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Working with Cultural Minority Parents on Issues of Physical Discipline & Abuse

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Protecting children from harsh corporal punishment is not easy to achieve in a culturally competent way. This article focuses on members of cultural minority groups not because they might be at higher risk for physical abuse—they do not seem to be-- but rather because: 1) preventive efforts are more likely to be effective if they are tailored to the needs of the

group(s) they are meant to address; 2) professionals frequently insult and therefore alienate cultural minority parents when they discuss concerns about disciplinary techniques; and 3) professionals are often puzzled about how to handle families' right to punish children in a way that fits with their culture and values, while at the same time protecting the youngsters.

Straus and Donnelly (2001) define corporal punishment as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior" (p. 4). Corporal punishment in the United States presents a complex picture, with high but decreasing rates of general approval and a population increasingly divided in regard to its use.

In drawing the line between corporal punishment and physical abuse, we can imagine a continuum ranging from low to high violence. On one end are extremely violent acts that almost anyone would agree constitute physical abuse, such as those resulting in death or permanent injury. On the other end of the spectrum are those actions that most people do not consider abusive, such as a gentle slap to a toddler's hand when the toddler reaches for a hot stove. However, there is wide disagreement about the central portion of this spectrum.

In most areas state law is of little help in demarcating the line between corporal punishment and physical abuse, since the language used, such as “causing a mark” leaves wide room for interpretation. Here, I refer to the problematic middle of this spectrum as “harsh physical punishment,” knowing that even this term is open to question, since any two individuals could easily debate about what is “harsh.”

Most episodes of physical abuse begin as disciplinary encounters. That is, a parent or other caretaker uses corporal punishment with the intention of punishing, teaching, or correcting a child’s misbehavior; but the child is injured because of an accident or excessive use of force. Unfortunately, incidents of corporal punishment that cross the line into abuse are all too common. Many parents can be heard weeping in hospital emergency rooms, "I didn't mean to hurt him!"

Reducing the number of disciplinary incidents and eliminating corporal punishment are important first steps to eliminating physical abuse in a family. Put simply, if I never strike my children, there is no possibility that I will strike them too hard.

Culture in Discipline and Punishment

Child rearing is highly influenced by ethnic culture. What children need to learn and the methods considered best for teaching them, are passed down from one generation to another as cultural knowledge and tradition. Some people from other nations might see abuse in the common United States practices of circumcising male infants, denying children food between mealtimes, sending misbehaving children to bed without supper, and forcing infants to cry themselves to sleep at night alone.

Cultural subgroups also vary widely in the methods they use to enforce discipline and gain compliance. African Americans and people from the Southern United States are more likely to punish their children with a weapon that resembles a whip, such as an electric cord, belt or switch applied to the back or bottom (Showers & Bandman, 1986). European (White) Americans are more likely to use a paddle or an open hand to the bottom. Recent Korean immigrants may slap a child's face. Chinese parents may pinch their youngsters and yank their hair more than other parents. Latino parents may make their child kneel with bare knees on a tray of uncooked rice (Fontes, 2002). And Puerto Rican families may place a toddler who is having a tantrum into a bathtub of cold water (Fontes, 2005). While cultural differences influence the kinds of physical discipline

used, they do not determine whether these punishments constitute abuse in any given instance, since each one of these methods can be applied gently or with great force, frequently or rarely, for a long or short duration, and to children of different ages and vulnerabilities.

We should be careful to distinguish between a single episode of physical abuse by caring parents that stems from acceptable discipline gone awry and intentional, repeated abuse in which physical and psychological damage is evident. Both need to be taken seriously. But in the first case, education and stress reduction are probably the most appropriate remedies. In the second case, the parent may be evidencing severe psychological disturbance, substance abuse, involvement in intimate partner violence, or an actual dislike of the child. These factors must be resolved through more extensive interventions before skills training will prove beneficial.

Frequently, concerns about discipline emerge long before a reportable incident is suspected or revealed. This opens a window for preventing child abuse and averting intrusive interventions. When you are uncertain whether a given incident raises enough concern about physical abuse to file a report, you should consult with a colleague or supervisor. In addition, in most areas you can call your state protective service agency, describe the case without revealing the clients' names, and ask for advice.

If the caretakers' disciplinary methods constitute physical abuse as defined by state law and through the course of your professional duties you become aware of abuse or consider a child at risk, you are legally obliged to file a report with child protective services or the police. This holds true regardless of the family's cultural background. Usually we should try to file with protective services in a collaborative way by explaining to the caretakers our legal obligations and letting them remain in the room during the phone call. In this way, the caretakers hear exactly what is being said. Many cultural minority families hold a deep distrust of professionals and authorities. Keeping caretakers in the loop early by telling them of our concerns can help us maintain a relationship with the family.

In most cases, when a charge of child abuse or neglect is investigated and substantiated, the case is readily closed without the provision of further services because the agencies simply do not have the resources to provide ongoing supervision to the vast numbers of families who have been found to have abused or neglected a child. This being true, we need to remember that our responsibilities related to child maltreatment do not begin and end with decisions about reporting. If we hope to make a true difference in the lives of vulnerable families, our commitment and engagement must be

more long-term.

In the United States and Canada, parents have a legal right to use corporal punishment with their children. Therefore, if we see our job as eliminating physical abuse only, then we might want to advise parents on how to punish their children gently without being culpable of physical abuse--for instance, by using one strike with an open hand on a clothed bottom only, and not engaging in this spanking while angry or more often than once a day. (With an open hand, the person who is administering the punishment is better able to feel the force of the hit, and therefore may be less likely to strike too hard. Also, striking the bottom allows some of the force to be absorbed by the fleshy buttocks, which protect more vulnerable organs).However, even striking a buttock with an open hand with too much force can kill a child. Parents who have ever lost control and inflicted abuse should eliminate corporal punishment altogether.

Even those forms of corporal punishment that do not qualify as physical abuse have been correlated with a variety of negative outcomes for children, including higher rates of delinquency and aggression at school, and lower levels of academic and professional achievement (Straus & Donnelly, 2001). Therefore, I join the American Academy of Pediatrics in

the belief that professionals have a duty to work toward the elimination of corporal punishment to remove its potential harm. This obligation is particularly important, I believe, when considering minority children who already face discrimination, higher rates of poverty, and other obstacles. If we fail to address issues of corporal punishment among minority families because of a fear of imposing dominant norms on oppressed people, we leave minority children at increased potential risk.

Building Opposition to Corporal Punishment

Firm discipline is deeply rooted in many families and institutions. Some African American parents feel as if they are turning their back on their ancestors and even on their race if they abandon corporal punishment. However, other African Americans believe that physical punishment is a residue of slavery, and contributes to aggression among African American children. When working with African Americans, professionals of all backgrounds need to keep in mind the issues of loyalty to family and people, and the pressures of racism.

Parents who were raised with corporal punishment can often be heard saying things like, "My parents spanked me and I turned out okay." To this I reply, "Probably you turned out okay because of everything else they

did—the way they spoke to you and loved you and modeled good behavior for you. I don't think it was the spanking itself that made you who you are." Parents of various ethnic groups usually agree.

To help parents abandon harsh corporal punishment, you can ask the following questions: “Does this kind of punishment produce the results you want? How do you feel when you hit your child? Are you tired of hitting? Ideally, how often would you like to hit your child?” Some parents respond well to questions that help them tune in to their children’s responses, such as, “What does your child think and feel while being spanked?” A frustrated parent who is asked, “If there was a more effective method of discipline, would you use it?” will often respond affirmatively, opening the door for skill building.

Parents’ ambitions for their children may be a source of motivation for abandoning corporal punishment. Most parents want their children to grow up safely, get rewarding jobs, and be decent people who make their parents proud. It is important to address these motivations directly and tap into parents’ noble intentions. Many members of cultural minority groups in the United States and Canada come from countries with recent histories of slavery and colonization. In these past circumstances, parents were

probably saving their children's lives by teaching them how to obey authorities without question. We can safely assume, however, that few parents hope their children will grow up to hold the menial jobs where this kind of abject obedience might be valued. Rather, they hope their children will grow up to hold jobs where they will think for themselves, initiate ideas, and eventually supervise others. Professionals can inform and explore with parents the concept that children need to have an internalized sense of values to achieve these higher status positions, and that nonviolent methods of discipline teach children how to think and reason, not merely to avoid punishment.

Some parents will say they use corporal punishment so their children will learn to obey rules and avoid trouble in school. They are likely to be surprised by research showing that children who are physically punished at home are more likely to be aggressive with their classmates and more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior as children and as adults (Straus & Donnelly, 2001). I also remind parents of the hidden lesson of corporal punishment, which is that physical force is the correct way to resolve difficulties.

Parents of young children may fail to consider that this strategy reduces

intimacy over the long-run, making their children less likely to confide in them as they mature. We can help parents see that the immediate goal of resolving a particular disciplinary incident needs to be viewed in the context of the longer-term goal of maintaining an open and trusting relationship.

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