

Psychology essays - parents corporal punishment



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Parents Corporal Punishment

There has been controversy in Australia regarding whether parents should be allowed to use smacking or other forms of corporal punishment (corporal punishment) as a means of behavioural management of children. There have not only been concerns that corporal punishment can be harmful, but also relating to the effectiveness of such a punishment as a means of managing and changing children's behaviour.

Although corporal punishment may be used to produce immediate compliance from the child, there are a number of provisions which must be met in order for compliance to be achieved (e. g., Holden, 2002). Principles of learning can be used to explain the effectiveness of corporal punishment, which involves operant conditioning. However, it is proposed that greater parental education is required to enable parents to facilitate safe and long-lasting behavioural change through the use of alternative disciplinary methods.

Firstly it is necessary to define corporal punishment. According to Straus (2001, p. 4, as cited in Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007) corporal punishment is defined as " the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child pain, but not injury, for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior." Spanking is one form of corporal punishment which parents may administer in order to prompt immediate compliance. Friedman and Schonberg (1996, p. 853, as cited in Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002) define spanking as " a) physically non-injurious; b) intended to modify behavior; and c) administered with an opened hand to the extremities or

buttocks.” Domjan (2000, as cited in Holden, 2002) postulates that behaviour can be successfully changed by means of punishment given that particular provisions are adhered to.

For instance, Holden (2002) and Brennan and Mednick (1994) suggest that punishment should be administered after every misbehaviour, occurring immediately after the behaviour and also be intense. Baumrind et al. (2002) indicate that spanking, alone does not encourage long-term competence or moral character.

The learning theory of punishment has been extensively studied in the laboratory setting with the use of animals. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs (2001) point out that much research regarding learning has involved the use of rats whereby, food pellets as administered as rewards and electric shock is used as a means of punishment. However, Baumeister et al. (2001) suggests that it is difficult to determine the number of food pellets which correspond to the number of shocks.

Brennan and Mednick (1994) maintain that learning theory can also be used to explain human behaviour outside the laboratory setting. Operant conditioning can be used to explain how behaviour can be changed. Operant conditioning relies on the law of effect which was devised by Thorndike. Thorndike’s law of effect suggests that behaviours which result in positive outcomes are likely to continue to occur.

On the other hand, behaviours in which the outcomes are negative or unpleasant are unlikely to occur in future. Based on the law of effect, those responses which frequently occur are generally those which have been

followed by a satisfying consequence. It must be understood that if the rewards are simply not important enough to the child, then the behaviour change is unlikely to be successful.

It should be noted that in order to facilitate effective behaviour change, the child needs to be motivated to change his/her behaviour. Zuckerman (2003) maintains that individuals do not always find the same stimuli reinforcing. For instance, getting to help make dinner in the kitchen might be perceived as a reward for one child and a punishment for another. Success is most probable when the child is mindful of his/her behaviour, disciplined and committed to change their behaviour.

On the other hand, a punisher refers to a stimulus that has a negative or aversive value to the individual and provides a perceived negative outcome (Schwartz et al., 2002). A child's behaviour can be changed by means of positive reinforcement which refers to an event that, when presented after a response, increases the likelihood of that response. There are two main types of feedback which create learning which are referred to as reinforcement and punishment (Baumeister et al., 2001). One must note the difference between reinforcers and punishers. A reinforcer is referred to as a stimulus which has a positive worth to the individual and is perceived to offer a positive consequence (Schwartz et al., 2002)

On the other hand, when positive punishment is used a stimulus is presented after a response, lowering the likelihood of that response occurring again. In accordance with the law of effect, positive events will result in an increase in the behaviour which preceded the outcome (Schwartz et al., 2002).

Conversely, negative reinforcement involves the removal of an aversive stimulus. In this instance, the removal of an aversive stimulus increases the likelihood of the behaviour in the future. Using operant conditioning to change the response to a child's behaviour depends on when the reinforcements are provided. In order to demonstrate that a child's behaviour predicts the reward; the reward needs to be provided in an unpredictable way.

Punishment decreases the likelihood of behaviour which preceded it. Negative punishment involves a desirable reward, action/event being removed. As proposed by the law of effect, the negative outcome will result in a reduction in the preceding behaviour. Baumeister et al. (2001) propose that events which are negatively valenced such as being criticised or losing money, will have a larger effect on an individual's behaviour compared to positively valenced events like being praised and winning money.

Costantini and Joving (1973, as cited in Baumeister et al., 2001) proposed that individuals are further motivated to avoid losing something than to gain something. Punishment can also be disadvantageous, as it can also influence other negative responses, particularly anger and resentment. If a child develops a fear of the person delivering the punishment, the process of operant conditioning may be less successful.

Parke (2002) discusses a number of factors which can influence the effectiveness of punishment. For instance, one must consider the timing and intensity of the punishment, the consistency of its delivery as well as the relationship between the child and the parent (Parke, 2002). It is suggested

that the stimulus to be used as a punishment should be as intense as possible (Brennan, & Mednick, 1994; Holden, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2002).

On the contrary, Parke (2002) indicated that if a child had a warm and loving relationship with the individual delivering the punishment, a punishment which was less intense would be sufficient. It has been argued that smacking is only successful in circumstances when parents are not angry (Larzelere, 2000, as cited in Ann Dobbs et al., 2006). In addition, the interval between the response and administering the punishment should be kept as brief as possible (Brennan, & Mednick, 1994; Schwartz et al., 2002). Baumeister et al. (2001) noted that punishment led to quicker learning across a number of different rewards and punishments. It has been suggested that people learn faster from negative events than from good events like rewards (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Six learning theory principles were discussed by Brennan and Mednick (1994). According to learning theory, there will be a decrease in behaviour when a punishing stimulus follows certain behaviour. It was also maintained that harsher punishing stimuli have a greater effect on behaviour (Azrin & Holz, 1996, as cited in Brennan & Mednick, 1994). In addition, different kinds of punishing stimuli are thought to produce similar effects on ones behaviour (Brennan & Mednick, 1994, p. 431).

From a learning perspective, the larger the proportion of behaviours which are punished, the greater the decline in the rate of behaviour in the future (Brennan & Mednick, 1994). Brennan and Mednick (1994) also note the need for punishment to be delivered on a continuous schedule in order to

decrease the likelihood of the behaviour being continued. However, when punishment is ceased, the behaviour which was previously punished is likely to resume provided that it is being reinforced (Brennan & Mednick, 1994). However, Mulvaney and Mebert (2007) note that a simple social learning model cannot adequately explain the relation between corporal punishment and outcomes for the child.

In order for punishment to be effective, the stimulus used as a punisher should be presented at a strength which has been determined to be the maximum (Brennan & Mednick, 1994). If the punishment is firstly presented in a weak form and progressively increased, the child may become accustomed to the increasing levels of intensity, thus having minimal impact on their behaviour (Schwartz et al., 2002).

Emphasis has been placed on the need for fairness and consistency in order to deliver effective punishment (Holden, 2002; Ann Dobbs et al., 2006).

Parke (2002) notes that the influence punishment has on a child from a culture which accepts punishment as a normal practice will differ from that of a child from a culture which does not permit such punishment. Zuckerman (2003) proposes that individuals differ in both their ability to be conditioned and their degree of sensitivity to conditioned stimuli connected with reward and punishment.

Holden (2002) suggests that according to learning theory, corporal punishment is not only unlikely to be successful, but may also bring about negative consequences. Holden (2002) maintains, that in some instances, customary corporal punishment carries with it negative baggage that is

detrimental. The goal of punishment is to elicit compliance (Ann Dobbs et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2002; Holden, 2002; Baumrind et al., 2002).

One should note the difference between behavioural compliance and dispositional compliance. Behavioural compliance involves altering one's behaviour so that it is in line with the direction of others, whilst dispositional compliance occurs when one internalises the general norm of compliance (Baumrind et al., 2002).

Holden (2002) discusses some of the limitations of the findings from Gershoff's (2002) study. It has been argued that researchers are unable to separate the particular effects of spanking from other variables (Holden, 2002). For instance, Holden (2002) notes that parental punishments such as spanking can take place alongside other parental actions including making a threat, yelling and then reasoning with the child. One should note that a spank which is administered from a loving parent might convey a rather different meaning than one which is dealt from a dismissing parent (Parke, 2002; Holden, 2002).

The effects of corporal punishment have been widely studied (e. g., Gershoff, 2002; Baumrind et al., 2002; Holden, 2002; Mulvaney & Mebert, 2007). A number of effects of punishment have been identified from Gershoff's (2002) meta-analyses. Such effects included negative behaviours such as aggression, lower levels of moral internalisation and mental health (Baumrind et al., 2002). Holden (2002) discusses the effects of punishment which were identified by Newsom, Favell, and Rincover in 1983. These effects include the primary effect, physical, secondary and social effects.

With regards to the positive outcomes of corporal punishment, Gershoff's (2002) study found that in five studies, instant compliance was reported (Holden, 2002). Holden, Miller and Harris (1999, as cited in Holden, 2002) indicated that corporal punishment was not positively connected with the internalization of positive behaviour.

However, Brennan and Mednick (1994) note that the effect of punishment decreases rapidly if the punishment is no longer delivered and the behaviour is reinforced. Gershoff (2002) proposes that with reference to learning theory, punishment can be used to suppress unwanted behaviours but is less effective at teaching children what behaviours are appropriate (Gershoff, 2002).

Ann Dobbs et al. (2006) reported the findings from their interviews with children regarding family discipline. Children disclosed that they would learn from their encounters and stop transgressing, provided that they could comprehend the message being delivered and agreed that it was reasonable (Ann Dobbs et al., 2006). Baumeister et al. (2001) also discussed the use of punishment across various developmental stages and reported that for all stages of development, punishment was found to be relatively more effective than providing rewards.

Baumeister et al. (2001) postulate that individuals seem to be predisposed to learn quicker about the correlates of negative events compared to events which are positive. It was suggested that research findings which imply that learning and conditioning are more strongly influenced by bad events than good events (Baumeister et al., 2001).

It has been suggested that in order for discipline to be effective, a child must correctly perceive the message being conveyed by the parent and either accept or reject it. Ann Dobbs et al. (2006) reported that a considerable majority of children reported that physical punishment was an unsuitable disciplinary method. In addition, there were noticeable differences in children's views on the appropriateness of physical punishment.

Unlike many of the younger children (5 to 11 years old), children approaching their teens began to view that smacking could be warranted (Ann Dobbs et al., 2006). Paintal (2007) maintains that corporal punishment teaches children to use violence and revenge as a means of resolving problems and they imitate the behaviours of their parents and other adults. The social learning theory emphasises that normal processes are involved in acquiring behaviour. According to the social learning theory, if a parent was to be rewarded for smacking, it would be more probable for a child observing to copy this behaviour.

Several researchers have emphasised the need for more effective parental education which enables parents to think how and what they do to punish their children, as well as offering alternatives to corporal punishment. It has been recommended that parents use positive parenting to influence their children's behaviour.

Positive parenting involves the use of reinforcement, being involved, offering support and independence as well as setting rules and boundaries (Bosmans, Braet, Leeuwen, & Beyers, 2006). Holden (2002) notes that the behavioural management of children can be achieved through employing reward-based

discipline. Anne Dobbs et al. (2006) note that disciplinary action includes both the child's behaviour and the response made by the parents.

Over the last couple of decades in Australia, the use of smacking and other forms of corporal punishment to manage children's behaviour has been a contentious issue. The learning theory of punishment can be applied to examine the effectiveness of corporal punishment. A number of variables can influence the effectiveness of corporal punishment.

In addition several studies have reported the harmful side-effects of corporal punishment and emphasised the need for parental education. Research has highlighted the need for parental education regarding discipline so that parents can reflect on their current use of punishment as well as learn about alternative means of behavioural management, particularly reward-based discipline.

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