Wait Until Your Mother Gets Home! Mothers' and Fathers' Discipline Strategies


SUMMARY: Fathers have become increasingly involved in parenting; however, research suggests that mothers may now be primarily responsible for child discipline. Discipline strategies were observed in two-parent, two-child households in the Netherlands. Results indicate that parent gender and child age, and less so child gender, significantly impact parents' discipline strategies and amount of discipline provided.

KEY FINDINGS:
- Mothers used more verbal (e.g., telling a child "no"), physical (e.g., holding a child's arm), and re-directive (e.g., focusing a child on a new game) responses to child noncompliance, while fathers used more permissive (e.g., letting a child misbehave) responses to child noncompliance.
- In response to noncompliance, parents used more verbal and re-directive responses for older children and more physical and permissive responses for younger children.
- Parents' discipline strategies were unrelated to child gender, except that mothers used more physical responses with boys compared to fathers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:
Military professionals could:
- Collaborate with programs for military families to reach parents and emphasize the importance of and encourage involvement in parent education classes for both mothers and fathers.
- Attend trainings about parenting during the deployment cycle to enhance their ability to support military parents struggling with child discipline during that time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:
Programs could:
- Educate military parents on effective discipline strategies for children of different age groups.
- Provide Service members information regarding ways to balance parenting responsibilities and military duties.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:
Policies could:
- Promote parenting programs that work with military parents to learn to apply developmentally appropriate discipline strategies with their children.
- Recommend education for service providers working with military families around the possible effects of parent gender and child age on parental discipline strategies.
METHODS
- Families were recruited via postal mail for a larger longitudinal study with a 31% response rate.
- Data were gathered via home-based family observations and parent questionnaires.
- This study focused on the results of a task where parents ask children not to touch toys; only families with complete data and child noncompliance during observation were included.
- Associations between parent and child gender, child birth order, and discipline strategies were examined.

PARTICIPANTS
- The sample included 242 two-parent families with two children from the Netherlands.
- Younger children had to be approximately one year old (M = 1.00, SD = 0.30), and older children had to be approximately three years old (M = 3.00, SD = 0.30) for families to participate.
- Families with two boys (29%), two girls (23%), or a girl and boy (48%) were included.

LIMITATIONS
- Although race and ethnicity data were not reported, the article’s limitations section stated that parents were mostly White and well-educated, limiting generalizability to more diverse samples.
- Parents may have responded differently when disciplining children during observation in order to present what they believe is the most positive type of parenting or discipline.
- The observed task requires children to inhibit responses, and this ability develops after one year of age, possibly contributing to more permissive parental responses with younger children.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research could:
- Examine parental discipline strategies in more diverse samples, such as families from different racial or ethnic backgrounds and families with varying socioeconomic status
- Explore the effects of child age on use and effectiveness of parental discipline strategies
- Investigate differences in discipline strategies among families with single parents

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