

Original Paper

Parental Spanking and Children Development: Review of Literature and Theories

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Abstract

The behaviorist approach would justify spanking as a corrective approach to a child's unwanted behavior. Supported by theories and various studies, this paper discussed that in spanking, however, the desired behavior is forced; it does not imply that the child realizes his or her mistakes, it disregards the notion that children are cognitively complex beings.

Keywords

children, a parent or caregiver, guiding, spanking, theories

1. Introduction

The behaviorists' approach uses a stimulus response pattern to condition a certain behavior. Pavlov- using this method of conditioning, using a bell as a stimulus- was able to make his dog salivate without offering him any food (Miller, 2011). The bottom line is to use positive reinforcement to increase the likelihood of occurrences of wanted behavior and negative reinforcement to decrease the likelihood of occurrences of unwanted behavior. This model has been very commonly misunderstood to constitute a model of reward and punishment. However, in behaviorism, it is a model of reward and withdrawal of reward, which, to some extent, can be considered a punishment. This can be seen in both the Skinnerian and Pavlovian models of series of stimuli and reinforcement (Miller, 2011). It can also be seen through the Bandura's (1997) model of learning through observation, or second hand reinforcement. According to Miller (2011) the utilitarianism offered a framework according to which a good behavior is one that brings pleasure.

When guiding children, one may think that spanking is a viable method of negative reinforcement, and that through repetition it could ensure the likelihood of a certain action, behavior, or response not being repeated. Arguably, parents following this approach follow the utilitarian principle of Miller (2011) that good behavior is associated with pleasure and that bad behavior is associated with pain. To use

spanking as a deterrent is another way of telling children that they can repeat behaviors when they are not being watched. If there is no conviction, there is no learning; only the fear of punishment without understanding why this particular behavior is inherently bad or good.

2. Review of Literature

Spanking is an ancient method that does not conform to progressive society but instead aims at enforcing what is seen as the norm. It does not require a conviction or persuasion but a fear of punishment. Researchers defined spanking differently. Benjet and Kazdin (2003) defined spanking as hitting a child or extreme disciplinary methods without causing physical harm. While Graziano, Hamblen and Plante (1996) and Straus, Sugarman and Giles-Sims (1997) regarded spanking as an aggressive act aimed at causing the child pain to avoid the reoccurrence of a certain behavior. However, Researchers found that in the United States, 74% of parents reported to use spanking as a disciplining method with their 17 years of age or younger children (Gallup Organization, 1995). Straus and Stewart (1999) mentioned that 94% of parents of 3- and 4-year-olds may use spanking for discipline. On the other hand, Yankelovich (2000) stated that 61% of parents saw spanking as a suitable form of regular discipline. Giles-Sims, Straus and Sugarman (1995) concluded that economic stress is related to resorting spanking as a corrective method for children's behaviors. Interestingly, Vittrup and Holden (2010) investigated disciplinary methods from the children's perspective. The study sampled 108 children between the ages 6-10. The children watched disciplinary approaches on video and rate them. Vittrup and Holden (2010) found that the children saw reasoning as most fair and spanking is most unfair. Vittrup and Holden (2010) found that children with middle to high exposure to spanking saw it the best and children with low exposure saw it as the worst. Vittrup and Holden (2010) concluded that parental factors affect corporal punishment; these include such variables as socio-economic status, parents' experience, parents' level of education, and culture. Further in the same line, Dietz (2000) found that uneducated parents with economic difficulty use spanking to discipline their children.

It is often assumed that corporal punishment usually co-occurs with authoritarianism. However, while parents that are more authoritarian may use corporal punishment more frequently than other parents (Baumrind, 1991). Bluestone and Yanis-Lemond (1999), after examining reported parenting disciplinary method of 144 working African American mothers with children ranging between 5-12 years old, found that there is a variation among parents in their disciplinary strategies; reasoning, which is typical of authoritative parenting, was the most regularly reported strategy. Poor parenting practices, such as inconsistent use of positive parenting, have been associated with delinquent behavior in both children and adolescents. Peterson and Rolline (1987) maintained that competent and educated parents do not use corporal punishment, but rather make use of reasoning and communication. McCord (1995) found that parents' consistent use of corporal punishment is related to antisocial behavior, or low self-esteem in children.

However, parents yelling at and spanking their children out of anger is counterproductive and does not help the child as much as it relieves the anger of the parent. Gershoff's (2002) meta-analytic review affirmed this conclusion that spanking although helps in gaining immediate result and compliance, it is not useful in causing a more substantive change of behavior. The point is that corporal punishment is a sign of weakness from the side of the parent; it is not one of firmness and discipline. In fact, it reflects the parent's anxiety. Martorell and Bugental (2006) noted that an increased sense of power would have a diminishing effect on parental stress and harsh parenting. Similarly, Coyl, Roggman and Newland (2002) examined factors affecting infant attachment security like stress, depression, and negative parenting, i.e., spanking. Coyl, Roggman and Newland (2002) noted that infant's sense of secure attachment was low when mother's depression was high because when mothers were dissatisfied with their infants' behaviors, they resort to spanking them. Furthermore, Coyl, Roggman and Newland (2002) noted that economic stress had a direct relationship to maternal depression leading eventually to frequency of spanking. In the same vein, Eamon and Zuehl (2001) showed that poverty, combined with maternal depression, is indicative of mothers using spanking to deal with their children's behavior problems.

Additionally, spanking affects children's behavior and their future relationships. Tomoda, Suzuki, Rabi, Sheu, Polcari and Teicher (2009) noted that spanking leads to aggressive and antisocial behavior in children, as they grow older. Thus, children who experience aggression and violence in their childhood are more likely to be abusive in their future relationships. From another perspective, Straus and Mouradian (1998) found that spanking is a risk factor for children developing a pattern of antisocial and impulsive behaviors possibly leading to social violence and crimes. Similarly, Taylor, Manganello, Lee and Janet (2010) investigated the relation between the use of spanking to discipline 3-year-old children and their aggressive behavior. Taylor, Manganello, Lee and Rice (2010) found that frequently spanking a 3-year-old child was related to an augmented level of child's aggression at the age of five.

3. Discussion

To examine this issue from the perspective of education and development, one must understand that developing a child's moral reasoning and internal standards of right and wrong is a long-term process. It is not like spanking, where parents feel that their child will not display certain behaviors because if they do, they will be spanked, and that will scare them from behaving in certain ways. In a sense, this can offer an immediate result, but does not address the child's cognitive development. It focuses on Watson's S and R model of behaviorism. What happens in the mind is not important: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, B is the mental process, and proponents of Watson's behaviorism see that if A leads to B and B to C, then A leads to C (Note 1) (Robinson, 1976).

According to Rogoff (1990) in developing moral reasoning, both Piaget and Vygotsky focused on the mind, that cognition as the building block of the child's character. While Piaget saw that children

should be given the chance to explore the world for themselves (which, in effect, results in building complex mental connections and in-depth learning), Vygotsky (1978) saw it as important to treat children as apprentices so that parents could act as mentors. In this case, children are not passive-receptive of instructions, but interact with their mentors in the process of learning. Looking at the issue from Vygotsky's (1978) point of reference, one can see that parents should act as examples for the children to morally imitate (learning by observation). They could tell the child to ask questions in order to receive guidance. In cases of mishap, an explanation could be provided immediately after in order not to lose the association between an action and its consequence. The point is not to create a copy of the parents, but rather to help the child gradually become an independent learner. To transform the child from a stage of heteronomy to a state of autonomy, Kohlberg's terms should be used.

Interestingly, according to Rogoff (1990) Piaget offered story telling as a method of creating the same Vygotskian effect of independent moral reasoning. In each story, the listener is called upon to judge whether the actions performed by the characters are right or wrong; why they are right or wrong; whether certain actions warrant punishment; and the like. Based on numerous studies, Kohlberg (1984) concluded that there are definable stages of moral reasoning, from the lowest, based solely on expectations of reward or punishment, to the highest, in which persons frame their own authentic moral standards and judge accordingly. Kohlberg (1984) differentiated between two types of moral reasoning based on cognition. Heteronomous moral reasoning judges actions according to what others would say, and autonomous moral reasoning makes a judgment based on internal standards. Thus, a child can acquire his or her moral judgment by imitating adults' judgments until these judgments become a part of their own moral reservoirs. Children's moral reservoirs are made by putting forth what adults think is proper. For children, sympathy, moralism, pleasure, and revulsion do not yet have a basis. They do not yet have an internal standard of judging right from wrong; hence, they judge anything as good if it pleases their parents and bad if it upsets their parents. In this respect, spanking can be deemed more as therapeutic to the parents' anger than as educational for the child. The point here is that child guidance should be seen in terms of development, which means that it takes time to show a relative result. To use penal logic would be to hinder the child from living as a thinking being.

4. Conclusion

In summation, in the beginning, the child lacks this associative mental capability. One spans the child immediately after the child misbehaves so that he or she will not do it again. Spanking will not change or contribute meaningfully to the child's character development in the long-run but will rather lead to anxiety and aggression (Gershoff, Grogan-Kaylor, Lansford, Chang, Zelli, Deater-Deckard, & Dodge, 2010). In some sense, the behaviorist approach would justify this, but there are other methods that could be used to get the child's attention (i.e., grounding or taking away some privileges). In spanking, it is forced; I think it is counterproductive in the long-run, and may alter the child's behavior, not

because the child realizes his or her mistakes, but because the child is afraid of being spanked. It disregards the notion that children are cognitively complex beings. It does not require the child to think or come to a realization that would eventually lead to productive conversations with parents. It does not support cognitive growth, only blind obedience.

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Note

Note 1. However, the limitation of the behaviorist theory would be in its fatal flaws that made it quite open for criticism. First, behaviorism does not differentiate between any living organisms in its applications. It can be used the same across species. Further, it is not a stage theory, it can be used the same with children or adult. More importantly, behaviorism is seen by its proponent from a mechanical world view, it is defined as not the study of psychological, cognitive, emotive or mental process, but as the study of observable behaviors, since behaviors are what we actually can see and measure. The internal processes are out of reach and they are needless. The behaviorist justification for the insignificance of the internal processes comes from this model: If X [the external stimulus] caused Y [internal mental process], and Y caused Z [the observable response] then actually X caused Z. and Y is unimportant, it is something out of reach. Ignoring the mental processes left behaviorism open to criticism. It saw human being as a mechanism and ignored the free individual initiative.