

# Discipline Responses Influences Of Parents' Socioeconomic Status, Ethnicity, Beliefs About Parenting, Stress, And Cognitive-Emotional Processes

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## Introduction

There are many theories that examine the role of physical punishment and its effectiveness with regard to the socialization of children. Two sets of theories surface in this article, which propose different sets of factors relative to the role of physical punishment in the development of antisocial behavior in children.

One set of theories states that multiple influences such as culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, social supports, family structure and family processes, precipitate responses to discipline. Another set of theories states that the cognitive and emotional processes of the parents, the parents' perception of the child and the perception of the effectiveness of the physical discipline are the determining factors. The researchers attempted to test the elements of these theories and presented the results in this article.

## Relationships

Several relationships between factors are modeled and comments made regarding the polarity of the associations are presented

- PARENTING VALUES AND BELIEFS -

Several studies have shown a link between socioeconomic status and parenting beliefs. These studies reveal that socioeconomic status is negatively associated with conformity and positively associated with self-direction. There were apparent differences between parents who believed that positive parenting or high efficacy effected child outcomes and low efficacy parents who believed that positive parenting had little effect on child outcomes. High efficacy parents use influences such as love, affection and positive role-modeling, whereas low efficacy parents were more likely to employ harsh physical discipline

- STRESSORS -

Socioeconomic status has an effect on parents, in that, the lower the socioeconomic status the more likely the parent will use physical discipline on the child. This status is also indicative of higher emotional reactivity and negative perceptions of the children. The cognitive and emotional processes of low-income parents are associated with hostile assumptions about the child, which correlates with punitive parenting.

Ethnicity also plays a role in whether or not physical discipline is viewed as acceptable practice. African American families generally report greater use of physical discipline than do European-American parents.

## Discussion

The two models which hypothesize the direct and mediated relations between socioeconomic status and discipline responses and ethnicity and discipline responses were tested.

- **THE SOCIOECONOMIC-DISCIPLINE RESPONSE MODEL**

As hypothesized, parents of lower income tended to employ harsher disciplinary methods on their children. The factors attributed to this style of discipline are: the parents have greater belief in the value of physical punishment; and these parents experience higher levels of stress and thus higher emotional reactivity to misbehavior.

The emotional and cognitive intensity factors seem to be more related punitive discipline. However, this poses a question as to whether some low-income parents use punitive methods because they believe in it or because they are under stress and just striking out.

- **THE ETHNICITY-DISCIPLINE RESPONSE MODEL**

The data showed a significant relationship between ethnicity, socioeconomic status and physical discipline. Low-income African American parents had much higher punitive discipline tendencies than low income white parents. It was also noted that low income African Americans typically deal with additional stresses than do whites, simply because of their racial status. African American families tend to worry more about the future of their children and thus, it would seem inevitable that they tend to employ harsher methods to ensure that their children are amply prepared for the challenge of the difficult future that lies ahead of them.

The differential between African Americans and Whites with regard to harsh discipline seems to narrow as we examine middle class families of both races. It appears that, as socioeconomic status improves, African American families are less likely to resort to physical punishment. This would tend to suggest that socioeconomic status, rather than belief systems or ethnicity, is the key determinant of corporal punishment.

Those parents who tend to avoid physical punishment, whether white or black, use other methods such as time outs and privilege withdrawals. They tended to use positive reinforcement along with discipline, which has the effect of allowing the parent to discipline the child without engendering fear of abandonment in the child.

## Conclusion

Two paths of influences are shown with regard to how culture and context related to discipline responses. First, cognitive-emotional processes and parental perception of the child may cause reactivity in the form of harsh and overly punitive responses to child misbehavior. Higher stress levels are more likely to trigger harsh reactions. As a result, when the parent is over-reacting from an emotional state, there is an inherent inconsistency between the behavior and the resultant punishment. In short, the punishment may not fit the crime and the child senses this. Thus, such overreaction may lead to pathology in the child's behavior.

Reduction of these cognitive-emotional reactions is recommended through therapy, self-monitoring techniques and alternative discipline strategies. These techniques should be applied across all socioeconomic level, but should be tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by lower socioeconomic minority families.

Second, parental beliefs regarding the importance of harsh or physical punishment motivates many African American parents, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status. It is more difficult to intervene with this response, because it is based on a strong belief system within the family. A parent who genuinely believes that his or her child will succeed only if strong discipline is applied is not typically receptive to the techniques outlined above.