“No, We Don’t Get a Say, Children Just Suffer the Consequences”: Children Talk about Family Discipline

TERRY ANNE DOBBS
ANNE B. SMITH
NICOLA J. TAYLOR
Children’s Issues Centre, University of Otago

Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the meanings of family discipline and physical punishment from children’s perspectives. Considering that children are the recipients of family discipline, listening to their views of disciplinary practice in family settings, is an important ingredient in understanding the dynamics of family life.

Investigating discipline through the eyes of children rather than adults is needed. To better explain how discipline affects children now and in the future it is important to understand how children react to the disciplinary incident (Holden, 2002, p. 593).

Our interest in children’s experiences of discipline and punishment also arises from concern about implementation of Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that State Parties should take the appropriate legislative and other measures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment. New Zealand, therefore, has an obligation to implement procedures which protect children from violence. The last two UN Committee on the Child reports have criticised our failure fully to comply with Article 19 (UNCROC, 1997; 2003). Research (Smith, 2005), however, suggests that the New Zealand public is accepting of the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary method, and politicians are wary of changing legislation to protect children. This study should, therefore, help cast more light on whether children experience physical punishment as part of family discipline and determine what impact children think it has on them.

Any disciplinary action includes two sets of behaviours, the child’s actions and the parental response. Effective discipline is based in part on the child’s accurate perception of the parental message and the acceptance or rejection of it (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Thus gaining knowledge of children’s
views on family discipline is important to develop effective discipline practices, and to gain a balanced perspective on the controversial policy issue of how the state should protect children from unduly harsh discipline. While adults often debate the best methods of disciplining children and their views influence public policies, children’s voices are not often heard. Without children’s acceptance and understanding, the debates and solutions are incomplete, and children are rendered invisible.

Family discipline is an inevitable and central part of family life, as all children are disciplined in one way or another. In its broadest sense family discipline is the collection of acts and rules that parents use to teach children the values and normative behaviours of society. Discipline involves guiding children’s moral, emotional and physical development, enabling them to take responsibility for themselves when they are older (Holden, 2002; Wissow, 2003).

Punishment is a disciplinary act which follows child behaviour which parents perceive to be inappropriate, and wish to stop. Punishment is usually aversive and focuses on obedience or compliance. Physical punishment is defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behaviour” (Straus, 1994, p. 4). Examples are smacking, hitting, slapping, grabbing, pushing and/or physically restraining a child for the supposed purpose of correction (Maxwell, 1993), though it can include other forms of physical discomfort such as forcing a child to taste unpalatable substances or to stay in one physical position for a long time (Durrant, 2004).

Recent theoretical perspectives from the sociology of childhood have stimulated qualitative research with children (Mayall, 2002). This methodology respects children’s own perspectives on aspects of their lives without stifling the expression of their voices, or constraining their reports according to standardised formats. The qualitative participatory design used in this study is drawn from existing theories of children and childhood, as well as the senior author’s experience as a forensic interviewer. A focus group process was chosen to access the subjective experiences of participants in relation to predetermined research questions (Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups give children an opportunity to be valued as experts and to work collaboratively with the facilitator and each other, and to develop and articulate their thoughts in a non-threatening and safe context.

Not many studies have simply asked children for their views, but those that have clearly show that “children do not like corporal punishment and the pain and anger surrounding it, but they accept it as a parental right” (Graziano, Hamblen & Plante, 1996, p. 848). These authors showed that children and their parents agreed on the type, frequency and severity of corporal punishment administered, but that children judged both the pain and the emotion involved to be greater than that judged by the parents, and most felt hurt, upset and angry about it, yet considered it to be a fact of life.