The legacy of aversive parenting: Predictors of pre-parents’ attitudes toward endorsement of physical discipline with children

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14th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect
Overview of Presentation

- Background Research
- Rationale and Aim
- Hypotheses
- Method
- Results
- Discussion
- Limitations
- Clinical Implications and Further Research
Child maltreatment

- Research in developed countries indicates child maltreatment statistics continue to rise annually.
- 22.6% will experience in physical abuse/maltreatment in their childhood
- 36.6 percent will experience emotional abuse
- 16.3 percent will experience physical neglect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2014).
- While attempts to operationalise problematic parenting practices and maltreatment vary widely and continue to be the topic of debate, there is a general consensus within literature that aversive or coercive parenting practices fall along a continuum of severity.
- According to the World Health Organisation (2002) violence against children is defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power (threatened or actual) against a child, by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity”.
- Substantiated abuse reports in Australia
  - 24,732 in 1999-2000
- 10,733 substantiated physical abuse cases in 2012-2013
- High co-occurrence of emotional abuse (37 %) and Neglect (26%) in those cases of physical abuse
Impact of harsh physical discipline

- Increases in externalising behaviour, aggression and substance abuse have been indicated in adolescents with abusive childhood histories, and prospective studies have reported evidence of a small, yet statistically significant increase in attempted suicide and prostitution/sex trading in maltreated children (Gilbert et al., 2009; Norman et al., 2012).

- High rates of internalising psychopathology such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Springer et al., 2007).

- Rates of depression estimated to be 3 to 4 times higher in adolescents with a history of childhood maltreatment, compared to non-maltreated counterparts (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999).

- Longitudinal data has indicated this depressive symptomatology, resultant from child maltreatment, often persists into adulthood.
Intergenerational Transmission

- Research conducted with both adult and teenage parents indicates harsh parenting practices transcend multiple generations (De Paúl & Domenech, 2000).

- Mothers who were physically abused were 12 times more likely to abuse their own children (Ertrem, Leventhal and Dobbs; 2000)

- Intergenerational abuse persists in families at varying rates ranging from:
  - 6.7 percent (Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Browne, 2005)
  - to 30 percent (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

- The inconsistencies in these prevalence rates are likely resultant from varying definitions of abuse and differing methodological standards, indicating further research is warranted.
Empirical literature has suggested that endorsement and perpetuation of physical discipline may be influenced by the frequency (Simons & Wurtele, 2010) and also the severity of an individual’s history of childhood physical discipline.

A study utilising African-American youth demonstrated chronicity of physical discipline was found to increase endorsement of physical discipline (Deater-Deckard, Langsford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2003).

521 American university psychology students asked to give appropriateness ratings to forms of physical discipline used in child vignettes, in conjunction with ratings of the severity of their own history of childhood discipline. Results of the study revealed appropriateness ratings typically decreased as the severity of discipline in the vignettes increased; however, participants who reported experiences of severe punishment rated equivalent levels of punishment as more appropriate than those without a history of severe discipline. Interestingly, this severity-appropriateness trend was not observed in participants who labelled their experiences of punishment as abusive (Kelder, 1991).

New Zealand college students found to endorse forms of physical discipline related to their own experiences, excluding situations in which a severe discipline-related injury had been sustained (Bower & Knutson, 1996).
Influencing factors: Cognitive and Affective

• According to the Social Information Processing Model (Milner, 2000):

• One’s history of parenting experiences, in addition to child-related beliefs formed over the lifespan, influences subsequent perception, interpretation, evaluation, and response selection when processing child-related information (i.e., child behaviours).

• Parents at “high risk” of child maltreatment or those actively engaging in abuse have also shown to be less attentive and less aware of their children’s appropriate behaviour, often fail to attend to minor improvements in children’s behaviour, and selectively attend to behavioural information that is congruent with and does not compromise their pre-existing schemata related to child behaviours (Dopke, Lundahl, Dunsterville, & Lovejoy, 2003).

• Attributions
  - Attribution Theory suggests that parents look for reasons for their child’s behaviour
    o Why is she crying or whining all the time?
    o Why doesn’t he do as I ask?
  
  - Attributions parents’ make impact on parents’ feeling and behaviour

  - Parenting behaviour depends on parents’ inferences about
    o the developmental skill level of the child
    o what are the dispositional traits and motives of child causing child’s behaviour in situation

  - An example: “Child who fails to share their toys with other children because of limited ability due to developmental limitations might be seen by a parent as selfish and be punished for the behaviour that in fact did not reflect personality dispositions, but developmental limitations.”
Where do parental attributions come from?
The origins and development

- Parents’ experiences with their child (Grusec & Mammone, 1995)
- Parent’s own childhood history within family and culture (Hastings & Grusec, 1998)

WHY ARE PARENTAL ATTRIBUTIONS IMPORTANT?

- Parents’ attributions about children’s behaviour are linked to
  - parents’ negative feelings & negative behaviour towards their children
  - parents use of harsh discipline

EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTIONS?

- Parent’s negative attributions for child’s misbehaviour can lead to parents becoming angry and using aversive discipline such as yelling and hitting

- Example of parents negative attributions translated into verbal messages:
  “You are a terrible child because you never do as I say, you are such naughty girl. You know I’m tired you are just doing this to get at me.”
Anger, unrealistic Expectations & Depression

• Parental anger has long been associated with increases in harsh response selection.

• According to Pidgeon and Sanders (2009), anger-intensifying attributional biases in parent’s perceptions of negative child behaviour leads to increased anger-related response selection, with negative parenting behaviour being perpetuated by parents’ justification of their behaviour through an attributional response set of child blame attributions.

• The suggestion parents justify angry parenting responses is supported in research, with parents observed to justify their behaviour following the use of corporal punishment techniques in order to maintain self-efficacy and reduce depression (McLoyd et al., 2007).

• Biased interpretations of children’s behaviour in response to parental negative mood have also been found to increase the probability parents will react with more negative affect and use more power-assertive disciplinary strategies such as harsh physical discipline (Dix, 1993).

• Previous research has noted violations of unrealistic child expectations, resulting in a negative attributional style, typically contribute to the development of negative self-evaluation and negative affectivity in parents (Azar & Weinzierl, 2005).

• Negative affective states such as depression, deplete the parent of their emotional resources to cope with child transgressions, often leading to ineffective parenting practices and harsh physical discipline (Azar & Weinzierl, 2005).
Demographic Risk Factor

- Literature implicating young parental age (under 21 years) as a significant risk factor mediating/for abuse (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Pears & Capaldi, 2001)

- A significant relationship between child abuse potential scores measure on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory and history of physical punishment was found in a small sample of adolescent mothers investigated by De Paul & Domenech (2000).

- Larger studies such as that of 679 male and female university students found high percentages of endorsement of physical punishment that students had experienced themselves, if they considered it to be justified and helpful (Graziano & Namaste, 1990).
Rationale and Aim

A growing body of literature has emphasized various factors that contribute to the selection of physical discipline in parenting response.

Variables of significance in the current literature include:
- Frequency of respondents’ own history of physical discipline
- Severity of respondents’ own history of physical discipline
- Negative Attributional Style, including Anger-Justifying Attributional Style
- Unrealistic Expectations
- Depression

As the literature is limited in reviewing these factors in a population of people who are not yet parents, the present study examines these variables within this population, herewith named pre-parents.

The present study aimed to examine which of these historical, cognitive and affective variables contribute to pre-parents’ endorsement of physical discipline in child behaviour vignettes.
Hypotheses

**H1:** Higher levels of negative attributional style, anger-justifying attributions, unrealistic expectations, depression and frequency of childhood physical discipline will be positively associated with higher levels of endorsement of physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios at a level of statistical significance.

**H2:** Higher severity of history of childhood physical discipline will be negatively associated with lower endorsement of punishment in the hypothetical parenting scenarios at a level of statistical significance.
Method

Participants
The sample was comprised of 129 University students who were not biological or proxy parents.

• 104 female, 25 male
• 82.3% were between 18 and 22 years of age \((M = 21.29, SD = 7.68)\).
• 47.7% enrolled in a Psychology Degree, 27.3% Study abroad program of mixed degrees, 4.7% enrolled in a Law degree

• 35.8 % identified as Australian
• 15.1 % as American
• 7.5 % as Asian
• 41.5 % self-identified only as “Caucasian” or of other ethnic identities (e.g., Middle Eastern, African, Russian).
Measures

- **History of Frequency and Severity of Physical discipline.** Discipline Questionnaire (DQ; Graziano, Hamblem & Namaste, 1990).

- **Negative Attributions about child behaviour.** The Parents Attributions for Child Behaviour Measure (PACBM; Pidgeon & Sanders, 2006). was used to assess pre-parents’ negative attributional styles for child behaviour.

- Six written analogue hypothetical situations were used as stimulus events, reflecting four attributional dimensions: the child’s disposition (internal), the stability of the child’s behaviour (stable), the degree of blame assigned to the child (blame), and the degree to which the child acted with intent (intentional). Participants were asked to read each scenario and rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of attributional statements on a six point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 6 = strongly disagree).

- **Anger justifying attributions.** One item from the Parent Attributions Measure (PAM; Pidgeon & Sanders, 2009). Participants were asked to read the hypothetical scenarios in the PACBM, and then respond to one statement from the PAM, assessing how strongly they agree or disagree with the child-blame statement “The way my child behaves is an important factor in causing me to physically discipline my child”.

- **Endorsement of physical discipline.** Participants were presented with six hypothetical child-rearing situations from the PACBM and asked to imagine the child in the story was their own. After each scenario, participants were asked: “How much would you physically punish the child (this includes hitting, smacking, slapping, spanking)?” Participants responded on a five point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much).

- **Unrealistic expectations.** Parent Opinion Questionnaire (POQ; Azar, Robinson, Hekimian & Twentyman, 1984)

- **Depression.** The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).
Measures

- **PARENT'S ATTRIBUTIONS FOR CHILD’S BEHAVIOUR MEASURE (PACBM)**
- This questionnaire contains six situations that involve different ways that children can behave. You are asked to imagine your child performing each behaviour in each situation. Please complete the questionnaire by reading all of the six situations, and then circling a number on each scale for all the four statements following each situation that indicates how much you strongly disagree or agree with each statement.

**SITUATION 1.** Imagine your child is playing with his/her friend in the next room and you think you hear them fighting. You ask your child what’s going on, but there is no reply. You go into the room to check, and at that moment your child hits their friend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My child’s behaviour is due to something about my child; for example, because that’s the way she or he is.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My child intended to behave this way on purpose.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The reason my child behaved this way is unlikely to change.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My child deserves to be blamed for their behaviour.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Analysis of Results

- Bivariate Analyses (Correlation) to examine the relationship between endorsement of physical discipline and the variables of interest (H1).

- Standard Multiple Regression was performed between endorsement of punishment as the dependent variable and severity of childhood discipline, frequency of childhood discipline, unrealistic expectations, negative attributional style, anger-justifying attributions and depression as the independent variables (H2).
## Results

**Correlations Between Criterion And Predictor Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Endorsement of punishment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Depression</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Anger-justifying attributions</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Negative attributional style</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Unrealistic expectations</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Frequency of childhood discipline</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.71**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Severity of childhood discipline</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Results

Summary of Standard Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Endorsement of Physical Discipline

• The adjusted $R^2$ value indicates that approximately 51% of the variability in endorsement of physical discipline is predicted by severity of childhood discipline, frequency of childhood discipline, unrealistic expectations, negative attributional style, anger-justifying attributions, and depression.

• The size and direction of the relationships suggest that anger-justifying attributions ($B = .63^{**}$), frequency of childhood discipline ($B = .35^{**}$) and severity of childhood discipline ($B = -.21^*$) all significantly contributed to the unique variance of the model.

Note. $R^2 = .54$, $\Delta R^2 = .51 (p < .01)$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$
Discussion

• The present study sought to examine the association between negative attributional style, anger-justifying attributions, unrealistic expectations, depression, frequency of childhood physical discipline and severity of childhood physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios.

• As demonstrated by the results, the hypotheses were partially supported.

• The results of analyses showed partial support for the hypothesis 1, finding that higher levels of anger-justifying attributions and frequency of childhood discipline significantly contributed to higher levels of endorsement of physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios.

• Additionally, the results supported hypothesis 2, finding that increased severity of childhood physical discipline significantly predicted less endorsement of physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios. No significant contributions were found, however, for negative attributional style, unrealistic expectations and depression, indicating that these variables did not significantly contribute to the endorsement of physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios.
• Contrary to original prediction, no significant contributions were found for negative attributional style, unrealistic expectations and depression, indicating that these variables did not significantly contribute to the endorsement of physical discipline in the hypothetical parenting scenarios.

• Negative attributional style, by its very definition, involves a combination of attributing blame and intent to a child, and attributing the causes of a child’s behaviour to something internal to the child, and something that is unlikely to change. A possible explanation for this finding is that pre-parents in this study may have had little significant experience with children, and therefore have not developed defining attributional styles at this point in their lives. This inference is supported by the fact that the majority (82.3%) of pre-parents in this study were aged 22 years or below.

• Previous research has found that unrealistic expectations and negative attributional style contribute to the use of harsh physical discipline (Azar, 1984; Plante & Graziano, 2002). The conflicting role of unrealistic expectations in the endorsement of physical discipline would likely benefit from further investigation.

• Similarly, the finding that higher levels of depression did not significantly predict higher levels of endorsement is inconsistent with other research that suggests that as negative affectivity increases, parents are more likely to rely upon aversive parenting practices (Dix, 1993). A possible explanation for this finding may be that the study asked participants to reflect upon what they would do if they imagined themselves in the hypothetical parenting scenario, which may be different from what depressed parents are actually observed to do, which is typically investigated by studies such as the Dix (1993) study. As there has been some discrepancy between whether intentions and perceptions predict actual behaviour (Herzberger, 1983), it is possible that the results differ as a function of the hypothetical nature of the predicted parenting behaviour.
Limitations

• A limitation to the study were some of the demographic factors of the current population.

• The sample was a convenience sample. Predominantly females, Australian, studying Psychology.

• Potential for socially desirable response patterns in collection of sensitive information related to childhood physical discipline histories

• To improve generalisability of results, further research could explore pre-parents from a variety of age, cultural and educational groups.
Clinical Implications & Further Research

- Adds to transgenerational research regarding discipline choices, focusing on a pre-parent population.

- Provides support that anger-justifying attributions exist, and contribute significantly to endorsement of physical discipline, prior to individuals even having children.

- As such, further research using samples broader in age, cultural and educational backgrounds is required to examine the development of anger-justifying attributional bias more extensively and, in particular, to explore the impact of history of childhood physical discipline in its varying degrees and development of anger-justifying attributions.

- Preventative programs may be enhanced by targeting this attributional style in an attempt to minimise the perpetuation of harsh physical punishment.

- The findings of this study also support further research and development of parenting education programs that target pre-parents with a history of childhood physical discipline, as research has shown that their limited life experience and developmental maturity may put them at increased risk for perpetrating harsh physical discipline (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1993). Additionally, the introduction of these type of programs may serve as primary prevention for this target group as they have not yet had children.
Thank you for your time and attention.

QUESTIONS?