Multiple perspectives on harsh parenting

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Abstract


Parents are the primary socializers of their children, and their choice of practices impacts on their children’s adjustment. There is a rich literature linking negative child outcomes to harsh parenting practices, and there is no shred of doubt that harsh parenting practices are at the root of many emotional and social adjustment problems in youths. There are, nevertheless, issues in harsh parenting research that need attention. In this dissertation I am going to address three research questions that touch on important issues related to harsh parenting: a) How have harsh parenting practices changed over time historically? b) If harsh parenting practices have changed, do they have a negative impact on youths’ patterns of interactions with others across contexts nowadays? and c) How do we help today’s parents reduce their use of harsh practices? Overall, the results show that contemporary parents rely less on physical discipline than parents from previous generations. Nevertheless, although parents use less physical discipline today, some parents resort to non-physical harsh discipline. Parents’ use of non-physical harshness, such as coldness-rejection, angry outbursts, or bad reactions to disclosure, are linked to youths’ problematic adjustment, not only at home, but also at school and in free-time. Given all their negative effects on youths’ adjustment, both physical and non-physical harsh practices should be targeted by interventions. Our findings show that parents’ sense of competence mediates the effect of the interventions on parents’ use of harsh practices. Taken together, the results in this thesis show that negative parenting practices have changed over time; that parents’ use of coldness-rejection, angry outbursts, or bad reactions to disclosure, coupled with youths’ defiance lead to a pattern of mutually hostile interactions that are transferred by youths’ to other everyday life settings; and that parents’ use of physical and non-physical harshness can be reduced by interventions, and can partly be explained by parents’ sense of competence as caregivers. These findings have implications for both theory and practice.

Keywords: parenting, harsh parenting, parent-child relationships, youths’ adjustment.

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