

Parental Discipline and Race

From the Appendix (“Parenting Styles: The Relevance of Culture, Class, and Race”) to *Unconditional Parenting* (Atria Books, 2005)
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By Alfie Kohn

...Needless to say, differences in discipline styles occur not only across cultures but among groups within a single culture, particularly when we’re talking about a complex modern society such as the United States. Before mentioning a few of those differences, however, I should point out that we’re trafficking here in statistical generalizations. Even if parents in group A treat their children in a particular way more than parents in group B do, that doesn’t mean everyone in group A acts that way – or that no one in group B does.

With that in mind, we can begin by noting that researchers have routinely found differences related to families’ socioeconomic status (SES), including the extent to which punitive discipline is used. Most studies have found that, as that status declines, “rates of parents’ use of corporal punishment rise,” according to one review of the available data. Another group of researchers concluded that, as a rule, “children in the lower socioeconomic classes are more likely than their peers to be the objects of harsh discipline, to [be] . . . raised by mothers who are relatively less warm in their behavior toward them . . . and who are more likely to

hold values that aggression is an appropriate and effective means of solving problems.”¹

Those facts are explained partly by economic pressure: The more such stress parents are experiencing, the more likely it is that they will use coercive methods to get their children to obey.² Melvin Kohn (no relation) famously showed that working-class parents are more likely to raise their children to conform to rules and respect authority – and to use punishment to achieve those goals – whereas middle-class, notably white-collar, parents are more likely to want their children to be self-directed and autonomous decision-makers. Kohn hypothesized that this, in turn, is related to the expectations that the parents themselves face at work, which often vary by class. His general findings have been confirmed by other researchers, and they’ve been echoed by international data showing that physical punishment is more common in cultures that value conformity in children than it is in cultures that value self-reliance.³

Then there is the complex question of race. Within the U.S., it appears that African-Americans are “less likely than white parents to prefer autonomy in children and are more likely to prefer obedience,” even after SES is held constant. African American mothers are more likely than white mothers to approve of their children’s being aggressive with their peers.⁴ As for the use of harsh disciplinary practices, including physical punishment, two conclusions emerge from the data: Class may have more of an impact than race, but race matters, too. When thousands of parents were asked (in 1990) whether they had spanked their children in the last week, about 70 percent of African Americans and 60 percent of whites said yes. The figures were 77 percent and 59 percent, respectively, in another study that asked parents (in 1995) whether they had spanked their children in the last year. The difference was still statistically significant, although somewhat reduced,

once SES was taken into account.⁵

When parents were asked (in 1988) about their *attitudes* toward physical punishment, a little more than 22 percent of whites opposed the idea, as compared with fewer than 9 percent of African Americans. What's particularly striking is the disparity in how attitudes have changed over time. In 1968, spanking was endorsed by more than 90 percent of Americans in all ethnic groups. A series of surveys from that point until 1994 have found a steady and remarkably sharp decline in the number of whites who support spanking; approval has dropped by a third, in fact. But the decline was only 14 percent for African Americans over the same quarter-century.⁶

The evidence against the wisdom of using such punishment is quite compelling, but in the last few years an interesting argument has been put forth to the effect that a given practice doesn't necessarily have the same meaning across racial lines. Kirby Deater-Deckard, Kenneth Dodge, and two other researchers have attracted considerable attention in their field by contending that, because disciplining children with physical force is more widely accepted by African Americans, black kids may not experience being hit by their parents in the same way that white kids do, and therefore it won't have the same negative effects. Their study of 466 white children and 100 black children found that higher levels of physical punishment resulted in aggression and similar problems only among the white children. These researchers – all of whom are white, incidentally – speculated that African American children may not “view their parents' physical discipline as an indication of parental lack of warmth and concern” – provided that the punishment doesn't reach levels usually classified as abusive.⁷

This presents a provocative challenge to those of us who find the idea of deliberately hurting children objectionable no matter where it's done, or by whom, or why. It forces us to

ask whether our objection is informed by a set of premises that can't be applied universally. Does a maxim such as "Never hit a child" just reflect the familiar arrogance of a powerful group attempting to impose its ethics on a less powerful group? Or, on the contrary, can we declare that some things are simply wrong and it's the attempt to *silence* judgment that's more offensive?

I've argued that psychological effects in general don't follow in mechanical stimulus-response fashion from the things that happen to us. Rather, what matters is the meaning we ascribe to what happens. It's not the act itself that predicts its impact; it's what the act signifies to individuals and communities.⁸ But now that interpretive approach faces its ultimate challenge: Are there some behaviors, such as striking children and deliberately causing them pain, that can never be construed as innocuous (much less loving) regardless of the parent's intentions? We – or, more important, the child – may struggle desperately to regard an act of violence as an expression of caring but ultimately find it impossible to perform this act of emotional alchemy. And even if a child *could* reconcile these things, is a commingling of love and violence a good thing? Do we want children to grow up thinking that hurting people is a way of showing concern for them?

At least part of the reason for opposing physical punishment is practical rather than moral, of course. Researchers who regard the practice as problematic generally point to the effects it has. To that extent, the Deater-Decker and Dodge (D-D & D) claim – that those effects don't occur in some children – is important to consider. But for several reasons, I'm not convinced it's true.

First of all, the argument (that black kids aren't adversely affected by physical punishment in the way white kids are) rests on the premise that physical punishment is much more pervasive in the African American community. That, as we've

seen, is true. But it poses a problem for drawing conclusions about the effects of this punishment. Consider an analogy: If we wanted to study whether eating a lot of fish had certain beneficial health effects, it would be wise to look at a group of subjects that included some people who ate huge amounts of fish, some who ate less, and some who ate none at all. Then we could investigate where there was a relationship between health and the amount of fish that was consumed, once other factors were taken into account. But if we studied a group of people almost all of whom regularly ate fish, it would be more difficult to assess the significance of how healthy they were. Thus, for a group of families who routinely rely on physical punishment, it's hard to isolate the effects of being subjected to it. The fact that there's less range or variability in how African Americans discipline their children might explain a lack of correlation between physical punishment and specific effects.⁹

In fact, with any group where the idea of discipline virtually *means* physical punishment – and where such punishment is supposed to be, as D-D & D argue, a marker for parental involvement and concern – its absence may signal a lack of just such involvement and concern. Thus, it wouldn't be surprising to find that kids who weren't punished didn't necessarily fare better than those who were.¹⁰

These considerations may also apply to a few other studies that have echoed D-D & D's findings. One discovered that, among teenagers who were African American – but not among those who were European American, Asian American, or Hispanic American – “unilateral parental decision making was correlated with better adjustment: less involvement in deviance and higher academic competence.” However, joint decision-making, where parents and teens worked things out together, also predicted lower rates of deviance for children of all ethnic backgrounds.¹¹

A second study found “no association between corporal punishment and conduct problems in communities where corporal punishment was widely prevalent.” But here, too, there was an important caveat: Even in these communities, such punishment was “not beneficial in preventing antisocial behavior . . . once the effects of caretaker monitoring and discipline [were] taken into account.” Thus, even if there are variations in the *damage* caused by hitting children, that doesn’t mean that hitting children is ever *useful*.¹²

More significant still is the fact that other research fails to support the D-D & D finding. A 1997 study found that the use of corporal punishment led to more antisocial behavior for both minority and white children, and the extent of that effect was directly related to the amount of punishment they had received earlier.¹³ Three years later, another study confirmed that coercive discipline was associated with conduct problems in low-income African American children. The psychologists who reported this result pointedly noted that it “stands in contrast” to the D-D & D finding.¹⁴

The idea that hitting children doesn’t harm them if they’re part of a culture that accepts this practice as appropriate would seem to imply that the children themselves regard it as legitimate. Toddlers are too young to have formed such a judgment, which may in itself pose a problem for the whole theory. But one study asked older children (ages nine to sixteen) in the West Indies, where harsh physical punishment is widespread, what they thought about it. It turned out that such punishment had the same negative effects on kids who believed it was appropriate that it did on those who didn’t believe this: “The psychological adjustment of youths who believe parents should punish them physically tends to be impaired to the same degree as the adjustment of youths who do not share this cultural belief.”¹⁵

Finally, though, let's assume for the sake of the argument that specific negative outcomes, such as the presence of conduct disorders, really don't show up (at least right away) in African American kids who are subjected to corporal punishment. That hardly proves that such punishment is harmless. If I'm right about the insidious effects of leading children to equate love and violence, then researchers who examined a wider array of possible outcomes might well find negative impacts that cut across lines of race and class.

Again, parents who dictate to, or hit, their children may well be doing so in an attempt to teach them, and they may be doing so out of concern for their well-being, particularly in places where these have become the default ways of expressing that concern. Unfortunately, admirable intentions don't guarantee a positive outcome. Bad things done for good reasons aren't nearly as helpful as good things done for good reasons.

Nor are positive results assured even if the children themselves accept that this style of parenting really is an expression of love – or convince themselves of this once they're grown. We learn to take what we can get – say, if physical punishment appears to be the only alternative to indifference. But the question is why these are assumed to be the only two possibilities available. This is analogous to the point I raised earlier in this book about praise: If conditional acceptance is the only possibility, kids will drink it in and even say they wish they'd gotten more. But that's not a persuasive defense of praise. Not all forms of acceptance – or love, or motivation, or ways of getting children's attention when they've done something wrong – are the same, nor are they equally desirable.

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There's another way that differences among groups are used to explain and justify a specific approach to raising children. It's sometimes said that physical punishment, along with a

more authoritarian style of parenting in general, are rational responses to living in a dangerous neighborhood. The argument goes something like this: Maybe affluent families can afford the luxury of a more relaxed, progressive, or democratic approach to child rearing, but things are very different in the inner city. There, making sure that kids follow the rules – obey the law, toe the line, defer to authority figures even when what they’re demanding may seem unjust – can literally determine whether these kids survive to adulthood. In this view, strict discipline is adaptive and perhaps even necessary. Michelle Kelley, a researcher at Old Dominion University, and her colleagues put it this way: “The consequences of disobedience in a low-income neighborhood . . . [where children] are at greater risk for involvement in antisocial activity (either as victims or as perpetrators) . . . may be much more serious [than in a middle-class neighborhood] and may require more forceful methods to prevent any level of involvement.”¹⁶

This is an interesting theory in part because it suggests that something about the environment, rather than something about the individuals living in that neighborhood (such as their race or class) accounts for the use of heavy-handed discipline. It’s also a reminder to many suburban whites that they haven’t a clue about the day-to-day reality faced by people of color in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, there are several problems with this explanation. For one thing, it’s not clear that the evidence supports it. Kelley herself hasn’t consistently found that the way “lower-class black mothers or caregivers” raise their children is influenced by the extent to which they’re worried about them.¹⁷ Something other than an objective appraisal of danger may be responsible for their favoring a certain approach to discipline.

If the dangerous neighborhood theory were true, moreover, we

might expect that the relation between how children are disciplined and whether they engage in antisocial behavior would vary depending on where they lived. But two large studies – the first conducted in 1996 with more than 3,000 teenagers from different ethnic backgrounds; and the second conducted in 2002 with 841 African American families – found that the effects of discipline style didn't change depending on the kind of community they lived in, including the prevalence of crime and delinquency.¹⁸

Empirical evidence aside, the dangerous neighborhood argument seems to be constructed on some of those same false dichotomies I discussed earlier, such as “coerciveness versus permissiveness.” Granted, children in some areas may need extra protection and closer monitoring, but that's not the same thing as saying they need – or would benefit from – authoritarian parenting or physical punishment.¹⁹ They may benefit from structure, but that doesn't mean they would benefit from being controlled. They may require a strong parental presence, but not a demand for absolute, do-what-you're-told-or-else obedience. (By the same token, it's important not to caricature what I've called a working-with approach by confusing it with laissez-faire permissiveness. To point out the flaws of the latter isn't the same as making an argument against the former.)

Look again at the research demonstrating the effects of heavy-handed control and punishment, which I reviewed in chapters 3 and 4, respectively. Children raised in these ways are less likely to acquire a sophisticated moral framework. They may find it harder to develop a flexible understanding of the situations they face, and they may remain trapped by a preoccupation with self-interest.

These things matter. Moral sophistication, cognitive flexibility, and the capacity to care about others aren't luxuries. More to the point, they're not mutually exclusive

with basic survival skills and street smarts. We want kids to have all these things. But traditional, punitive discipline may result in their having none of them. Even if obedience were our goal, this is not a particularly effective way to get it. Remember, children whose parents are controlling are often less compliant, especially when their parents aren't around. But ultimately it makes sense to question the goal of just getting kids to obey authority, which is very different from the goal of developing good judgment and responsibility.

I'd even go so far as to say that the approach I've described in the latter half of this book – unconditional love, a relationship based on respect and trust, the opportunity for children to participate in making decisions, and so on – may be *most* important for kids who are growing up in tough neighborhoods.²⁰ In any case, there aren't many real-world situations in which children end up doing better as a result of fear-based parenting.

ADDENDUM: For a provocative book published in 2017 that's relevant to this discussion, see Stacey Patton's *Spare the Kids: Why Whipping Children Won't Save Black America*. (A short article based on that book is available [here](#).)

NOTES

(Full citations appear in the book's bibliography.)

1. "Rates of parents' use": This conclusion by Gershoff, p. 562, is followed by fifteen citations. "Children in the lower socioeconomic classes": Dodge et al., p. 662. Also see Sears et al.; and Simons et al. 1991. Gershoff notes, however, that some studies have failed to find the same relationship. This may be related to the specific aspect of socioeconomic status that's being investigated. For example, the use of physical punishment may be more consistently (negatively) related to parents' level of education than to their income or occupation.
2. See Conger et al. ; and also the evidence reviewed in Grolnick, pp. 83-87

3. Melvin Kohn's results: M. Kohn. Kohn's findings confirmed by others: See, for example, Schaefer and Edgerton; Pinderhughes et al.; and Gerris et al. International data: Petersen et al.
4. Less likely to prefer autonomy: Alwin (p. 362) cites five studies to support this conclusion. More likely to approve of aggression: Dodge et al.
5. Class may have more of an impact than race: Pinderhughes et al. This same study, however, found that race remains relevant, as did Deater-Deckard et al.; Giles-Sims et al. (the study conducted in 1990); and Straus and Stewart (the study conducted in 1995). McLeod et al. (p. 586), relying on a huge national data set from 1988, also reported that "white mothers reported spanking their children less often" during the preceding week than did black mothers, but she added that this may have been at least partly because the latter in this sample were more likely than the former to be poor.
6. Opposition by 22 versus 9 percent: Flynn. Declining approval over 26 years: Straus and Mathur.
7. Deater-Deckard et al. That last qualification is very important: "There appears to be a boundary for the extremity of harsh physical discipline past which the effects are deleterious, and equally deleterious, for all children" (Deater-Decker and Dodge, p. 168).
8. Of course, this point has been made by many other theorists, including Erik Erikson and – more relevant to this discussion – Deater-Decker and Dodge, who argue: "Apparently similar parental behavior (such as spanking) may have different meaning and consequences in different cultural milieus" (p. 168).
9. This point was made by the late Hugh Lytton (p. 213), an eminent researcher in human development, and by D. C. Rowe (p. 221). Rowe also questions D-D & D's finding on the grounds that the measure of parenting practices may not have had equal reliability for whites and blacks, or equal validity (if, say, black mothers had reason to mistrust the interviewers).
10. This point is made by Straus 2005.
11. Lamborn et al. 1996. Quotation on p. 293.
12. Simons et al. 2002.

13. Straus et al.

14. Kilgore et al.

15. Rohner et al. Quotation appears on p. 691.

16. Kelley et al., p. 574.

17. "Maternal fears about child victimization were unrelated to parenting orientation" in the study reported in Kelley et al. (p. 579), although in an unpublished dissertation Kelley previously reported having found such a relation.

18. Lamborn et al. 1996; and Simons et al. 2002, respectively.

19. This point is also made by Straus et al. in the context of their finding that physical punishment has damaging effects on children of all races.

20. Grolnick made much the same point. In tough neighborhoods, "the development of self-regulation and responsibility – both outcomes of autonomy supportive parenting – are just as necessary, if not more so, than they are for children of advantage" (Grolnick, p. 74).

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