

# Parental Discipline Mistakes

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The dictionary defines discipline as "training to act in accordance with rules. . . ." We assume that children are not born knowing how to act in accordance with the rules of their families or society. We assume that most children learn (i.e., are taught) to behave appropriately (and inappropriately). Such teaching is one aspect of child rearing, and parents play a key role in disciplining or teaching their children to behave according to a wide range of rules.

Although parental rules vary across families, children's ages, cultures, and historical periods, most people know a rule when they hear one. Common rules for children in American families today include these: Don't hurt other people; do what your parents tell you to do; don't ask loudly in the grocery store, "Why is that man so fat, Mommy?"; don't play with the telephone; don't lie; come home on time; do your homework before you watch television; and don't pester your sister. When children do not behave according to the rules, we say they have misbehaved. When parents use ineffective strategies to manage misbehavior, we say they have made *discipline mistakes*.

Parents are undoubtedly not the only people who significantly influence children's misbehavior. Siblings, day-care providers, teachers, baby-sitters, grandparents, and peers are participants in child rear-

ing. The younger the child, however, the more influential parents are likely to be. Interest in parental discipline practices has a long history, and scientifically established relations between discipline mistakes and children's behavior disorders have been reported since the early 1950s. Young children's aggressive and oppositional behavior disorders are quite stable; if left untreated, these disorders predict later delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, unemployment, and psychiatric disturbance. Understanding what constitutes effective and ineffective parental discipline practice, particularly for young children, should facilitate both the prevention and the treatment of children's behavior problems.

Before I describe what we know about parental discipline, and particularly parental discipline mistakes, four points must be made. First, managing children's misbehavior is certainly not all there is to rearing children; responsive nurturing and the provision of a positive emotional and physical environment are also critical components of responsible child rearing. Second, being a "nice" parent is not equivalent to being a "good" parent. As a matter of fact, one discipline mistake is responding positively to misbehavior. Third, advocating appropriate, effective discipline is not equivalent to advocating stronger punishment; a frequent discipline mistake is being overreactive and harsh. Finally, the focus of this review is parental mistakes in disciplining children's disruptive, oppositional, and aggressive behaviors. We know much less about the relation of parenting to childhood anxiety, fear, and depression. We also do not know whether the discipline mistakes I describe here would still

be problematic, ineffective, or both if the child misbehavior were construed very differently, as might be the case in another culture.

## WHAT ARE PARENTAL DISCIPLINE MISTAKES?

Early, retrospective studies of child rearing indicated that inconsistent, harsh, and excessively lax discipline practices are associated with delinquency and aggression. Similarly, observational studies of preschoolers found that mothers who are harsh in their use of authority tend to have children who are not self-reliant or content and who are aggressive; mothers who are permissive tend to have children who are dependent and not well-behaved.<sup>1</sup> At a more specific level, the degree of parental inconsistency, receptiveness to bargaining, use of indirect commands, lack of enforcement, and demonstration of affection during discipline episodes are associated with the degree of resistance and noncompliance displayed by 1½- to 3½-year-olds. Comparisons of normal and clinic samples indicate that parents of aggressive, anti-social, and noncompliant children issue more frequent commands and negative consequences, engage in lengthier and more intense coercive interchanges with their children, are more submissive and ambiguous, and are less consistent in their responses to problem behaviors. These parents also are more likely to reinforce oppositional behavior with attention, softening of commands, or coaxing.

This large number of probable discipline mistakes was identified primarily by time-consuming and expensive observations of parent-child interactions. To increase the efficiency with which we can assess parents' discipline practices, my students and I developed a 30-item self-report Parenting Scale.<sup>2</sup> Factor analyses of the Parenting Scale repeatedly reveal three primary

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types of mistakes made by mothers of 2- to 4-year-old children: laxness, overreactivity, and verbosity. Laxness includes giving in, not enforcing rules, and providing positive reinforcement for misbehavior. Overreactivity includes anger, meanness, and irritability. Verbosity involves the propensity to engage in lengthy verbal interactions about misbehavior even when the talking is ineffective. These factors are consistent with other theoretical formulations of parental discipline, are reliable, correlate well with observations of maternal behavior, and are comparable across normal and problematic populations. The Parenting Scale appears to be a useful tool for identifying mothers whose discipline strategies may put their children at risk for developing serious behavior problems.

All of the findings just outlined must be viewed with some caution because of the correlational methodologies used in the research; however, recent experiments in my laboratory and elsewhere support a causal link between parental discipline mistakes and young children's misbehavior. Some of this research was conducted in homes, but most took place in laboratory settings. Mothers of both normal and hard-to-manage toddlers and preschoolers were instructed to respond to the relevant misbehaviors in specified ways. We have demonstrated that delayed, long, and gentle (imprudent) reprimands result in higher levels of misbehavior than do immediate, brief, and firm (prudent) reprimands.<sup>3</sup> Another mistake is leaving a two-year-old to his or her own devices for too long. Patterson<sup>4</sup> referred to this mistake as poor monitoring and found it to be one of the best predictors of outcome for older children. We have also learned that mothers are less effective when they try to distract their misbehaving children than when they use clear reprimands. In fact, when distraction does not work and mothers change their tactics to reprimanding, children

become upset, as though they are offended by the change. On the other hand, children are not particularly upset when they are consistently and prudently reprimanded.<sup>5</sup> Distraction may be less effective than reprimanding because distraction provides positive attention to misbehavior.

Other examples of lax discipline mistakes can be found. We have all laughed when three-year-olds use unsavory, "adult" language, even though we understand that our laughter reinforces that misbehavior. The same phenomenon occurs when mothers are on the telephone and do not wish to be interrupted, but respond positively to their children's requests for help or a snack. The children are temporarily satisfied but are likely to solicit their mothers' attention again very soon,<sup>6</sup> some mothers even report that picking up the telephone is a signal for their children to pester them.

One last example of a strategy that may inadvertently reinforce misbehavior involves the use of time-out (i.e., removal of the child from sources of reinforcement for a brief period of time). Although time-out can be very effective for reducing noncompliance and aggression, young children often attempt to escape from the commonly used time-out chair. Some parents deal with an escaping child by holding the child in the chair, thus providing attention for the misbehavior. Others give up very quickly and allow the child to determine when time-out is over. Both of these strategies are mistakes and are less effective than ensuring that the child remains in the time-out chair for the assigned period of time, for example, by calmly turning the chair toward the wall.<sup>7</sup>

#### WHY DO PARENTS MAKE MISTAKES?

In the course of conducting these experimental studies, we have often heard two things from mothers of hard-to-manage toddlers: "I just

don't know what to do with him (her)" and "I know I should \_\_\_\_\_, but I just can't seem to." These comments suggest that parents may need two different kinds of help with discipline: learning what constitutes a discipline mistake and learning why they make such mistakes.

It is not surprising that some parents seem to lack knowledge about effective discipline practices, as most education in how to parent is informal and indirect. We observe our parents and relatives managing child misbehavior, and these people often offer advice about how we should raise our own children. Unfortunately, not all of what we observe or are told is consistent with what the scientific literature tells us. Parents who need to learn what effective discipline is would benefit from more structured educational experiences. The best time for such training might be when parents begin teaching their children to follow rules, that is, when the children begin to crawl. People are probably not particularly motivated to learn before they have children; waiting until the toddler or preschool years means dysfunctional parenting may already be established, and correcting dysfunctional parenting is surely harder than preventing it.

Understanding the parent who knows what is best but who does not or cannot use that knowledge is more complicated. We know that depression, marital discord, social isolation, and economic and employment stresses are related to mothers' dysfunctional discipline practices.<sup>8</sup> Additional factors have emerged from research on abusive mothers and have been substantiated in nonabusive samples as well. First, some mothers are more "upset" than others by children's misbehavior or by the negative affect (i.e., whining and crying) that children display when they are disciplined. A mother's internal reactivity, particularly her own sense of irritation or anger, is related to the overreactivity

or harshness in her discipline. Second, mothers' explanations for why their children misbehave are associated with the type and likelihood of discipline mistakes made by mothers. For example, if a mother views her child as an incorrigible, she will be overreactive. If she views herself as a hopelessly inadequate mother, she will be lax in her discipline. Third, mothers who make discipline mistakes may do so because they tolerate or define child misbehavior differently than effective mothers do. Although both under- and overidentifying misbehavior should be problematic, more evidence supports overidentification as the problem. A final factor that influences how well a parent disciplines is the child himself or herself. Children with conduct disorders elicit corrective or controlling feedback from all mothers, including mothers of normal children. Having a "difficult" child may compromise a mother's ability to implement appropriate discipline.

Precisely how all of these variables affect mothers' abilities to teach their children to behave according to the rules is not clear. Reasonable hypotheses include interference with the mother's attentional capacities and increases in the mother's motivation to reduce immediately the negative emotions the child elicits in her. Regardless of the mechanisms involved, consideration of these variables would probably enhance the effectiveness of parent training programs and may explain why some parent training efforts are ineffective.

## UNCHARTED AREAS

The attentive reader may have realized by now that no specific mention has been made of fathers and their roles in disciplining children. The reason is that relatively little is known about fathers' discipline practices. Traditionally, mothers

have spent considerably more time parenting than fathers, but parental roles are changing, making the need to know about fathers' discipline practices especially important. We recently learned that the factor structure of fathers' self-reported discipline practices on the Parenting Scale is virtually identical to the factor structure for mothers. We are currently observing fathers interacting with their toddlers to determine the validity of the Parenting Scale for fathers and to assess whether fathers handle discipline encounters differently than do mothers.

In addition to knowing little about fathers' discipline mistakes, we know little about whether discipline mistakes change over time. Children are, almost by definition, developmental phenomena. Viewing discipline as a developmental phenomenon would probably be equally appropriate. Parents do not discipline their 8- or 12-year-olds in the same ways they discipline their preschoolers. On the one hand, as children's cognitive capacities improve, parents should be able to more effectively use preventive, verbal teaching of rule-governed behavior. Greater delay of consequences should be tolerated by older children. On the other hand, older children have learned about handling conflict by observing their parents and may have learned some bad lessons (e.g., to be argumentative and aggressive, to hold a grudge, and to rely on apologies). Certainly, the concrete consequences implemented by parents change as children grow up. Chair time-outs become weekend groundings. Leaving the park early changes to no television that night. Whether the broad characteristics of what constitutes a discipline mistake remain overreactivity, laxness, and verbosity or whether only the specifics of the teaching techniques (e.g., chair time-out vs. grounding) change as children become young adults is yet to be clarified.

A final "uncharted area" about

which I would like to comment is the area of side effects, particularly the side effects of correcting discipline mistakes. The literature contains many examples<sup>9</sup> of positive side effects accompanying the therapeutic use of a variety of punishment procedures. These reports suggest that correcting discipline mistakes might have advantages in addition to reducing the rate of child misbehavior. Let me illustrate this possibility by describing a common clinical experience: Parents and their son are having severe conflicts. If an intervention that is focused almost exclusively on identifying and altering parental discipline mistakes results in the boy behaving more appropriately, other aspects of the parent-child relationships also change even though there has been no specific intervention in these areas. The boy offers to help with a chore; the mother hugs him good-night; the father tells his son for the first time in a long time that he loves him. Such clinical experiences should serve heuristic roles, furthering our understanding of parental discipline mistakes and how to correct them.

## Notes

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