

# To Spank or Not to Spank: Effect of Immediacy on Selected Discipline

Steffanie Chaviano, Daniel H. Chung, Melinda M. Joseph, Ariel C. S. Reid, Christian M. D. von Pohle, and Charlene K. Bainum



## Abstract

Research on parental discipline has focused on intergenerational transmission of disciplinary techniques and the factors that affect the style of discipline used. We hypothesized that in situations of immediacy participants would revert to the discipline used by their parents. We also hypothesized that situations of immediacy would elicit stronger and harsher discipline. A total of 78 college students were assigned to one of two conditions in which they watched a video clip of a child misbehaving and subsequently filled out a discipline survey. We found a significant relationship between the discipline students chose and the discipline they predicted their parents would use. Also, the type of discipline selected was directly affected by the immediacy of the misbehavior.



What is the most efficient way of regulating a child's behavior? Through the ages, this is a question that parents, teachers, and caregivers of children of all ages ponder. Discipline coupled with nurturance guides the development of character in a child, teaching the self-control needed for moral and ethical behavior (Baumrind, 1989). Many studies such as Covell, Grusec, and King (1995) examined intergenerational transmission of discipline in hopes of finding an explanation for why parents discipline the way they do. Their study found that discipline techniques are passed from grandmother to parents. Brownridge (2006) further noted that the key determinant of intergenerational transmission is imitation. Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, and Wu (1991) theorized that children who were exposed to more aggressive means of discipline develop a model of what the parent role should be. When these children grew up and became parents, they used this model on their children.

Rodriguez and Sutherland (1999) conducted a study on the predictors of parents' physical disciplinary practices. They established that the parents' history of discipline and the severity of judgments were the best predictors of disciplinary methods. Further studies have found that the parenting practices used by one generation seem destined to be seen through many generations (Bailey, Hill, Osterle, & Hawkins, 2009).

Whether the mother or the father is more dominant in applying discipline might influence whether this parenting practice is passed down to the next generation. In addition, the situation surrounding the misbehavior might also affect the discipline chosen as well as its intergenerational transmission. Our study specifically examined how the immediacy of the situation would affect the discipline selected and whether the discipline used by the participants' parents correlated with that selected by the participants.

## Method

### Participants

Participants consisted of 78 collegiate students (29 men and 49 women) attending a small liberal arts college. Ethnic make-up of participants included the following: 31 Caucasians, 18 Latinos, 16 Asian Americans, seven African Americans, and six Mixed ethnics. After finishing the investigation, participants received extra-credit in a general psychology course.

### Materials

Two video clips (less than one minute in length) were used in this study. Bannedcommercials (2006, September 1) was used for the experimental clip. This video depicted a child misbehaving in a public setting. Ajarlando2007 (2007, October 24) was used for the control clip. This video illustrated a child throwing a temper tantrum at home. A child discipline survey was presented to the participants that included the following: (1) participant's demographics, (2) discipline technique selected if it was their child in the video clip, (3) participant's main disciplinarian as a child, (4) punishment most often received as a child, (5) recollection of being spanked, and (6) participant's prediction of how his or her parent would have reacted in a similar situation.

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition. All participants signed a consent form that they detached from the survey in order to keep their responses anonymous. Both conditions viewed one of the video clips and proceeded to fill out the questionnaire. Participants were debriefed afterwards about the general nature of the study.

## Results

Sixty-seven participants (87%) claimed that they had been spanked as a child. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the main disciplinarian for the participants. As is evident, 62% were disciplined by their mother, 31% by their father, and 7% reported being disciplined by others. Using Pearson Chi Square analyses we found that disciplinary styles change according to how serious a situation is perceived to be. In the experimental group, 77% of participants marked that if the child portrayed in the video were theirs, they would use spanking as a method of discipline.

A Contingency Coefficient showed a significant relationship between the discipline that the participants would use and what they perceived their parents would choose, ( $r = .34, p = .002$ ). Secondly, the type of discipline selected was directly affected by the immediacy of the misbehavior ( $\chi^2 = 18.23, df = 1, p = .00$ ). As seen in Figure 2, participants in the experimental condition chose the spanking response significantly more (43% of responses), than those in the control condition (4% of responses).

Figure 1

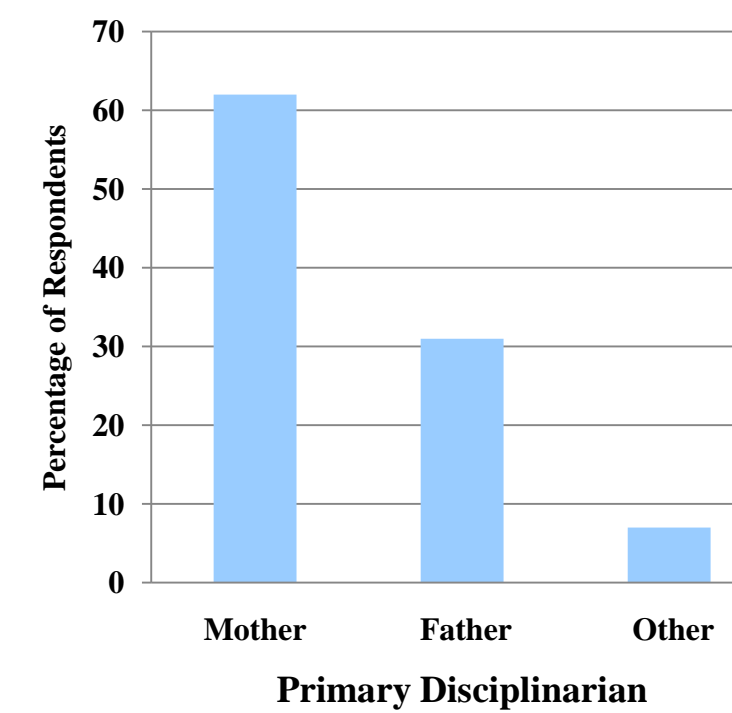
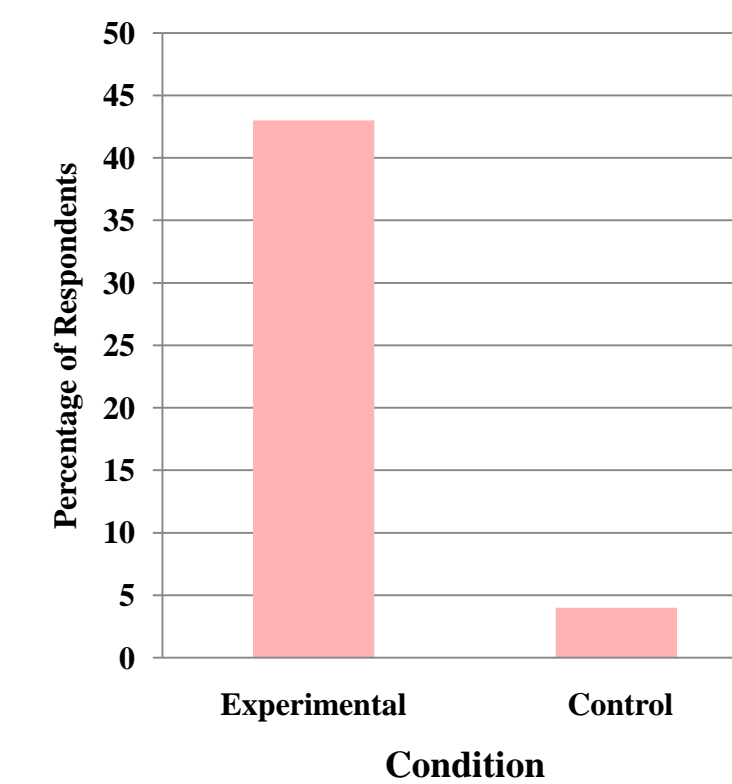


Figure 2



## Discussion

The hypothesis that in situations of immediacy, subjects would adhere to the discipline to which they had been subjected when children was supported. This is consistent with Covell, Grusec, and King's (1995) study, which showed a strong correlation between how mothers respond to their children and how their mothers responded to them. The results are also consistent with the research by Rodriguez, Sutherland, and Dougal (1999), which found that one's past history of discipline predicts one's future disciplinary practices as a parent. It is clear that the disciplinary techniques chosen by parents are often times ones that have been passed down from generation to generation.

The hypothesis that situations of immediacy would elicit stronger, harsher discipline like spanking was supported. This finding is similar to that of Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, and Wu (1991), who demonstrated that people use models of aggressive discipline on their children in a reflexive, knee-jerk sort of way. This could be due to people's anger and/or embarrassment in a public situation rather than a propensity toward harsh discipline.

The limitations in this study involved an uneven ratio of men and women participants, the possible social influence of watching the video in a group, and the fact that there were differences in the two videos which might have affected the outcome. Future studies might investigate the effect of immediacy on disciplinary actions by having an identical clip of a child misbehaving in which the location cannot be ascertained in the video, and having the survey ask what discipline would be chosen if this incident occurred at home or in a public setting. This would better allow one to determine whether it was the immediacy of the situation or some other difference between the clips.

These findings are important when considering the intergenerational transmission of abuse. It is clear that violent modes of discipline can be passed down from parent to child. Having a more comprehensive understanding of immediacy on the disciplinary techniques that we choose can help us to stop and better evaluate the situation the next time we are tempted to spank a child out of public humiliation. The factors determining an individual's method of discipline involve both the contextual cues and the personal disciplinary history.

