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History of Emotional and Physical Abuse and Parenting

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History of Emotional and Physical Abuse and Parenting

Child maltreatment is a major social problem in the United States that results in more than 740,000 children and youth visits to hospital emergency departments (CDC, 2012) and a total lifetime cost-child welfare, health care, criminal justice, etc. - of $124 billion each year (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012). According to data collected by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2008 the Child Protective Services (CPS) received 3.3 million reports of children being abused or neglected (CDC, 2012). Approximately seventy-one percent of the reports were classified as victims of child neglect, nine percent as victims of sexual abuse, sixteen percent as victims of physical abuse, and seven percent as victims of emotional abuse.

Experiencing any kind of abuse as a child has negative outcomes in adulthood. The adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, which is one of the largest studies regarding adult well-being, found increased risks for suicide attempts, alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression for those with a history of abuse compared to those who were not exposed to abusive experiences (Felitti, et al., 1998). Additionally, adverse childhood experiences (e.g., neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse) play a factor in a victim’s later physical health in both direct and indirect ways. Bonomi, Cannon, Anderson, Rivara, & Thompson, 2008; Felitti et al., 1998; Perry, 2002. For example, being exposed to childhood abuse can lead to having high levels of stress for long periods of time, which can negatively impact a person’s physical health via the impact of stress hormones on the cardiovascular and immune systems (Brunner & Marmot, 2006; Davidson, Devaney & Spratt, 2010). Furthermore, abuse is associated with an increased likelihood that abused individuals will engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking as a way of dealing with their experiences (Davidson et al., 2010). Abuse can also influence later parenting practices. According to Family-Systems Theory, ideas and beliefs on how to discipline children are rooted in childhood history, experience, and family origin. Thus, childhood experiences influence parenting discipline styles and practices in parenthood (Belsky, 1984).

Physical and Emotional Abuse: Definition and Correlation

Emotional abuse, also referred to as psychological abuse, is a type of maltreatment in which the caregiver repeatedly makes a child feel used, unloved, and worthless (Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007). These acts of commission differ from emotional neglect, which involves acts of omission (i.e., withdrawal of attention; Iwaniec et al., 2007). In contrast, physical abuse refers to harming a child via causing a physical injury (e.g., punching, kicking, beating, etc.; U.S Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). Such injury may occur unintentionally, as the result of over-discipline or severe physical punishment. While corporal punishment does not necessarily result in a significant physical injury (e.g., spanking), physical abuse is defined by significant physical injuries (e.g., punching; Gershoff, 2002).

After analyzing 29 studies in which multiple forms of child maltreatment were assessed (i.e., sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological/emotional maltreatment, etc.), Higgins and McCabe (2001) concluded that maltreatment types show considerable co-occurrence. Another study also demonstrated that the parental perpetration of physical and emotional abuse often occurs in the same families (Briere & Runtz, 1988). In this sample of 251 female undergraduate students, participants responded to the Family Experiences Questionnaire, which evaluates physical and psychological maltreatment in relation to psychological disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression). This study was later extended and the results again suggested a co-occurrence of physical and psychological maltreatment (Briere & Runtz, 1990). In fact, it has
been argued that all types of abuse may have an emotional basis (Hart, Binggelı, & Brassard, 1998), making it difficult to determine the unique impact of physical abuse versus the concurrent emotional maltreatment in many cases where physical abuse does occur.

**History of Abuse and Disciplinary Attitudes**

The general population tends to show a high rate of acceptance of the use of corporal punishment in parenting when asked their opinions about various forms of discipline. In a survey of 700 college students, 85% believed that parents hold the right to spank their children, and 83% stated that they would use such practice with their own children (Graziano & Namaste, 1990). Such attitudes may stem, in part, from individual childhood experiences, which show a significant influence in the formation of individuals’ physical disciplinary choices (Bower-Russa, 2005). For example, in a study by Bower-Russa, Knutson, and Winebarger (2001), it was found that college students’ attitudes regarding parental disciplinary practices were influenced by their own disciplinary history so that students were more accepting of practices they had experienced in their own childhoods. Other studies have also found a relationship between childhood history of discipline and individuals’ perceptions of the severity of disciplinary practices (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999). For instance, in a similar study with college students, those who had experienced physically and emotionally abusive parenting, perceived those disciplinary approaches as less severe and more appropriate (Herzberger & Tennen, 1985). In general, people who report being more severely disciplined as children rate physical punishment as more appropriate than those who do not report a severe disciplinary history (Kelder, McNamara, Carlson, & Lynn, 1991).

With regard to future parenting, research suggests that individuals who experienced harsh and abusive disciplinary practices as children are also more likely to report approval of such practices in their own parenting (Rodriguez & Price, 2004; Kelder et al., 1991). This is especially true if they perceive the abuse to have been deserved or feel it was justified (Rausch & Knuston, 1991; Kelder et al., 1991). For example, Rodriguez and Price (2004) found that participants who rated the harsh discipline they received in childhood as acceptable also had tendency to indicate that they would approve of these practices. Thus, experiencing punitive punishment seems to influence the victim’s formation of beliefs regarding appropriateness and effectiveness of such disciplinary strategies (Bower-Russa, et al., 2001; Crouch & Behl, 2001). As the approval of physical abuse increases, the likelihood for abuse perpetration when these children become parents likely increases as well. Data support a link between these disciplinary beliefs and high risk parenting responses (Bower-Russa, 2005; Bower-Russa et al., 2001).

**History of Abuse and Disciplinary Choices**

The actual practice of corporal punishment is not uncommon in the United States today. In a nationally representative sample of 991 American parents it was found that 94% of almost all toddlers had been hit (e.g., hand slapping, spanking) by their parents (Straus & Stewart, 1999). This study showed that more than one in four American parents reported having used objects (e.g., belt, stick, or hairbrush) to hit their child, and over half of American parents report hitting their children even at the age of 12 (Straus & Stewart, 1999). While some have argued that physical punishment in and of itself leads to negative outcomes for children (Gershoff, 2002), such treatment raises particular concerns when it becomes severe and punitive punishment, leading to injury to the child. Because physical disciplinary approaches exist on a continuum ranging from acceptable to punitive, the study of both abusive and sub abusive corporal punishment can play an important role in increasing our understanding of the mechanisms and consequences of physical abuse (Graziano & Namaste, 1990).

History of physical abuse is associated with parenting responses. A sample of 681 first time mothers yielded a significant negative correlation between maternal self-report of a history of childhood emotional and physical abuse and responsiveness of the mother towards their 6-month child (Bert, Guner, & Lanzi, 2009). In this study, history of emotional and physical abuse was also significantly correlated with maternal use of physical punishment (Bert et al., 2009), and a history of physical abuse increases the risk for punitive parenting as an adult (Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritis, & Brown, 2005). In fact, it has been estimated that maternal history of abuse may account for up to one third of the variance in predicting later child abuse perpetration (Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999).

The mechanism by which punitive history is associated with punitive parenting is not yet entirely clear. It has been theorized that mothers who have been victims of abuse have lower thresholds for reacting to their children’s misbehaviors; thus, they are more likely to use punitive disciplinary practices (Bert et al., 2009). It may also be the case that mothers who had been victims of abuse have less access to positive disciplinary strategies, which then may lead to the use of punitive parenting (Zaidi, Knutson, & Mehm, 1989). Again, in these studies, while physical abuse is the primary focus, the history of physical abuse often co-occurs with a history of emotional abuse, and the research typically does not explore the unique impact of history of physical and emotional abuse on later outcomes.

**Emotional Abuse, Empathy, and Parenting**

Emotional abuse often takes the form of parents’ unrealistic expectations, hostility, and rejection of their own child (Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2002). Emotional maltreatment can be harmful to a child’s verbal and non-verbal communication skills and goal setting behavior (Iwaniec et al., 2007). Additionally, being emotionally maltreated can damage self-esteem and trigger later emotional and behavioral problems (Iwaniec et al., 2007). Past research suggests that emotional maltreatment in isolation is particularly harmful (Hart et al., 1998).

Interestingly, parenting practices have been linked to a child’s moral thought and empathy development (Esikovits & Sagi, 1982). Studies support a correlation between mothers’ and fathers’ empathy...
and children’s empathy (Strayer & Roberts, 1989), and past research has also demonstrated that low use of parental induction, which is a way of reasoning with children about the misbehavior, leads to low levels of empathy in the child (Lopez, Bonenberger, & Schneider, 2001). Additionally, maternal sensitivity and maternal preconceptions (e.g., maladaptive and negative attitudes regarding parenting) have been shown to negatively impact a child’s empathy development (Kiang, Moreno, & Robinson, 2004).

Emotional maltreatment may negatively affect an individual’s empathic understanding by hindering the individual from being able to connect with the emotions of others (Sorsoli, 2004). In a sample of 19 abused children and 19 control children, in which levels of empathy were compared, it was found that the abused children showed a significant difference in empathy levels, such that abused children were less empathetic compared to the control group (Straker & Jacobson, 1981). In a slightly different sample of 102 undergraduate students, in which parental disciplinary styles were evaluated, regression models revealed a significant relationship between parental discipline styles and level of empathy (Lopez et al., 2001). The study demonstrated that even minor use of corporal punishment by parents significantly predicted low levels of empathy in students. This suggests that experiencing harsh disciplinary practices may limit the child’s ability to express or feel empathy for others (Hoffman, 1994).

Levels of empathy in study participants have been associated with their selection of parenting approaches (e.g., negative strategies, reward strategies, and talking strategies). In a sample of 205 participants, the relationship between empathy and appropriate and inappropriate parenting strategies was assessed. The results demonstrated that levels of empathy accounted for a significant portion of the variance in the selection of negative parenting strategies (Brems & Sohl, 1995). Specifically, participants were more likely to endorse negative parenting strategies as the participants’ empathy level decreased (Brems & Sohl, 1995).

In sum, empathy has also been associated with more effective parenting and behaviors necessary for effective parenting such as the ability to be understanding and comforting have been positively correlated with empathy (Frodi & Lamb, 1980). In contrast, deficits in parents’ empathy levels have been associated with increased risk for physically abusive parenting (Wiehe, 2003; Perez-Albeniz & De Paul, 2005). Thus, lack of empathy as a result of punitive childhood experiences may lead to harsher parenting responses. In fact, in adults, the presence of more empathy is negatively correlated with a harsh parenting style (Conners, Whiteside-Mansell, Deere, Ledet, & Edwards, 2006).

**Hypotheses**

1a. History of physical abuse and emotional abuse will be significantly correlated.

2a. History of abuse will predict attitudes towards corporal punishment.

b. History of physical abuse will be a stronger predictor of attitudes toward corporal punishment than history of emotional abuse.

3a. History of abuse will predict disciplinary choices.

b. History of physical abuse will be a stronger predictor of disciplinary choices than emotional abuse.

4a. Empathy will predict disciplinary attitudes

b. Empathy will predict disciplinary choices.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The participants used in this study belong to two different samples collected at different times. As indicated in Table 1, both samples are very similar in demographics. Although sample 1 \( (n = 332) \) was larger than sample 2 \( (n = 181) \), the participants in both samples were predominately Caucasian, females between the ages of 18 and 23, and without children. Hypotheses one to three were analyzed using sample 1, and hypothesis four was analyzed using sample 2.

**Measures**

The Brief Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (BCTQ; Furlong, Pavelski, & Sandoval, 2002) was used to assess physical and emotional abuse history. The BCTQ is a 28-item self-report, retrospective measure with five subscales that assess the responses based on a five-point frequency of occurrence scale. Three of the subscales assess emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and the other two subscales assess emotional and physical neglect. There are five items for each subscale. The emotional abuse \( (\alpha = .84-.89) \) and physical abuse \( (\alpha = .81-.86) \) subscales show acceptable internal consistency. The validity of the brief measure was assessed by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis of the original (BCTQ) 70-item version of the data to test the goodness of fit for different population samples (e.g., adult substance abusers and adolescent psychiatric inpatients). The analysis confirmed the structural validity of the instrument in these samples (Furlong et al., 2002). This measure has also been successfully used by therapists and clinicians, yielding strong correlations between scores on the BCTQ and ratings derived from clinical interviews (Furlong et al., 2002).

The Perception of Parenting (POPA; Winebarger, Leve, Fagot, & Mary, 1993) measure was used to assess disciplinary attitudes. The POPA includes two scales based on 61 descriptions of parental behaviors: the POPA Similarity scale and the POPA Attitudes scale. The POPA attitudes scale, used in the present study, uses the average ratings (7-point scale) of harshness (from pleasant to very harsh) and appropriateness (from appropriate to very inappropriate) for eight physical disciplinary approaches. High scores on the attitudes scale indicate a tendency to perceive harsh discipline more negatively. The POPA Attitudes scale shows concurrent validity by correlating with other measures of disciplinary history and disciplinary attitudes (Bower-Russa, 2005). This measure has also shown acceptable internal consistency in past research \( (\alpha = .87) \) (Bower-Russa, Rodriguez, & Silvia, 2012).

The Analogue Parenting Task (APT) was used to assess disciplinary responding. This measure has proven a useful tool...
in assessing risk for abusive parenting, yielding results that are consistent with theory regarding transgenerational patterns of abuse (e.g., Bower-Russa et al., 2001; Knutson & Bower, 1994; Zaidi, Knutson, & Mehm, 1989). The measure involves having participants watch 28 slides that show a child engaged in a range of activities. Participants select a disciplinary strategy that they would use to manage the behavior. Behaviors presented include dangerous (e.g., sitting on a roof), socially inappropriate (e.g., drinking beer), destructive (e.g., tearing pages out of a book), and control (e.g., playing with tinker toys) acts. The participants’ task is to select what their initial reaction would be, how many times they would allow the child to be engaged in the behavior before they would change their disciplinary strategy and what their next strategy would be. The APT provides two scores: a Physical Disciplinary Score (indicating the frequency with which physical disciplinary responses are selected) and an Escalation Score (indicating the frequency with which a respondent changes from a nonphysical to physical disciplinary strategy if the child persists in the behavior). In the present study, the Escalation score was used as a measure of disciplinary responding. Evidence of content validity derives from consistency between APT responses and self-report disciplinary attitudes in the Attitudes Towards Spanking questionnaire (ATS; Russa & Rodriguez, 2010). Scores also correlate as expected with risk for abuse (CAPI; Russa & Rodriguez, 2010). Escalation scores show a high level of internal consistency (α=.91-.93; Russa & Rodriguez, 2010).

The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) measure was used to assess both empathy and disciplinary attitudes. This 40-item measure uses a 5-point Likert response format (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The items assess a range of attitudes about child rearing and parenting, including empathy toward children’s needs, appropriate expectations about a child’s abilities, approval of the use of physical punishment, and parent child role reversal. Coefficient alpha reliability for the entire instrument is acceptable (.85), with solid reliability for the Lack of Empathy and Value of Corporal Punishment scales (α = .79; Conners et al., 2006). The AAPI demonstrates content validity by showing a correlation of AAPI scores with The Parenting Discipline Methods Interview (Baydar, Reid, & Webster-Stratton, 2003). In this study the Empathy subscale and the Approval of Physical Punishment scale were used.

**Procedure**

This study consisted of secondary analysis of data collected previously at GVSU. The original procedure involved having undergraduate students volunteer to participate in this research study as one of several options to meet a research requirement for their Introductory Psychology class. Students signed up for the study by computer using the SONA system. This study was one of several options to meet research participation requirements. Upon arrival at the session, informed consent was obtained and participants were assigned personal ID numbers to allow for anonymous responding. All materials were coded with these ID numbers. The session was completed on computer by students seated at individual cubicles to ensure privacy of responding. The session took approximately one hour. Upon completion of the session, students were thanked, debriefed, and credited for their participation.

**Statistical Analysis**

Secondary analyses were conducted using Predictive Analytics Software Statistics 18 (PASW). Hypotheses were tested using correlations and regressions.

**Results**

**Hypothesis 1**

The co-occurrence between history of physical abuse and history of emotional abuse scores was assessed by correlating BCTQ Physical Abuse with BCTQ Emotional Abuse. As expected, analyses indicated a statistically significant correlation (r = .499, p < .05), with 25% of the variance between BCTQ Physical and BCTQ Emotional abuse shared.

**Hypothesis 2**

As shown on Table 2, regression analysis was used to determine whether BCTQ History of Abuse predicted POPA Attitudes toward Corporal Punishment. When BCTQ Physical Abuse and BCTQ Emotional Abuse were entered together as independent variables, a significant model emerged: F (2,327) = 18.997, p < .001. In this model, BCTQ history of physical abuse predicted attitudes toward corporal punishment (Adjusted R² = .099). The contribution of BCTQ Emotional Abuse was non-significant.

**Hypothesis 3**

As shown on Table 2, a regression analysis was conducted to determine whether BCTQ history of abuse predicts disciplinary choices. When BCTQ Physical Abuse and BCTQ Emotional Abuse were entered as independent variables, a significant model predicting APT Escalation emerged: F (2,327) = 16.354, p < .001. In this model, BCTQ history of physical abuse predicted Escalation (Adjusted R² = .085). The contribution of BCTQ Emotional Abuse was non-significant.

**Hypothesis 4a**

As shown on Table 2, a regression analysis was conducted to determine whether AAPI Empathy predicted AAPI physical punishment. When AAPI Empathy was entered as an independent variable, a significant model emerged: F (1,179) = 29.066, p < .005. In this model, AAPI Empathy predicted AAPI attitudes towards corporal punishment (Adjusted R² = .135).

**Hypothesis 4b**

As shown on Table 2, a regression analysis was conducted to determine whether AAPI Empathy predicted APT Escalation abuse. When AAPI Empathy was entered as an independent variable, a significant model predicting APT Escalation emerged: F (1,179) = 8.719, p < .001. In this model, AAPI Empathy predicted APT Escalation (Adjusted R² = .041).

**Discussion**

The findings demonstrate that as expected, physical and emotional abuse...
tended to co-occur at significant rates, which highlights the difficulty of distinguishing whether the negative outcomes of having a history of abusive parenting are due primarily to emotional or physical maltreatment. We explored the extent to which physical and emotional abuse was predictive of disciplinary attitudes and responding. Although emotional and physical abuse probably have broad effects on development and later parenting, the data suggest that physical abuse probably has a greater impact than emotional abuse when predicting disciplinary attitudes and physical discipline responding. Emotional abuse may be more likely to impact empathy. Though this possibility could not be directly tested with the existing dataset, the data did demonstrate that low level of empathy in a respondent was associated with selection of more punitive disciplinary responses.

The finding that physical and emotional abuse often co-occur parallels previous research in which physical and emotional abuse were reported occurring in combination by 11% of the participants in a sample of 668 middle class gynecologic patients (Moeller, Bachmann, & Moeller, 1993). Similarly, the finding that abuse is predictive of both disciplinary attitudes and disciplinary choices is consistent with previous research in which a history of harsh punitive parenting was found to influence people’s disciplinary attitudes (Kelder et al., 1991; Rodriguez & Price, 2004) and the formation of beliefs regarding disciplinary strategies (Bower-Russa, et al., 2001; Crounch & Behl, 2001). Although little research has examined the distinct effect of physical and emotional abuse on parenting outcomes, our results suggest that for both disciplinary attitudes and disciplinary responding the strongest predictor is having had a history of physical abuse. In contrast, emotional abuse did not have a significant influence. While this data suggests that having a history of emotional abuse does not have as large an influence in the formation of disciplinary attitudes, this should not be taken to suggest that there are no negative effects of emotional abuse. Rather, those effects may be less evident with regard to disciplinary attitudes and behaviors and more evident with regard to factors such as self-esteem (Finzi-Dottan & Karu, 2006).

These findings suggest that parenting characterized by punitive corporal punishment may shape children’s beliefs system in regard to what type of behaviors are acceptable in parenting. Thus, children might learn to see what is acceptable based on their own experiences and the extent to which they view such methods as effective in managing child behavior. It appears that physical abuse not only contributes to the formation of people’s attitudes toward parenting, but it also influences the choices that people make in regard to how to manage specific instances of child behavior. Harsh parenting also leads to other outcomes, such as problems with emotion regulation (Chan, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003), which may also influence later parenting. The impact of these other negative outcomes on future parenting warrants additional research.

Empathy may play a significant role in predicting both attitudes toward corporal punishment and disciplinary choices. These findings are consistent with previous studies in which individuals’ empathy levels were associated with their parental discipline styles (Lopez et al., 2001), and parenting disciplinary strategies, especially negative ones (Brems & Sohl, 1995). It may be that harsh parenting impacts the development of aggression and empathy in victims, which makes those individuals prone to more punitive parenting practices once they become parents. While we were unable to directly assess the impact of a history of abusive parenting on later empathy levels in the present study, this research suggests that a child’s level of empathy is affected by their parent’s parenting style. Future research should consider exploring the direct link between a history of abuse and the development of empathy more specifically. Future studies should also consider the value of incorporating a more detailed measure of empathy, as we relied on a short subscale of empathy that was available in the present data set.

Current findings should be considered in terms of several study limitations. This study used undergraduate students and only a very small percentage of the participants were actually parents. However, it is important to note that working with “pre-
References


health status to childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14, 245-58.


Furlong, M., Paveski, R., & Sandoval, J. (2002). Childhood trauma questionnaire. [Review of the test Childhood Trauma Questionnaire by D. Berstein & L. Fink]. Mental Measurements Yearbook and Tests in Print 14, 73.


Table 1: Demographics

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Table 2: Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis

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