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Discipline in the African American Community: The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Beliefs and Practices

Ivor B. Horn, MD, MPH*‡; Tina L. Cheng, MD, MPH*‡; and Jill Joseph, MD, PhD*‡

ABSTRACT. *Objective.* To describe and compare disciplinary beliefs and practices among African American parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Methods. A cross-sectional survey was conducted of self-identified African American parents of children <48 months of age at 2 ambulatory teaching clinics, 2 community health centers, and 3 private practices in Washington, DC, and the surrounding metropolitan area. Disciplinary beliefs and practices of African American parents were measured.

Results. A total of 175 of the 189 parents who were approached for the study completed the survey for a participation rate of 92.5%. Middle/upper socioeconomic status (SES) parents in this study were more likely to be married (60.9% vs 14.7%), older (31.4 years vs 25 years), and more educated (80% having attended at least some college vs 34.4%) than lower SES parents. There were no significant differences between middle/upper and lower SES parents with regard to their belief in a preferred disciplinary method (teaching, spanking, removing) or approach (positive, negative). Lower SES parents were more likely to endorse spanking a 1- to 3-year-old child if they were doing something that was not safe (90.5% vs 78.3%). Middle/upper SES parents were significantly more likely to reward their child for positive behavior than lower SES parents (66.1% vs 47.1%).

Conclusions. Lower and middle/upper SES parents in this study population were reasonably similar with respect to disciplinary beliefs and practices. Exceptions to this generalization were that lower SES parents were more likely to endorse spanking as a response to an unsafe behavior on the part of the child, and middle/upper SES parents reported higher levels of reward for positive behavior. *Pediatrics* 2004;113:1236–1241; *African American, discipline, socioeconomic status, spanking.*

ABBREVIATIONS. SES, socioeconomic status; PDM, preferred disciplinary method; PDA, preferred disciplinary approach; SD, standard deviation.

An issue of particular concern to pediatricians is disciplinary practices, yet research on this topic has focused primarily in white populations and investigations to date in African American populations are limited. As a result, disciplinary practices and their effects among African American families are not well understood. In fact, in her recent meta-analysis of corporal punishment, Gershoff¹ was unable to examine the impact of race/ethnicity because so few studies that included minority participants were available. (Ethnicity, as used here, is defined as a heritage based on nationality, language, and culture.²) This is particularly troubling, as some studies have suggested that African American families use more harsh disciplinary practices than European American families.^{3–5} However, such conclusions are predominantly drawn from between-group comparisons of upper socioeconomic status (SES) European Americans to lower SES African Americans. For example, Socolar and Stein^{6,7} compared the maternal spanking beliefs and practices of an upper SES, primarily white population with a lower SES, primarily Hispanic and African American population. This study confounds the effects of race/ethnicity and SES, making it difficult to draw valid conclusions about the relationship of race/ethnicity to discipline. More generally, little is known about the disciplinary beliefs and practices in middle and upper SES African Americans, although recent within-group descriptions of African American disciplinary practices reveals considerable heterogeneity.^{8–10} Bluestone and Tamis-LeMonda,⁸ as well as Bradley,¹⁰ found substantial variability in disciplinary practices among middle-class African Americans. In these studies, disciplinary practices were influenced by multiple factors, including the context of the disciplinary episode, maternal depression, and sociodemographic factors. To build on this work, the current study replicates the research of Socolar and Stein⁶ by providing a cross-cultural comparison of the disciplinary beliefs and practices of African Americans of differing socioeconomic status.

METHODS

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in a convenience sample of self-identified African American parents with children <48 months of age. Participants were recruited from 7 pediatric primary care practices in Washington, DC, and the surrounding metropolitan area between November 1999 and May 2001. Sites were chosen on the basis of the large numbers of African American parents and diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds. Two sites were ambulatory teaching clinics, 2 were community health centers, and 3 were private practices. The survey was limited to

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English-speaking parents. First- and second-generation immigrant families (defined as either parent or grandparent being born in a country outside the United States) were excluded from the study to limit heterogeneity arising from differences in disciplinary practices as a result of acculturation.

Data Collection

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Children's National Medical Center. A trained researcher recruited patients at each site using a rotating schedule for day of attendance. The researcher approached potential participants in the waiting room or examination room at each site and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Participants were screened for eligibility, the study was explained, and informed consent was obtained. A 20-minute, structured, face-to-face interview was conducted in a private area of the waiting room or a patient examination room by the researcher. Demographic data were obtained from parents who declined to participate in the study.

Participants

Only parents who seemed to be of African American background were approached for the study. Of the 189 parents who were approached for this study, 175 completed the survey (participation rate: 92.5%). Among respondents, 91.4% were mothers, 7.4% were fathers, and 1.2% were other female caregivers (primarily grandmothers). Of the 14 nonparticipating parents, 10 were ineligible because either grandparents or parents of the index child were born outside the United States, 1 refused to participate, and 3 did not complete the entire interview. Eligible parents who refused to participate did not seem to differ from participants, although the small number of such parents limits the value of statistical testing of such differences. Shown in Table 1 are sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics of participants both overall and after stratification into the 2 socioeconomically differentiated groups.

Participants were dichotomized into lower SES (household income <\$40 000/year) and middle/upper SES (household income ≥\$40 000/year) based on a rounded number of the median income for the sample. Use of dichotomized groups permitted us to make SES-specific comparisons mirroring the site-defined comparisons of the Socolar and Stein study. As suggested in Table 1, many other family characteristics, notably including parental education, differ in the 2 groups defined by income.

Study Measures

The questionnaire used for the interview was an instrument developed by Socolar and Stein.^{6,7} The instrument provided a parent self-report of attitudes and beliefs about 1) preferred dis-

ciplinary methods (PDMs) and approaches (PDAs), 2) belief in the perceived appropriateness of various disciplinary methods, and 3) recent disciplinary practices.

PDM Summed Scores

Parents' PDMs were assessed with 9 vignettes that included the child's age and type of misbehavior (eg, When a 3-year-old girl is trying to plug a fork into an electric socket). Each vignette was followed by 3 disciplinary options, 1 representing a tendency to teach (eg, Tell her why she must not plug a fork into the socket), 1 representing a tendency to remove (eg, Take the fork away from her), and 1 representing a tendency to spank (eg, Spank her). Parents responded to each of the 3 options on Likert-type scales with choices of "never," "rarely," "usually," and "always." Scores on each of the 9 PDM vignettes were summed for the teach options (PDM-teach: mean: 29.3; standard deviation [SD]: 2.5), the remove options (PDM-remove: mean: 26.1; SD: 3.1), and the spank options (PDM-spank: mean: 13.1; SD: 4.8). Data were missing for only 1 participant; therefore, this participant's results were not included in data analysis. Sums for each measure were similar to those in the Socolar and Stein⁷ study, with the exception of the sum for spank (teach: mean: 29.2; remove: mean: 25.8; spank: mean: 4.6).

PDA Summed Scores

Two broad disciplinary approaches were assessed with 6 vignettes that included the child's age and type of misbehavior (eg, When a 3-year-old girl splashes in the bathtub and onto the floor). In the same manner used to determine PDM, each vignette was followed by an option representing a negative approach (eg, Yell at her to let her know that she should not do this) and a positive approach (eg, Show her in a gentle manner how to splash without making a mess). Similarly, choices ranged from "never" to "always" on a Likert-type scale. Responses were summed for each of the 6 options for negative (mean: 8.2; SD: 2.76) and positive (mean: 20.6; SD: 3.29) approaches. Data were missing for only 2 participants; therefore, those results were not included in the data analysis. Sums for each approach in the Socolar and Stein⁷ study were 11.0 for negative and 20.7 for positive.

Belief in Perceived Appropriateness of Disciplinary Practices

Parents' beliefs about the perceived appropriateness of various discipline practices, such as spanking, time out, yelling, rewarding, and frightening, were assessed using questions stating, "It is okay to (spank a child <1 year old; put a 2-year-old in 'time out' for 2 minutes)." Parents responded using a Likert-type scale with choices ranging from "never" to "always." Responses were dichotomized into "never" or "ever." Each of these items was evaluated individually, and belief in the appropriateness of harsh

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 175)

	Middle/Upper SES (n = 70)	Lower SES (n = 105)	Total	P Value
Parent's age, y*				
Mean (SD)	31.4 (6.89)	25.0 (5.65)	27.8 (6.9)	
Range (min, max)	19, 46	14, 39	14, 46	<.0001
Child's age, mo*				
Mean (SD)	17.6 (13.6)	14.6 (12.1)	15.8 (12.7)	.117
Education, %†				
GED/HS graduate or less	20.0	65.6	46.0	
At least some college	80.0	34.4	54.0	<.0001
Marital status, %†				
Single/other	39.1	85.3	65.9	
Married	60.9	14.7	34.1	<.0001
Self-reported "regular" religious practice, %†				
Yes	72.9	48.4	58.8	
No	27.1	51.6	41.2	.001
Parental history of being spanked, %†				
Yes	90.0	90.4	90.2	.928
No	10.0	9.6	9.8	

* T test was used to compare continuous means.

† χ^2 was used to compare categorical variables.

disciplinary practices was assessed by summing affirmative answers to questions about 1) spanking a child 1 to 3 years of age, 2) spanking a child somewhere besides the buttocks, 3) spanking a child with something other than a hand, and 4) leaving a mark on a child as a result of spanking.

Recent Disciplinary Practices

Asking parents how often they used various strategies when their child misbehaved in the last week assessed recent disciplinary practices used by the parent and their frequency of use. These items were evaluated individually, and severity of spanking practices was assessed by summing responses to questions about whether the parent has ever 1) hit his or her child somewhere besides the buttocks, 2) used something other than a hand to spank the child, and 3) left a mark that could be seen on the child after spanking. Severity of spanking practices was determined on the basis of scales developed by Socolar and Stein.⁶

Data Analysis

χ^2 analysis was used to compare beliefs about the perceived appropriateness of various disciplinary practices between the 2 SES groups. Summed scores for PDM (teach/spank/remove) and PDA (positive/negative) and method were compared using *t* tests on the mean value of the sum of the answers for the 2 SES groups.

Multiple Regression Models

Multiple regression analysis examined the relationship of SES to 1) PDM-spank, 2) belief in harsh disciplinary practices, and 3) severity of spanking practices. Belief in spanking was determined by the sum of spank options for PDMs as described above. Covariates were chosen for inclusion in the model on the basis of 2 criteria. The first criterion was whether the variable was reported to be an important covariate in the Socolar and Stein⁶ paper. The second criterion was based on analysis of data available in this study but not available to Socolar and Stein. Once variables were chosen, the full models were developed. The final models were checked using regression diagnostics, including determining whether collinearity and variance inflation were affecting the results. Results for the belief in spanking and severity of spanking practices models are presented after removal of outliers. The belief in harsh disciplinary practices model did not have outliers.

RESULTS

There were significant differences between the middle/upper and lower SES families (Table 1). Notably, the middle/upper SES parents were significantly more likely to be married (60.9% vs 14.7%; $P < .0001$), older (31.4 years vs 25.0 years; $P < .001$), more educated (80.0% having attended at least some college vs 34.4%; $P < .0001$), and to have self-reported regular religious practices (72.9% vs 48.4%; $P < .001$). These findings draw attention to the need for multivariable modeling of the relationship between SES and disciplinary practices to control for other factors, which may plausibly confound this association.

Scores for PDM (teach, spank, remove) and PDA (positive, negative) are displayed in Fig 1, contrast-

ing lower SES and middle/upper SES families. Two points immediately emerge. First, there were no significant differences between these 2 groups with respect to their PDAs, either specifically or more generally when "positive" or "negative" approaches were considered. Second, participants clearly had a greater tendency to endorse teaching, removing, and positive approaches over spanking and negative approaches.

Parental beliefs in the perceived appropriateness of specific disciplinary practices as well as recent disciplinary practices are shown in Table 2. For ease of interpretation, these are first presented with respect to spanking, then with respect to other disciplinary practices including "time out." Results are displayed with respect to the overall prevalence in participants and then stratified by SES. There are remarkably few differences between middle/upper and lower SES groups. As seen in Table 2, however, middle/upper SES parents were significantly more likely to reward than lower SES parents (66.1% vs 47.1%). Conversely, participants were remarkably consistent in their perceptions that the age of the child is related to the appropriateness of spanking. Overall, <1 of 10 of these African American parents from diverse socioeconomic circumstances believed that spanking sufficiently harsh to result in the child's "getting a mark you can see" is ever an appropriate disciplinary practice (7.5%). When asked about their disciplinary practices in the last week with their own children (who on the average were between 15 and 16 months of age), just under 1 (32.2%) in 3 reported having ever spanked their child. For purposes of comparison, it should be noted that 42% of respondents in the Socolar and Stein⁶ study reported recently spanking their child. When asked about their belief and practice regarding the use of other disciplinary practices such as "time out," it was apparent that the overwhelming majority of parents (90.2%) endorsed the appropriateness of this practice and more than one half (51.8%) had practiced it in the last week.

In Table 3, results of multiple regression models are reported to describe the independent contribution of parental sociodemographic characteristics, history, and beliefs in a negative disciplinary approach to selected disciplinary measures of harsh disciplinary beliefs and severe spanking practices. Income was not significantly associated with harsh beliefs or severe spanking practices, even after taking

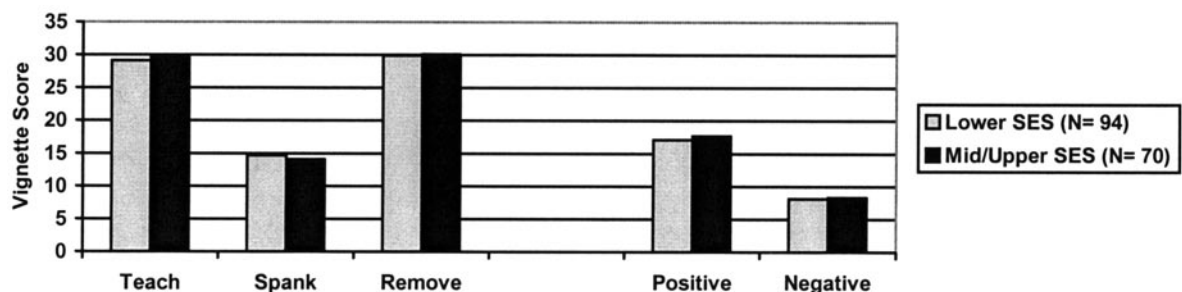


Fig. 1. PDM/PDA in response to a vignette among lower versus middle/upper SES parents.

TABLE 2. Belief in Perceived Appropriateness and Practices in Lower Versus Middle/Upper SES Parents (% Ever)

	Middle/Upper SES (n = 70)	Lower SES (n = 105)	Total	P Value
Belief in perceived appropriateness				
It is okay to spank <1-y-old	20.0	15.8	17.1	.482
It is okay to spank 1 to 3-yr-old	77.1	87.4	83.4	.084
It is okay to spank 1 to 3-yr-old if they are doing something that is not safe	78.3	90.5	86.2	.028
It is okay if a child gets a mark you can see as a result of spanking	10.0	6.4	7.5	.396
It is okay to spank a child with something other than a hand	31.4	20.2	26.4	.101
It is okay to spank a child somewhere besides the buttocks	67.1	58.9	62.3	.283
It is okay to put a 2-y-old to sit in "time out" for 2 min	88.4	92.6	90.2	.365
Recent disciplinary practices (spanking)				
Have you ever hit this child somewhere besides the buttocks? (% yes)	32.9	30.5	32.0	.750
Have you ever used something other than a hand to spank this child? (% yes)	12.9	4.2	8.6	.042
Have you ever left a mark you could see on this child after spanking the child? (% yes)	2.9	3.2	3.0	.911
Spanked child (in the last week)? (% yes)	25.7	35.2	32.2	.185
Recent disciplinary practices (other)				
I tried to get him/her interested in something else (Distract)	96.6	91.9	93.9	.265
I told him/her why not to do what he/she was doing (Explain)	100	98.6	99.2	.378
I told him/her I would give him/her something he/she wanted if he/she behaved as I wanted (Reward)	66.1	44.6	53.8	.015
I told him/her he/she was a big boy/girl when he/she behaved as I wanted (Praise)	93.0	95.9	94.7	.455
Gave child a "time out" (in the last week)	45.6	56.8	51.8	.206

Significant values shown in boldface.

TABLE 3. Multiple Regression Models of Belief and Practice of Spanking

	Standardized β Coefficients		
	Model 1: Belief in Harsh Practices	Model 2: PDM-Spank	Model 3: Spanking Severity (Practice)
PDA-negative	.362*	.532*	NS
Income	NS	NS	NS
Parental education	NS	NS	.165†
Maternal history of being spanked	NS	NS	NS
Regular religious practice	NS	.157†	NS
Age of index child	NS	NS	.249*
Belief in spanking	Not tested	Not tested	.376*
R ²	.165	.388	.262
Adjusted R ²	.131	.363	.227
Overall regression	F = 18.6, P < .001	F = 6.246, P < .001	F = 6.374, P < .001

NS indicates not significant.

* P < .001.

† P < .05.

account of other potentially confounding covariates. Only PDA-negative was significantly related to 2 of the 3 spanking-relevant measures: belief in harsh disciplinary practices and PDM-spanking. Other significant associations were scattered, and each was relevant to only 1 of the 3 dependent measures. Greater parental education was significantly associated with more severe spanking practices. Unexpected, this was in the positive direction with more educated parents reporting more severe spanking practices. Similarly, parental marital status, age of the index child, and maternal history of being spanked were also unrelated to these measures. Parents who reported regular religious practices were also more likely to describe spanking as an appropriate disciplinary practice but not more likely to report harsh disciplinary beliefs or more severe spanking practices. Particularly noteworthy is that the proportion of explained variance was low for all

of these models. This suggests that factors not identified in this study were affecting the observed heterogeneity in disciplinary beliefs and practices in this group of African American parents.

Finally, multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the independent relationship between the independent variables used in the models discussed above and other disciplinary practices (distracting, explaining, rewarding, and praising). These identified an independent association between income and the use of reward as a disciplinary practice ($\beta = 1.14$, $P < .05$). However, there was no significant association between income and recent use of other disciplinary practices such as distracting, explaining, praise, and time out.

DISCUSSION

Little is known about variability of discipline practices within the African American community, and

little research has been done on beliefs and disciplinary practices in the middle and upper SES African American community. The results of this study revealed 3 important points. First, there is remarkably little difference in disciplinary beliefs across socioeconomic groups. Second, there was greater endorsement of disciplinary methods such as teaching and removing than of spanking. Third, harsh spanking practices were uncommon and there was remarkably little difference across socioeconomic groups in these specific practices. In addition, we were surprised by the finding that middle/upper SES parents were more likely to use something other than a hand to spank their child. This finding, however, does seem consistent with the association between severity of spanking practices and higher education level noted in the multiple regression analysis. Clearly, future research is needed to determine whether this finding is consistent and, if so, to explain it. A possible explanation for this result may be related to the increased religious practices among middle/upper SES parents and writings in the lay religious press that recommend the use of something other than a hand (eg, a paddle or switch) to discipline a child.¹¹ The explanatory value of factors explored in this study is low overall.

Our results seem to suggest a specific relationship between belief in spanking and severe spanking practices. More general beliefs in negative practices are related to beliefs in harsh practices or spanking but not use of severe spanking practices themselves. This suggests that parents who believe that it is appropriate, for example, to yell at a child may nonetheless stop short of spanking their child.

Results from our study are comparable to those of Socolar and Stein using the same instrument. The lower SES population in this study is similar to the teaching clinic group in their study, and our middle and upper SES population is similar to the private practice group in their study with relation to income levels and educational background. In effect, the clinic site served as a surrogate measure of SES in the Socolar and Stein study. As Socolar and Stein discussed, they were unable to comment on the relationship of race/ethnicity to disciplinary practice. Their study also was not designed to investigate relationship of SES to discipline within a specific racial group. The present study, by looking specifically at an African American population, allows us to examine the potential contribution of SES to disciplinary practices within this group. The exclusion of families with grandparents and/or parents born outside the United States further strengthens our ability to draw conclusions about disciplinary practices within the African American community by limiting the confounding of issues related to acculturation.

By replicating the Socolar and Stein study using the same instrument in an entirely African American sample, we were able to demonstrate the value of exploring within-group differences in disciplinary practices and factors potentially related to such variability. After doing so, we were able to determine that upper and lower SES African American parents in our study more closely resemble one another than

did the private practice and clinic patients in the Socolar and Stein study. This study also gives insight into the disciplinary practices of a previously understudied population—middle and upper SES African Americans. Although middle and upper SES African American parents in this study were less likely to believe in or practice spanking than lower SES African American parents, they were still more likely to believe in or practice spanking than the primarily European American, upper SES private practice group in the Socolar and Stein⁶ study (eg, response to, “It is okay to spank a child 1 to 3 years old”: 77.1% in this study vs 57% for the Socolar and Stein⁶ study).

In general, there were no consistent differences in disciplinary beliefs or practices between the 2 SES groups in this study. Two notable exceptions to these findings were that 1) lower SES parents were more likely to endorse spanking in response to unsafe behavior by the child and 2) middle/upper SES parents were more likely to report using reward for positive behavior.

The finding of significant differences in the use of rewarding as a disciplinary practice between the 2 SES groups was confirmed by multiple regression analysis (data not shown). A possible explanation for this is that middle and upper SES parents have more resources to provide rewards to their children. In addition, an understudied explanation may be the possibility that middle and upper SES African Americans are more exposed to mainstream European American values that endorse such practices than lower SES African Americans. This suggests that “acculturation” to European American values and culture requires additional investigation. Lower SES parents in this study were also significantly more likely to endorse spanking for a child 1 to 3 years of age if they are doing something that is not safe than middle and upper SES parents. In this instance, SES may, in fact, serve as proxy for a subculture of poverty^{2,12} and its impact on parenting. Finally, results of our study indicate that although 7% to 10% of participants believe that it is okay to leave a mark when disciplining a child, there is no evidence of a broadly based belief in harsh disciplinary practices. However, there is a strong reliance on practices most commonly endorsed by pediatricians (eg, explaining) as well as frequent use of time out and other nonpunitive behaviors.

Although this study addresses 1 of the potential mediating factors that contribute to parenting practices in the African American community, there are several limitations. The small number of participants limits the ability to draw conclusions from our results. A better definition of SES is also needed. Our decision to dichotomize the groups based solely on income results in a limited definition of SES. However, the demographic characteristics of each SES group seem to confirm our decision. Future studies would benefit from a more comprehensive definition of SES. With a larger sample size and more refined definition of SES, the effects of SES may be more apparent. As with the Socolar and Stein⁶ study, the definition of spanking in the composite measure was left to the parents. As a result, parents may have

different definitions of spanking. Such unappreciated measurement errors would tend to reduce our ability to detect significant differences between groups. In addition to the limited definition of spanking, our study does not address the context of the disciplinary episode (eg, the presence of other people, precipitating events). These 2 issues point out the need for additional research using more comprehensive measures of discipline. Another potential limitation of this study is the concern for social desirability in the responses given by participants. We attempted to limit this possibility by conducting the interviews in a private area and having interviewers with the same ethnic background as participants, but the issue of discipline is sensitive and participants may have given answers that they deemed more "socially acceptable" rather than what reflected their true experience. Finally, we recognize that by recruiting in 1 geographic region, we have underestimated the broader heterogeneity in disciplinary practices among African American families. Nonetheless, this study provides some of the first data examining disciplinary practices in a socioeconomically diverse group of African American families.

In conclusion, issues that have an impact on parenting are multifactorial. We need to go beyond basic demographic information to understand better the factors that contribute to parenting in the African American community.

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STAYING WELL

"General practitioners don't have all day to counsel well people about their lifestyles, organize screening tests, and discuss the latest research on vitamin supplements and drinking. But all day is exactly what they need, says a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* (2003;93:635-41). Researchers calculated it would take 7.4 hours of every working day for primary care physicians in the US to complete all the preventive services recommended for all their patients. So they don't."

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