

Research Findings on Parental Discipline of Children

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Few aspects of child-rearing are more problematic or conflict ridden for parents than disciplining their children. An impressive body of research shows that problems with disciplining children are largely related to putting the cart before the horse, namely, parents applying discipline to their children when they should first be applying it to themselves (Anderson, Lytton, & Romney, 1986; Covell & Abramovitch, 1988; El-Sheikh, Cummunings, & Goetch, 1989; Garbarina, Sebes, & Schellenbach, 1984; Johnson & O'Leary, 1987). In essence, before parents can become effective disciplinarians, they must first learn to manage their own emotions and be able to apply basic principles of problem solving with their children (Dix, 1991; Montemayor, 1983; Petit, Dodge, & Brown, 1988; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992).

Here are some of the salient conclusions of recent research on child discipline that suggest most parents can improve the behavior of even the most difficult of their children:

- Simple self-help techniques, with or without professional help, can help parents sharply reduce discipline problems.
- Parents who are sensitive to their children's needs have more obedient children. Authoritarian approaches tend to diminish a child's cooperative responses.
- Praise and love alone are not enough to instill good behavior. Too much permissiveness hurts a child's efforts to develop self-control.
- Behavior problems should be reversed early; waiting until teenage years diminishes chances for success and puts children at higher risk for drug use and other behavior problems.

Studies among hundreds of families at the University of Washington have shown that parents need to learn as many relevant skills as possible, including how to play with their children, communicate with them, praise and reward them, and set limits for them (Webster-Stratton, 1988; Webster-Stratton, 1990; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1990; Webster-Stratton, 1991). In the U.W. studies, instructional videotapes showing the right and wrong ways of handling behavior problems helped parents induce major improvements in their children's behavior (Webster-Stratton, 1987). These tapes were effective regardless of parents' economic, marital, or educational status or the level of therapeutic support provided to accompany these tapes (Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollingsworth, 1988; Webster-Stratton, 1990; Webster-Stratton; 1994). In addition, studies of young children conducted by Lay, Waters, and Park (1992) showed that they were much more responsive to parental discipline if the children perceived their parents as available, responsive, and sensitive to their needs.

The so-called permissive approach, in which parents are unconditionally warm and accepting regardless of what the child does, is highly ineffective for most parents according to a number of studies. A study of permissive parenting carried out by Baumrind (1991) found that adolescents lacked self-confidence and faced a high risk of developing antisocial behavior. In a

study of stepfamilies, Bray (1992) concluded that when parents failed to set limits, the children had more problems with knowing when to stop and tended to act out more. Other studies (Pffiffer & O'Leary, 1989; Reid, O'Leary, & Wolff, 1994) concerned with the discipline of young children found that lax parenting is as bad as harsh parenting.

If maladaptive behavior is not reversed in a child's life, studies have shown that highly aggressive and noncompliant children are at high risk for delinquent or socially deviant behavior when they reach their teenage years. In a series of studies conducted at the University of Oregon (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Patterson, & Bank, 1986; Patterson, Crosby, & Vuchinich, 1992; Vuchinich, Bank, & Patterson, 1992) researchers found that the teenagers exhibiting delinquent or socially deviant behavior tended to be problematic children who resisted or were not exposed to adequate parental discipline in their early development, i.e., between the ages of 18 months and three years. In sum, these studies suggest that if a child's behavioral problems are not corrected very early in life, that child is at risk of becoming a much greater discipline problem later in life.

Classroom studies (Hyman, Clarke, & Erdlen, 1987; Hyman, 1988) strongly suggest that a more rational, democratic approach that teaches children to behave in certain ways because it is the right thing to do is more effective at instilling internal controls than is an authoritarian approach based on fear of retribution. In these studies, when the teachers left the room, the children with the authoritarian teachers became highly unruly, but the children with the more democratic teachers were as good as when they were present. Furthermore, Wahler (1992, 1994) concluded from his research in working with two to eleven year-olds that a more subdued approach to discipline is crucial. His findings suggest that high-intensity discipline promotes a counter response from the child and that discipline of the child should be administered in as businesslike a manner as possible.

Researchers who study discipline seem to agree that consistency is a key factor in its application. They stress that parents must have rules and limits that are consistently enforced (Lang, Forehand, & Wierson, 1994; Wierson & Forehand, 1994). If these conditions are not met, they point out that children will tend to feel the need to continuously test the boundaries of appropriate behavior. In addition, they point out that consistent discipline is one of the most important aspects of promoting behavioral improvements in disobedient children (Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Lorber, Felton, & Reid, 1984). In a series of studies of disobedient children, Roberts (1984) and his associates (Hohnhorst & Roberts, 1992; Olsen & Roberts, 1987) also found that discipline alone is not a sufficient treatment for disruptive children. Parents must also learn to become responsive to their children's questions and requests and must give them extensive unconditional praise.

Summary

The findings from the research literature on parental discipline of children indicate that effectiveness is achieved by applying a combination of different skills. As this research shows, parents are likely to be the most effective disciplinarians when they are able to exercise emotional self-control, teach their children basic problem solving, pay attention to their children's needs, communicate and play with them, praise and reward them, and consistently set limits for them.

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