variable.	
Child Characteristics (N=200)	
Male (%)	42.3
Female (%)	57.7
Age (months)	
M	67.12
Birth Order (%)	
First Born	64.2
Second Born	20.0
Third Born or Greater	15.8
Paternal Characteristics (N=200)	
Age (years)	
M	36.23
Range	29-48
Education (%)	
Less than High School Graduate	0.5
High School Graduate	2.5
Some Education beyond High School Graduate	9.3
B.A./B.S. Degree	56.3
Some Education beyond B.A./B.S. Degree	31.4
Occupation (%)	
Professional Specialty	43.0
Self-Employed Businessman	8.5
Service	6.1
Homemaker	0.8
Student	3.3
Sales Manager	25.8
Other	12.5
Ethnicity (%)	
Euro-American	70.5
Asian	29.5
Family Characteristics	
Number of Children	
M	1.95
Range	1-4
Gross Household Income (%)	
Under \$ 24,999	9.7
\$ 25,000- \$49,999	40.3
\$ 50,000 and over	50.0

Temperament Child temperament was assessed with the use of the Colorado Childhood Temperament Inventory (CCTI) (Rowe & Plomin,

1977). This instrument consisted of twenty-five items. Five dimensions were derived from the individual items: 1) sociability, 2) emotionality, 3) activity level, 4) attention span-persistence, 5) soothability. High scores on each subscale indicated that the child was very social, emotional, active, persistent, and easy to pacify. The Cronbach's alpha for each dimension was as follows: sociability .84; emotionality .88; activity level .80; attention span-persistence .79; and soothability .80.

Social Support The parental levels of social support were assessed through the utilization of the Social Provisions Scale developed by Weiss (1974). Parents used a four point scale to indicate how much each of the items described their social support. A high score was indicative of greater social support. The Cronbach's alpha, for the total Social Support Scale of the present sample was .93.

Quality of Life A Quality of Life Measure was adapted in this study based on the Quality of Life Measure developed by Andrews and Withey (1976). Ten items determined parental feelings about life concerns; however, only the items applicable to this study were included. Among the ten items, 2 items were used to test marital satisfaction and job satisfaction.

Parents selected answers from a seven point scale. Higher scores on this scale corresponded to higher levels of satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha for the Quality of Life Scale of the present sample was .89.

Intergenerational Transmission of Parenting Two instruments measured the intergenerational transmission of parenting that required that the fathers recollect their childhood memories.

First, the Supportive Discipline Scale was developed by Simons *et al.* (1992) and the response categories ranged along a 5-point scale. A high score on this measure indicated higher levels of the supportive parenting by grandparents. The Cronbach's alpha, for the Supportive Discipline Scale of the present sample was .90.

Second, a Harsh Discipline Scale was adapted

from Straus *et al.* (1980). The response categories were measured along a 5-point scale. A high score on this scale indicated higher levels of harsh parenting by grandparents. The Cronbach's alpha, for the Harsh Discipline Scale of the present sample was .76.

Data Analysis The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A descriptive analysis was used to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample. Three statistical methods were used for data description and analysis: zero-order correlations, multiple regression analyses, and chi-square analyses.

RESULTS

Research question 1: How are the child, father, and contextual variables related to paternal disciplinary practices?

The first step of the analysis was to test research question 1, and the zero order correlations were examined. This study examined the child factors that included the temperament, birth order, and gender of the child; the identified paternal factors were age, education level, and ethnicity. Seven contextual factors are included in the analysis: number of children living at home, marital & job satisfaction, levels of quality of life & social support, household income, and recollected childhood experiences and the results are presented in <Table 2>.

The emotional state of the child (as perceived by fathers) was negatively correlated with the disciplinary practices of fathers, and the gender of the child showed a significant correlation with the disciplinary practices of fathers. The data indicated that boys who were perceived as less emotional by fathers received more effective disciplinary practices. The correlation with the sociability and soothability perceptions of the child were insignificant for fathers.

Ethnicity was significantly associated with the disciplinary practices of fathers. Euro-American fathers scored higher than Asian fathers did on effective disciplinary practices.

There was also a strong association between the

Table 2. Zero-order Correlations of Paternal Disciplinary Practices

Predictor Variables	Paternal Disciplinary Practices (N = 200)
	Correlations
Child Factors	
Temperament	
Emotionality	-.22*
Activity Level	.05
Sociability	.13
Attention Span-Persistence	.07
Soothability	.15
Birth Order	.07
Gender of the Child	-.23*
Paternal Factors	
Age	.09
Education Level	.06
Ethnicity	-.22*
Contextual Factors	
Number of Children	.12
Marital Satisfaction	.21*
Job Satisfaction	.20*
Quality of Life	.42***
Social Support	.34***
Household Income	.30***
Recollected Childhood Experiences	
Supportive Parenting	.15
Harsh Parenting	-.14

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Gender of the child: male = 0; female = 1

Ethnicity: Euro-American = 0; Asian = 1

five contextual factors and paternal disciplinary practices. The levels of perceived marital satisfaction, job satisfaction, quality of life, social support, and levels of household income were positively and significantly correlated with the disciplinary practices of fathers.

Collinearity diagnostics were checked to confirm multicollinearity problems and to conduct further analyses. VIF was arranged 3 to 5 and was lower than 10 and shows that there is no serious problem among research variables.

In second step of the analysis to test research

Table 3. Regression of Paternal Disciplinary Practices

Predictor Variables	Paternal Disciplinary Practices (N = 200)
	Standardized Betas
Child Factors	
Temperament	
Emotionality	-.20*
Paternal Factors	
Ethnicity	-.24*
Contextual Factors	
Quality of Life	.42***
R-square	.36
F	13.25***

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Ethnicity: Euro-American = 0; Asian = 1

question 1, the regression was examined. Eight factors (emotionality, gender of the child, ethnicity, marital satisfaction, job satisfaction, quality of life, social support & household income) that were significant in the zero-order correlations were examined with the method of stepwise entry. The results of these analyses are presented in <Table 3>.

Only three variables were found to be predictive of the disciplinary practices of fathers: emotionality, ethnicity, and quality of life measure. The data indicated that less emotional children, Euro-American fathers and higher levels of quality of life made unique contributions to predicting more effective disciplinary practices of fathers. Thirty-six percent of the variance in paternal disciplinary scores was accounted for by these variables. The F values for the two regression models were found to be significant ($p < .001$).

Research question 2: What is the relationship between the cumulative risk factors and ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers?

To examine the cumulative effect of risk, child, father, and contextual influences on the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers, eight predictors for fathers that had significant effects on the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers in <Table 2> were converted to dichotomous variables (risk factors versus protective factors). Of the eight predictor

Table 4. Probability Fathers with Ineffective Disciplinary Scores (Bottom 33rd percentile) for Each Level of Risk Factors

No. of Risk Factors	Ineffective Disciplinary Score	
	Father (N = 69)	
	N	% with Risk
0	5	5.4
1	10	25.1
2	17	37.3
3	19	55.1
4 or more	18	67.3
Phi48***	

*** p < .001

variables for fathers, two were child factors (emotionality and gender of the child), one was paternal factor (ethnicity), and five were contextual factors (marital & job satisfaction, quality of life, social support & household income). The following information was considered to be a risk factor for fathers: (a) scores on the emotional state of the child were above the upper third for this sample, (b) the gender of the child was female, (c) ethnicity of the father was Asian, (d) scores on the marital satisfaction were below the lower third for this sample, (e) scores on the job satisfaction were below the lower third for this sample, (f) scores on the quality of life were below the lower third for this sample, (g) scores for social support were below the lower third for this sample, (h) family income was below the lower third for this sample. Each of the risk factors was coded as 1 (present) or 0 (absent), and the total score was produced by adding the number of risk factors present for each father.

The cumulative risk index score ranged from 0 (non of these risk factors) to 4 or more (all of risk factors) for fathers. To avoid small cell sizes, the risk indexes for outcome were collapsed into five categories for fathers: zero risk factor, one risk factor, two risk factors, three risk factors, and four or more risk factors.

For the analyses, the outcome variable, the disciplinary practices as measured by the Parenting Scale, was also converted to a dichotomous variable (the lowest 32.5% of scores versus the upper 67.5%). Cross-tabulations were used to determine the

probability of utilizing the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers for each level of risk factor. These analyses are presented in <Table 4>.

The results of the analyses indicated that fathers simultaneously exposed to several risk factors are at a greater probability of ineffective disciplinary practices than fathers exposed to few or no risk factors. 67.3% of the fathers exposed to four or more risk factors had high ineffective disciplinary scores compared to approximately 5.4% of fathers with a score of 0 on the risk index.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The conceptual model utilized for this study is Belsky's determinants of parenting model. Belsky (1984) proposed that the factors affecting parental behavior could be grouped into three major categories: characteristic of the child, parent, and contextual factors.

The finding from this study correlate with other studies and shows that fathers who perceived the child as less emotional engaged in more effective disciplinary practices. Extremely difficult, stubborn, and aggressive children emotionally drain parents cause them to become lax, less affectionate, uninvolved and possibly violent (Lytton, 1990).

Contrary to previous studies (Zurabin, 1988), education had no effect upon the disciplinary practices of fathers. The data in this study suggested that highly educated fathers the same as fathers of lower education to engage in more effective disciplinary practices. In addition, the number of children in the household and paternal age did not emerge as significant predictors of paternal disciplinary practices as reported in other studies (Nye et al., 1970). The discrepancy is due in part to the fact that the sample of fathers in this study had a higher educational attainment than a more diverse sample.

This study reinforces other studies on parents who report that higher levels of quality life and social support available to them feel less parenting stress and exhibit more effective disciplinary practices (Belsky & Isbella, 1988). It clearly suggests that families do not exist in isolation, but are

embedded in a variety of formal and informal support systems. Theories that emphasize the importance of social contexts, family systems, and ongoing relationship contexts (Laursen & Collins, 1994) all suggest possible developmental precursors and consequences for the parental use of discipline.

In support of past research (Kelly & Tseng, 1992), the results of this study show significant racial/ethnic differences in parental reports of disciplinary practices. There is no obvious explanation for the findings that Euro-American fathers were less apt to report ineffective disciplinary practices than Asian fathers. However, these findings could be interpreted in a number of ways. It seems reasonable to assume that the findings may reflect cultural differences in child-rearing styles and values (Garcia Coll, 1990). Cultures differ in the value they place on different child qualities and behaviors and in their beliefs about which parenting practices will promote these qualities and behaviors (Mistry, Chaudhuri & Diez, 2003; Ripoll-Nun ez & Rohner, 2006). Cultures also differ in the evaluation of what parenting practices are considered to be physically or emotionally appropriate (Korbin, 2003). Links between cultural values and parents' preferred childrearing practices have been documented. A study of mothers in China and India found that differences in the use of authoritative and authoritarian parenting practices by the two groups were related to relative differences in the valuing of goals or social emotional development and family honor (Rao *et al.*, 2003). Parents in countries with more collectivist orientations (such as China) tend to emphasize the importance of behavioral inhibition and subjugation of individual wants for the good of the family, whereas parents in Western individualist cultures typically value assertiveness and independence in children (Rothbaum *et al.*, 2000). Cross-cultural comparisons also showed that U.S. mothers had more conversations that emphasized individual differences, more often acted as playmates and used joint attention, showed more emotion, and made more positive accomplishments (Dennis *et al.*, 2002).

These ethnic and culturally diverse conceptions of fatherhood have differential effects on child outcomes and might work through different

pathways. Such research is critical for program design and implementation (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, it seems probable that some research instruments standardized in the United States are not designed to be responsive to different cultural standards.

Discipline is most likely to be effective when children perceive it to be fair and reasonable (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Parental discipline techniques may not have similar effects on children across cultures, because the effects may depend on the extent to which the techniques are normative within a culture (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Discipline that is perceived by children to be nonnormative is likely to be ineffective in promoting appropriate child behavior and may inadvertently lead to increases in problematic child behavior.

Contrary to previous research (Simons *et al.*, 1992), the quality of parenting that the father experienced as a child had no effect on his disciplinary practices toward his children. One possible reason for this finding is that the retrospective reports by fathers on the quality of parenting that they received may be influenced by their affective state at the time of data collection and the quality of their current relationships between the adult child and his or her parent (Berkowitz, 1989). It also depends on how those events have been cognitively processed.

Fathers exposed to several risk factors were more likely to exhibit ineffective disciplinary practices than fathers exposed to no risk factors. Ecological risk, defined by factors such as the emotional state of the child, paternal ethnicity, and low quality of life was associated with the ineffective use of disciplinary practices. The results indicate that exposure to each additional risk factor greatly increases the probability of ineffective disciplinary practices by fathers. The findings of these results suggest a combined influence of several factors in individual differences in paternal disciplinary practices. Transactional models suggest that child behavior problems may lead parents to be less involved and unengaged with their children, and that less involved and ineffective parenting may lead to escalating delinquent behaviors of children.

In conclusion, the expectations by fathers about what they should do, what they actually do, and their effects on children must be reviewed within the context of the family, the community, culture, and current history. It is important to recognize the value of examining multiple factors within one study and acknowledge the importance of the social context of the family.

Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are follows. First, the overall sample size was relatively small and the population sample were two-parent families background that overrepresented higher education and income levels. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized to the population at large. Second, the data collected through the questionnaire were all self-reported and there was a lack of observational data on parent-child interaction. Future work should include validating measures of disciplinary style to assure the validity of the disciplinary style construct. Third, this present study was a cross-sectional study. The gathering of longitudinal data would provide a more comprehensive and deeper insight of the paternal disciplinary practices, in response to the changes in the characteristics of the child, father, and contextual factors.

This study provides a notable contribution to the field on the implications for the effects of cumulative risk factors on the ineffective disciplinary practices of fathers.

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