




ADULT EVALUATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD  
DISCIPLINARY SITUATIONS

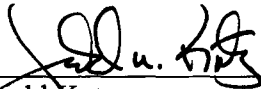
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ADULT EVALUATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD  
DISCIPLINARY SITUATIONS

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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ADULT EVALUATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD  
DISCIPLINARY SITUATIONS

Boun Marie Smith

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## VITA

Boun Marie Smith, daughter of Jackson Smith and Thelma Marie Covin Smith, was born in Weisbaden, Germany on January 26, 1974. She began attending Troy State University Montgomery in Montgomery, Alabama in 1990 after being exclusively home-educated. She received an Associates Degree in General Education in 1992 and went on to graduate with a Bachelor's of Science in Psychology in 1996. In 1998, she entered the Graduate School at Auburn University Montgomery.

THESIS ABSTRACT  
ADULT EVALUATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD  
DISCIPLINARY SITUATIONS

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Directed by Glen E. Ray

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This study examined the influence of contextual factors on adult evaluations of parent-child disciplinary situations. Of particular interest to the current study were the influence(s) of discipline type and the child's misbehavior. Thus students at a public university evaluated vignettes describing a child's transgression and the parental disciplinary response. Evaluations were assessed in terms of abusiveness, severity, effectiveness and deservedness. Results demonstrated that both the transgression type and discipline type had a significant effect on evaluations of both the severity and abusiveness of the discipline. Specifically, the mild discipline type was evaluated as least severe and abusive, the moderate discipline type more severe and abusive, and the severe type most severe and abusive. Additionally, an interaction was demonstrated between transgression type and discipline type. The more severe the precipitating transgression, the less severe and abusive the discipline was evaluated as being. This interaction was particularly pronounced in the moderate discipline condition. Analysis also demonstrated that the more severe the child's transgression, the more deserving of punishment that transgression was evaluated as being. Investigating the relationship between evaluations

of abusiveness and effectiveness revealed that for the moderate and severe discipline conditions, when the severity of the discipline was equivalent to the severity of the transgression a negative correlation was demonstrated. Results are discussed in terms of how the current research extends previous work in this area. Implications for clinicians and possible areas for future research are also discussed.

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## Adult Evaluations of Parent-Child

### Disciplinary Situations

Research over the last 40 years has convincingly shown that child maltreatment, whether psychological, physical, or sexual, has immediate and long-term negative effects on the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of the child (e.g., Higgin and McCabe, 1998; Malinosky-Rummell and Hansen, 1993). Empirical research on child abuse has usually focused on risk factors associated with abuse such as parental, child and socio-cultural characteristics. While these efforts have proven useful in identifying "at risk" populations, little research has been done defining what exactly constitutes "abuse." Without a clear definition, many abusive situations may go unrecognized and escape research and intervention efforts. The current study begins to address this issue of definition by investigating adult evaluations of potentially abusive situations involving physical discipline and the situational factors (e.g., specific children's transgressions) that may influence these evaluations. Investigating the influence(s) of these situational factors on adults' evaluations, will facilitate an understanding of how adults define a specific punishment as severe or abusive in one situation as opposed to being acceptable in another. What follows is a review of the literature on parent and child factors associated with abuse and a review of the limited work on evaluations of potentially abusive disciplinary situations.

#### History

Historically, children have been seen as property of their parents and, therefore, anything that parents saw fit to do was accepted by society including incest and even infanticide (deMause, 1998). Even after murder of children was no longer openly

accepted, beating of children was still accepted and even recommended by many churches and physicians. It is only in the last hundred years or so that loving, protective parenting has become the accepted ideal and child abuse has been recognized as a social problem. In fact, not until the second half of the twentieth century were laws passed in this country protecting young children from battery and neglect (deMause, 1998). In 1962, Kempe addressed the effects of child abuse on children's current and future development and coined the phrase "the battered child syndrome." This work raised awareness in professionals and the population in general that children who were beaten would grow up to be adults burdened by dysfunction (Cruise, Jacobs, & Lyons, 1994). Despite the recognition of child abuse as a significant social problem, children remain the only population in this country whom it is completely legal to hit.

#### Consequences and Correlates of Physical Abuse

Children who are physically abused suffer long-term consequences affecting their development in a number of important areas. Physical maltreatment has been correlated with such externalizing adjustment problems as delinquency and aggressive behavior (Higgin & McCabe, 1998). Inmates, and psychiatric patients who perpetrated violence against unrelated individuals, dates, spouses and their children were significantly more likely to have been abused than similar non-violent populations (Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993). Drug and alcohol abusers, both adolescent and adult, report higher rates of childhood physical abuse than the general population. Clinical populations with a history of abuse were more likely to have substance abuse problems than their non-abused counterparts. These findings are somewhat questionable, however, since rates of parental substance abuse were high in the populations studied and these effects were not

controlled for (Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993). Abused children often have dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and are less socially competent than individuals without any history of abuse. It is unclear, however, if this difference in competence is due to the actual physical abuse or to the underlying pattern of dysfunctional family relations found in families where abuse is present. Similar social problems have been found in children from families where parents are cold and unresponsive but not physically abusive (Lytton, 1997).

Physical abuse has also been associated with a variety of psychological problems. Females physically abused as children often react to abuse by developing codependent behaviors, while males tend to develop conduct disorders (Roehling, Koelbel & Rutgers, 1996). Both male and female adolescents with a history of abuse have higher rates of depression, withdrawal and somatization disorders than non-abused adolescents (Higgin & McCabe, 1998). Abuse has also been shown to correlate positively with paranoia, dissociation and even psychoticism (Malinowsky-Rummel & Hansen, 1993). In addition, male and female inpatients abused as children were more likely to be suicidal and engage in self-injurious behavior than were inpatients who were not abused. Female college students with a history of abuse also had more suicidal ideations and self-injurious behaviors than female college students with no history of abuse. It should be noted that when adolescents were studied, these long term negative effects could only be shown when both physical and sexual abuse were present. This finding may indicate that in the case of physical abuse, some of the long-term effects may be delayed.

In summary, it is apparent that child abuse has dramatic and long-lasting negative consequences for children, adolescents and adults. From disturbed interpersonal

relationships to drug abuse and severe psychiatric problems, abused children develop problems which seriously affect their quality of life. Not only do these problems affect the individuals themselves, but also the lives of those around them. These long-term negative effects of child abuse highlight the importance of examining risk factors that lead to abuse and the factors that affect evaluations of abuse in order to better direct research and intervention efforts.

### Risk Factors

The majority of research on child abuse has focused on risk factors that predispose individuals to abuse their children. Research (e.g., Belsky, 1993) indicates that individual factors such as gender, age, and personal abuse history may predispose certain parents to become abusive. For example, young mothers with a personal history of being abused are more likely to become abusive than older mothers with no such history. In addition, the age and temperament of the child also contributes to the overall risk of child abuse in any given parent-child relationship (Belsky, 1993). A child with a difficult temperament who is clingy, resistant to change and easily frustrated is at higher risk for being abused than a child with an easy temperament who is able to adapt quickly to new situations and who makes fewer demands on their parents. Finally, parents tend to react with different levels of disciplinary harshness to different types of child misbehavior. That is, parents are more likely to resort to physical punishment when the child's transgression involves the disrespect of the rights of others or aggression towards others (Holden, Coleman & Schmidt, 1994) or if a situation has escalated to a power struggle rather than in instances of simple non-compliance or violation of convention (Ritchie, 1999).

Of particular relevance to the current study is the parent's acceptance of harsh discipline. Rather than a distinct line between physical discipline and physical abuse there seems to be a continuum, at one end no amount of physical discipline appears acceptable, at the other end there is obviously abusive behavior and somewhere in the middle harsh discipline becomes unacceptable. Often what ends up as abusive parenting practices begins as physical discipline (Greenwald, Bank, Reid & Knutson, 1997). That is, inconsistent and ineffective punishment followed by non-compliance in the child leads to parental frustration, which often increases the use of physical coerciveness that can escalate into abuse. Parents who accept harsh and coercive punitive practices were more likely to cross the line and use apparently abusive punishment than were parents who accepted only moderate physical punishment or no physical punishment at all (Greenwald, et al., 1997). This relationship held up even when such factors as parental irritability, stress level and the behavior of the children were considered. In 1984, Bavolek cited perceived value of physical punishment as being the second most highly correlated factor to high risk parenting behind inappropriate expectations (Lutenbacher and Hall, 1998). That is, the more effective parents believed physical punishment to be the higher their risk for becoming abusive.

Another important risk factor of importance to the current study is the behavioral transgressions of the child. Approximately 66% of all situations that become abusive begin as simple discipline, meaning that physical abuse is often precipitated by misbehavior of some type on the part of the child (Belsky, 1993). As stated earlier, mothers of three-year-olds reported that physical punishment was most likely to occur when a child's transgressions involved restricting the rights of others or outright

aggression towards others. For example, mothers were more likely to spank their young children for hitting or stealing as opposed to either violations of conventional expectations (e.g., dressing oddly or not cleaning their room) or non-personally directed destructiveness such as breaking something (Holden, et al., 1994). As stated earlier, mothers were also more likely to resort to physical assertions of power and spanking if a certain instance of misbehavior had escalated from simple non-compliance to a power struggle. Physical coercion was more likely used at the end of a power struggle as opposed to the beginning, particularly if the child resorts to outright defiance or physical resistance (Ritchie, 1999). Taken together, these results indicate that for many parents, physical punishment was somewhat of a last resort for gaining control in a disciplinary situation.

Several studies (e.g., Belsky, 1993) have shown that the behavioral characteristics that are often identified as precipitating factors in abused children are in fact reactions to the abuse itself. As reviewed earlier, abuse often causes long-term behavioral problems that lead to escalating abuse by the parents. Belsky (1993) also showed that if the behavior of the child is determined primarily by parental report, the reports might be unreliable. That is, abusive mothers often reported their children as being more badly behaved than did objective observers. This difference in parental perceptions may be the result of inappropriate expectations of how the child should behave and/or lower tolerance levels on the part of abusive parents.



### Evaluations of Parent-Child Disciplinary Situations

The current legal definition of physical abuse utilized by social service and law enforcement agencies is extremely vague and open to interpretation. The Alabama Attorney General's office defines child physical abuse as "the act of inflicting injury or causing injury to result" and makes it clear that the act itself and not the degree of injury is the important factor. Thus, if you hit a child on the arm, this act is considered abusive whether the hit breaks the child's arm or leaves a bruise. This definition is interpreted in different ways by different professions depending on their particular point of view. For example, the legal profession must be concerned with being able to justify intervention. Police and attorneys may therefore require a harsher level of physical punishment be present to define a situation as physically abusive than mental health professionals whose main concern is mediating the harmful effects of physical abuse on the child (Cruise, et. al., 1994). This lack of continuity in definition can lead to a great deal of confusion. The current study attempts to determine what level of physically coercive discipline is considered abusive by doing a normative study of adult evaluations of disciplinary situations.

Little research has been done specifically focusing on what factors affect how an observer might perceive a specific disciplinary situation. Many of the same individual risk factors in abuse potential (e.g., gender and abuse history) may also play a role in whether adults perceive certain situations to be abusive or merely disciplinary. As reviewed above, an adult's acceptance of harsh physical disciplinary tactics is also a significant risk factor in parents' potential to become abusive. If this is the case, then it will be useful to study how adults differentiate between acceptable physical discipline and

physical abuse and to identify what factors affect their evaluations of parent-child disciplinary situations.

### Age

The age of the evaluator of a disciplinary situation has an effect on how a situation is interpreted. Young children are more tolerant of harsh physical discipline than adolescents and adults and they are also less likely to evaluate a situation as abusive (Cruise, et al., 1994). There are several proposed explanations for this age related difference in evaluations. It could be that young children are unable to thoroughly interpret unusual events and tend to focus on more direct cause and effect relationships without regard for intentions. Young children also may have a more difficult time verbally expressing their interpretations. Further, young children do not have enough social knowledge to compare their own personal experiences to social norms and therefore do not realize that abusive behavior is considered abnormal. Older children, who presumably had more real world experience, did evaluate abusive vignettes as more serious than their younger counterparts. Finally, young children tend to idealize their parents and may not be able to accept that the most important figure in their life is doing something unacceptable. Adolescents tend to evaluate disciplinary vignettes as more abusive than children and also more abusive than adults. This is most likely due, at least in part, to a lack of parental experience among the adolescents studied. Without parenting experience, adolescents may not be able to appreciate that some situations encountered by parents might call for physical punishment and they are therefore more likely to take a position of low tolerance to physical discipline (Cruise, et al., 1994).

## Gender

The gender of the parent involved, the target child, and the observer all seem to have a significant effect on the evaluation of physical discipline as being appropriate or abusive. In a study of how gender affects evaluations of physical discipline, adults were first asked to evaluate a list of disciplinary techniques (e.g., spanking) according to level of severity and abusiveness. Participants then evaluated child misbehaviors (e.g., stealing, hitting) according to deservedness of punishment. The disciplinary techniques and children's misbehaviors were then combined into vignettes in which the gender of both the parent and child were manipulated (Herzberger & Tennen, 1985). All of the misbehaviors used in the combined vignettes were specifically chosen because they were rated moderately deserving of punishment.

Results from Herzberger and Tennen (1985) indicated that adult female observers evaluated harsh physical discipline (e.g., hitting with a leather strap) as less acceptable than adult male observers, although males and females evaluated moderate physical punishment (e.g., spanking) equally. Female observers also evaluated physical discipline carried out by opposite sex parents as significantly less appropriate than discipline carried out by a parent who was the same gender as the child. Male observers evaluated discipline against girls less appropriate regardless of the gender of the parent. When the child being punished was a girl, evaluations of appropriateness of discipline went down and evaluations of severity of discipline went up. Even moderate physical punishment was more likely to be categorized as abusive when the child being punished was a girl, this relationship was particularly pronounced if the father was the one carrying out the discipline. Both male and female observers reported that physical discipline and abuse

reduced the occurrence of misbehavior in the child and both men and women reported that abuse was more likely to have a negative effect on the child's emotional development than moderate physical punishment.

In general, Herzberger and Tennen (1985) demonstrated that discipline carried out by the mother was evaluated as being more severe than discipline carried out by the father, although father-daughter disciplinary situations received low appropriateness ratings. This bias against maternal discipline is most likely due to the fact that mothers are expected to be warm and loving and when they become severely punitive they are seen as more cold and rejecting than fathers who are perceived as being more harsh to begin with. Mothers are seen as stepping outside of their maternal role when they become physically punitive while fathers are merely fulfilling their role as disciplinarian.

Interestingly, women are actually the most frequent perpetrators of abuse (Belsky, 1993). A likely explanation for this gender disparity is that women spend more hours per day as the primary caretaker of young children than do men. Thus, gender statistics may be a reflection of opportunity rather than gender specific predispositions to abuse. Fathers may, in fact be more likely to abuse young children when rates of opportunity are taken into consideration (Belsky, 1993). Merrill (1962) found that in families where spousal roles had been reversed and the father stayed at home with the children while the mother worked, the fathers often experienced frustration and anger which led to abuse (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972). In one study, participants recalled that their fathers used significantly higher levels of physical and psychological coercion than their mothers (Harvey, Gore, Frank and Batres, 1997).

### Personal Discipline History

Bower and Knutson (1996) reported that the personal discipline history of the observer and how the observer perceives that history can have a powerful impact on how they evaluate disciplinary situations. Less than half of adults classified as victims of abuse labeled themselves as such, even when they admitted to receiving injury from parental discipline. Therefore, it seems that apparently abusive and injurious discipline is not always labeled abusive by those who experience it (Bower & Knutson, 1996).

Adults classified as abused but who did not label themselves as such were significantly less likely to label disciplinary vignettes as abusive than adults with a history of abuse who admitted to being abused or adults who had no history of abuse (Bower & Knutson). Abused adults who did not label themselves as such were also more likely to consider even very severe discipline as appropriate when it was in response to childhood misbehavior. This trend was especially pronounced when the adult evaluators had experienced the specific disciplinary technique cited in the vignette (Bower & Knutson, 1996).

Not surprisingly, a history of abuse has been identified as a significant risk factor in abuse potential. Studies have shown the rate of intergenerational transmission of abusive parenting practices to be as high as 30% (Belsky, 1993). Parents who have a personal history of abuse but who do not become abusers themselves are more likely to clearly remember their abusive history and to retrospectively perceive it as abusive. This perception of their own abuse as abusive rather than justified helps them create a more cohesive view of the parent who abused them and also a more cohesive personal identity than those who were abused but deny the severity of it (Belsky, 1993).

### The Current Study

While most empirical research on child abuse has focused on individual risk factors specific to the child or parent, some researchers (e.g., Herzberger and Tennen, 1985) have studied factors that influence how observers evaluate discipline in terms of acceptable or abusive. These factors include age, gender, and personal abuse history of the evaluator, as well as the gender of the child and parent involved. The perceived justification of the punishment in relation to the specific misbehavior that provoked the discipline has also been mentioned as playing a role in evaluations of disciplinary situations (Bower & Knutson, 1996; Davis, 1991). While the relationship between the justification of harsh physical discipline and the evaluation of that discipline has been mentioned in some studies, it is only mentioned in the context of studying other factors (e.g., gender, abuse history) affecting a person's judgment of abusive parent-child situations.

The current study examined adult evaluations of potentially physically abusive situations as a function of the type of physical discipline used and the type of child transgression. Three physical discipline conditions were used in the study: mild, moderate, and severe. In addition, three types of children's transgressions were used, a mild, moderate, and severe condition. These discipline techniques and transgressions were combined into nine vignettes (see Table 1).

It was first hypothesized that evaluations of abusiveness of a particular discipline technique would vary as a function of which transgression type it was paired with. Specifically, the moderate discipline technique would be evaluated as abusive when it is paired with the mild transgression and evaluated as less abusive when paired with the moderate or severe transgressions. Further, the severe discipline technique would be

evaluated as more abusive when paired with the mild or moderate transgressions than when paired with the severe transgression.

Secondly, it was hypothesized that evaluations of the severity of a particular discipline technique would vary depending on which transgression it was paired with. Specifically, the mild discipline technique would be evaluated as less severe when paired with the moderate or severe transgression than when paired with the mild transgression. The moderate discipline would be evaluated as being more severe when paired with the mild transgression than when paired with the moderate or severe transgression. The severe discipline technique would be evaluated as more severe when paired with the mild or moderate transgression than when paired with the severe transgression.

Third, it was hypothesized that evaluations of deservedness of punishment would vary according to which transgression type was being evaluated regardless of the discipline condition. Specifically, the mild transgression type would be considered least deserving of punishment, followed by the moderate transgression type and the severe transgression type would be considered most deserving of punishment.

Fourth, based on previous research citing the perceived effectiveness of corporal punishment as an important risk factor for abusive behavior (e.g. Lutenbacher and Hall, 1998) it was predicted that there would be a negative relationship between perceived effectiveness and evaluations of abusiveness. That is, the more effective a particular discipline was rated, the less likely it would be to be rated as abusive.

Lastly, it was expected that the earlier findings of Herzberger and Tennen (1985) would be replicated and that female participants would evaluate the various disciplinary techniques more harshly than would male participants.

Table 1

Disciplinary Techniques

Mild

Moderate

Severe

Mild

<p>One child accidentally runs into another child, knocking him to the ground. The other boy's mother takes him gently by the arm and pulls him over to sit next to her on the bench.</p>	<p>One child accidentally runs into another child, knocking him to the ground. The other boy's mother spanks him on the buttocks with her bare hand.</p>	<p>One child accidentally runs into another child, knocking him to the ground. The other boy's mother slaps him across the face with the back of her hand.</p>
<p>One child pushes another child to the ground and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother takes him gently by the arm and pulls him over to sit next to her on the bench.</p>	<p>One child pushes another child to the ground and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother spanks him on the buttocks with her bare hand.</p>	<p>One child pushes another child to the ground and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother slaps him across the face with the back of her hand.</p>
<p>One child attacks another child, punches him, and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother takes him gently by the arm and pulls him over to sit next to her on the bench.</p>	<p>One child attacks another child, punches him, and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother spanks him on the buttocks with her bare hand.</p>	<p>One child attacks another child, punches him, and takes a ball from him. The other boy's mother slaps him across the face with the back of her hand.</p>

Children's Transgressions

Moderate

Severe



## Method

### Participants

Participants were 50 male and 89 female students from a public university in Montgomery, Alabama. Each participant read and signed a consent form (See Appendix A). The participant sample was composed of 71 freshmen, 32 sophomores, 19 juniors, 14 seniors and 2 graduate students. The mean age of the participants was 21 with a range from 18-45.

### Measures

Vignettes Nine parent-child disciplinary vignettes were constructed combining three different discipline techniques and three different child transgressions (see Appendix B). The three discipline techniques chosen for the current study varied from mild to moderate to severe. Previous research (e.g., Giovannoni and Beccera, 1979) has shown that spanking with a bare hand is consistently evaluated as a moderate discipline and slapping across the face is consistently evaluated as a harsh discipline. A third discipline technique of gently taking the child by the arm was also included as a technique of mild severity. Thus the current study used "gently taking the child by the arm" as a mild technique, "spanking with bare hand" as a moderate technique, and "slapping across the face" as a severe discipline technique.

The three child transgressions used focused on interpersonal violence because previous research has shown this to be the type of transgression to be most likely to lead to physical discipline (e.g., Holden, et al., 1994). The three transgressions were constructed to vary with regard to intent and severity of outcome. The mild transgression

involved the target child accidentally knocking another child to the ground. The moderate transgression involved the target child intentionally knocking another child to the ground in order to take possession of a toy. Finally, the severe transgression involved the target child attacking and punching another child, giving the other child a black eye. The nine completed vignettes included the nine possible combinations of the three discipline techniques and the three children's transgressions.

To control for parent and child gender, and age of the child, each vignette was written with a male target child receiving the discipline from his mother. Participants were told to assume that the target child was seven years old. Each vignette was constructed in such a manner as to put the participant in the position of an uninvolved observer witnessing a single incidence of parent-child interaction.

Questionnaires Each of the nine parent-child disciplinary vignettes was followed by its own six-item questionnaire (Appendix C). Participants were asked to evaluate each questionnaire item on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The first item asked participants to evaluate the severity of the transgression depicted in the vignette with 1 being not at all serious and 6 being extremely severe. This first question was a manipulation check, intended to determine if participants distinguished between the various transgressions. The second questionnaire item asked participants to rate the deservedness of punishment of the transgression with 1 being not at all deserving of punishment and 6 being highly deserving of punishment. The third item on the questionnaire asked the participants to rate the severity of the discipline depicted in the vignette with 1 being not at all severe and 6 being extremely severe. The fourth questionnaire item asked participants to evaluate the appropriateness of the discipline depicted in the vignette with 1 being not at

all appropriate and 6 being very appropriate. The fifth questionnaire item asked participants to predict the effectiveness of the discipline in the preceding vignette with 1 being not at all effective and 6 being very effective. After the fifth questionnaire item a Likert-type scale was printed on the questionnaire with no accompanying question. On the final page of the questionnaire participants were instructed to go back to each vignette and use this last scale to evaluate the abusiveness of the discipline depicted in the vignette with 1 being not at all abusive and 6 being very abusive.

### Procedure

Participants were presented with the vignettes and questionnaires in a group setting at either the beginning or end of a class period. Consent information was briefly explained and consent forms circulated at the beginning of the interview. Instructions were reviewed and any questions answered before participants were asked to complete the questionnaires. After signing consent forms, participants read and began to evaluate the nine written vignettes and questionnaires. Participants were told to consider each vignette as a separate, isolated incident of parent-child interaction unrelated to the other vignettes. To control for sequencing effects order of presentation of the parent-child disciplinary vignettes were partially counterbalanced across participants.

## Results

The current study included gender of observer as a between-participants variable and transgression type and discipline type as within-participants variables. For hypothesis one, investigating evaluations of abusiveness as a function of type of discipline and type of transgression, a 3(Type of discipline) x 3(Type of transgression) repeated measures factorial ANOVA was conducted. Similarly, for hypothesis two, investigating evaluations of severity of discipline type as a function of type of discipline and type of transgression, a 3(Type of discipline) x 3(Type of transgression) repeated measures factorial ANOVA was conducted.

For hypothesis three, investigating evaluations of deservedness of punishment as a function of type of transgression evaluated, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. For hypothesis four, investigating the relationship between perceived effectiveness of discipline and evaluations of abusiveness, a series of Pearson correlations were conducted.

Lastly, for hypothesis five, predicting that females would evaluate disciplinary techniques as more severe and abusive than males, two independent t-tests were performed, one for severity and one for abusiveness.

For all analyses, follow-up tests to statistically significant interactions were conducted as tests for simple effects followed by Newman-Keuls post hoc tests ( $p < .05$ ) to determine sources of differences where appropriate.

### Manipulation Checks

Transgression Type. To ensure that the three transgression types were evaluated as significantly different from each other regardless of the discipline it was paired with, a

one-way ANOVA was conducted with transgression type as an independent variable and severity of transgression ratings as a dependent variable. This analysis revealed a transgression type main effect,  $F(1, 138)=5619.54$   $p<.001$ . The severe transgression type was evaluated as most severe ( $M=5.58$ ,  $SD=.66$ ), followed by the moderate transgression type ( $M=4.0$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ), which was, in turn, evaluated as more severe than the mild transgression type ( $M=1.50$ ,  $SD=.76$ ).

Discipline Type. To ensure that the three discipline types were evaluated as significantly different from each other regardless of the transgression it was paired with, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with discipline type as an independent variable and severity of discipline ratings as a dependent variable. This analysis revealed a discipline type main effect,  $F(1, 137)=4915.88$   $p<.001$ . The severe discipline type was evaluated as most severe ( $M=5.46$ ,  $SD=.88$ ), followed by the moderate discipline type ( $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ), which was, in turn, evaluated as more severe than the mild discipline type ( $M=1.91$ ,  $SD=.88$ ).

#### Individual Hypotheses Analysis

Hypothesis One: Evaluations of Abusiveness as a Function of Discipline Type and Transgression Type. The results support hypothesis one, which predicted that evaluations of abusiveness would vary as a function of discipline type and transgression type. Analysis revealed a statistically significant Transgression type x Discipline type interaction,  $F(4, 536)=19.87$ ,  $p<.001$ .

As shown in Figure 1, regardless of the transgression type, participants evaluated the severe discipline type as most abusive, followed by the moderate discipline type which was in turn, evaluated as more abusive than the mild discipline type. Within the mild

discipline type, no significant differences emerged in abusiveness evaluations between the three transgression types. Within the moderate discipline type, evaluations of abusiveness were highest when paired with the mild transgression, lower when paired with the moderate transgression and lowest when paired with the severe transgression. Within the severe discipline type, evaluations of abusiveness were highest when paired with the mild transgression type compared to evaluations when paired with either the moderate or severe transgressions which did not differ (See Table 2 for means and standard deviations.)

Figure One: mean abusiveness ratings

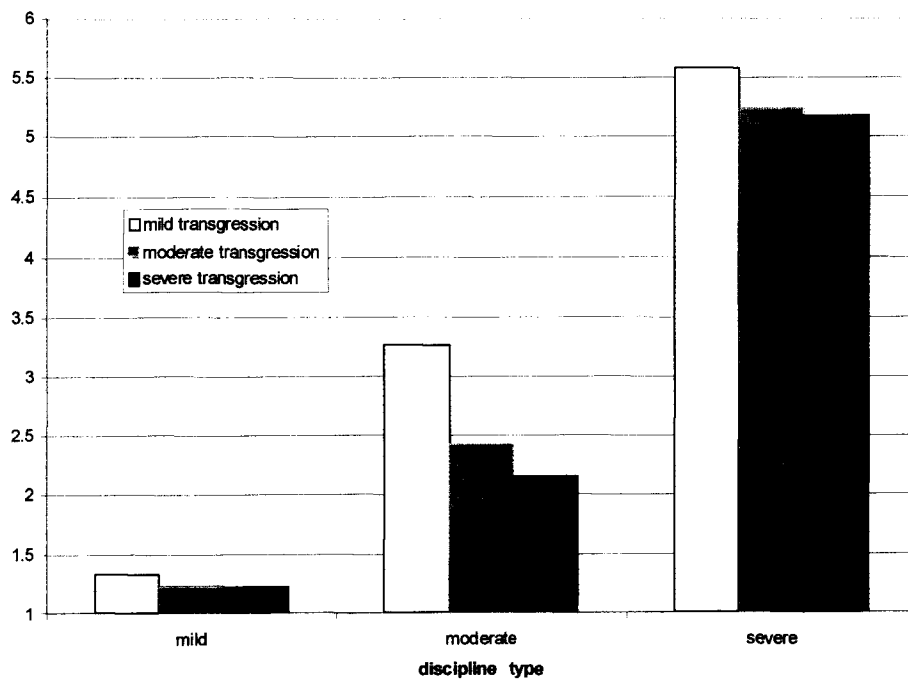


Table 2: Evaluations of Abusiveness	M	SD
<u>Mild Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Mild Discipline	1.33	(.88)
Moderate Transgression/Mild Discipline	1.23	(.72)
Severe Transgression/Mild Discipline	1.22	(.74)
<u>Moderate Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Moderate Discipline	3.26	(1.66)
Moderate Transgression/Moderate Discipline	2.42	(1.38)
Severe Transgression/Moderate Discipline	2.14	(1.20)
<u>Severe Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.58	(.94)
Moderate Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.24	(1.1)
Severe Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.17	(1.16)

In general, evaluations of abusiveness depend on contextual factors like the type of transgression and the type of discipline being administered. When the severity of the transgression was equivalent to or exceeded the severity of the discipline which it was paired with (i.e. moderate transgression/moderate discipline or severe transgression/moderate discipline) the discipline was evaluated as less abusive than when the severity of the discipline significantly exceeded the severity of the transgression (i.e. mild transgression/moderate discipline).

Hypothesis Two: Evaluations of Severity of Discipline Type as a Function of Discipline Type and Transgression Type. The results support hypothesis two, which predicted that evaluations of the severity of a particular discipline type would vary as a function of the discipline type and the transgression type it was paired with. Analysis revealed a statistically significant Transgression type x Discipline type interaction  $F(4, 548)=3.70$   $p<.01$  (see Figure 2).

Within the mild discipline type, evaluations of severity when paired with either the mild or moderate transgressions did not differ from each other but were evaluated as

more severe than evaluations when paired with the severe transgression. Within the moderate discipline type, evaluations of the severity of the discipline were highest when paired with the mild transgression compared to evaluations of severity when the discipline was paired with either the moderate or severe transgressions which did not differ. Within the severe discipline condition, no significant differences emerged (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations).

**Figure 2: mean discipline severity ratings**

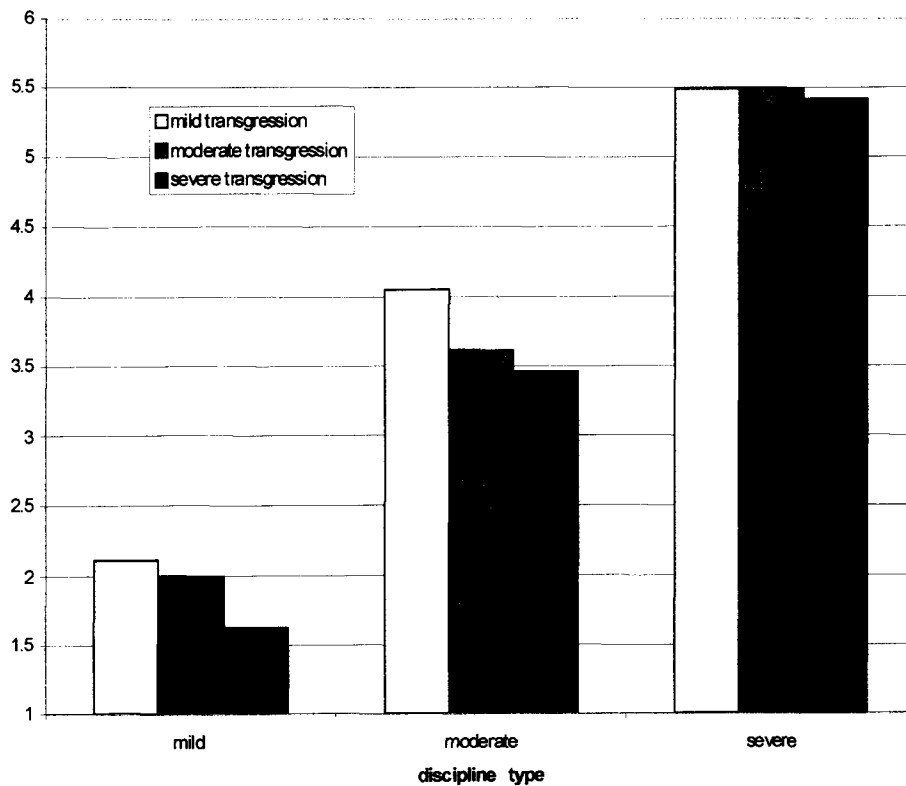




Table 3: Evaluations of Severity	M	SD
<u>Mild Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Mild Discipline	2.11	(1.38)
Moderate Transgression/Mild Discipline	2.00	(1.15)
Severe Transgression/Mild Discipline	1.62	(1.14)
<u>Moderate Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Moderate Discipline	4.05	(1.46)
Moderate Transgression/Moderate Discipline	3.61	(1.36)
Severe Transgression/Moderate Discipline	3.46	(1.50)
<u>Severe Discipline</u>		
Mild Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.49	(1.15)
Moderate Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.49	(0.95)
Severe Transgression/Severe Discipline	5.41	(1.08)

These findings reveal that evaluations of the severity of a particular discipline type vary as a function of the type of discipline and the type of transgression which precedes it. In the mild discipline type, the more severe the precipitating misbehavior, the less severe the discipline is evaluated. In the moderate discipline condition, the less severe the preceding transgression, the more severely the discipline is evaluated.

Hypothesis Three: Evaluations of Deservedness of Punishment as a Function of Transgression Type. The results support the third hypothesis which predicted that evaluations of deservedness of punishment would vary as a function of transgression type, regardless of the discipline type it was paired with,  $F(2, 276)=746.19$   $p<.001$ . The severe transgression was evaluated as most deserving of discipline ( $M=5.42$ ,  $SD=.93$ ) followed by the moderate transgression ( $M=4.33$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) which was, in turn, evaluated as more deserving of discipline than the mild transgression ( $M=1.62$ ,  $SD=.80$ ).

Hypothesis Four: Relationship Between Evaluations of Effectiveness of Discipline and Evaluations of Abusiveness of Discipline. The results partially support this hypothesis, which predicted a negative correlation between evaluations of the effectiveness of a

particular discipline and the evaluations of the abusiveness of that discipline. A statistically significant negative correlation was found in the moderate transgression/moderate discipline condition,  $r(135)=-.38$ ,  $p<.001$  and the severe transgression/severe discipline condition,  $r(135)=-.22$ ,  $p<.02$ .

Hypothesis Five: Evaluations of Severity and Abusiveness of Discipline as a Function of Gender. Analysis did not support the fifth hypothesis, predicting females to evaluate discipline types as more severe and abusive than males. No significant differences were found in evaluations of severity or abusiveness of any of the discipline types. The current study was therefore unable to replicate the results found earlier by Herzberger and Tennen (1985).

## Discussion

Since the 1960's, child abuse has been the subject of a great deal of research, mostly focusing on the risk factors and the long-term consequences suffered by the victims. Some research has studied how individuals evaluate the abusiveness of disciplinary situations and the individual factors such as age and gender that influence these evaluations (e.g., Cruise, et al., 1994; Herzberger and Tennen, 1985.) Very little research, however, has been done investigating how specific situational factors (e.g. the precipitating transgression) affect evaluations of the abusiveness of a disciplinary situation. Since research has shown that most abuse begins as discipline (e.g., Greenwald et al., 1997), and since discipline is the reaction to a transgression, it seems unrealistic to ask individuals to evaluate the abusiveness of a discipline in isolation of the precipitating transgression.

The current study was designed to investigate the influence of transgression type and discipline type on evaluations of the severity and abusiveness of a particular discipline type. By understanding how situations are evaluated in their entirety rather than isolating disciplinary techniques or ignoring the possible effects of the precipitating transgression, the current study examined factors affecting how individuals evaluate discipline.

Previous research has shown that an individual's opinion of corporal punishment is a risk factor for abusive behavior (e.g., Lutenbacher and Hall, 1998) so an understanding of how individuals form those opinions is important to understanding that risk factor.

The first prediction that evaluations of abusiveness would vary as a function of the type of discipline and the type of transgression was supported. Previous research has

demonstrated that spanking a child on the buttocks with a bare hand is evaluated as a moderate discipline and is evaluated as only moderately abusive (Giovannoni and Beccera, 1979). Slapping a child across the face has previously been consistently evaluated as a severe discipline technique with relatively high evaluations of abusiveness. The effect of the interaction between a given discipline technique and the precipitating transgression on evaluations of abusiveness of the discipline technique has not been the subject of much research.

This interaction does, however seem to have a significant effect on evaluations of abusiveness of moderate and severe discipline types. Even abusiveness evaluations of the severe discipline type (slapping a child across the face), which was evaluated above 5.1 on a 6 point scale in all vignettes, were significantly affected by the precipitating transgression type. When paired with either the moderate or severe transgression, evaluations of abusiveness were significantly lower than evaluations when paired with the mild transgression type. Abusiveness evaluations of the moderate discipline technique were even more sensitive to the effects of the precipitating transgression. Significant differences were found between all three different transgression pairings.

This interaction effect indicates that the more severe the discipline is in relation to the preceding transgression, the more abusive that discipline is evaluated as being. If the severity of the discipline is significantly greater than the severity of the transgression then it is seen as being more abusive than the same discipline when the severity is closer to being equivalent to the severity of the precipitating transgression.

Additional analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between evaluations of deservedness of punishment and evaluations of abusiveness in six of the nine vignettes.

That is, in most cases, the more deserving of punishment a transgression is, the less abusive the discipline is evaluated as being. As shown below in the discussion of hypothesis three, it was also found that, regardless of discipline, the mild transgression type was always evaluated as less deserving of punishment than the moderate transgression type which was always evaluated as less deserving of discipline than the severe transgression type.

It seems then that when evaluating the abusiveness of a particular discipline type, individuals take into account the severity of the precipitating transgression and how deserving of punishment they perceive that transgression to be. This seems particularly true when the moderate disciplinary technique of spanking is evaluated. Within the moderate discipline type, significant differences were found between all three transgression pairings and significant negative correlations were found between deservedness and abusiveness in all three transgression pairings.

The second hypothesis predicting that evaluations of severity of a discipline type would vary as a function of discipline type and transgression type was also supported by the results of the current study. As with evaluations of abusiveness, the effect of the interaction of discipline type and transgression type and evaluations of severity of a discipline type has not been the subject of very much previous research.

The current study shows that for the mild discipline type, evaluations of severity were significantly lower when it was paired with the severe transgression as compared to when it was paired with either the mild or moderate transgressions. Within the moderate discipline type, evaluations of severity of the discipline were significantly higher when it was paired with the mild transgression than when paired with either the moderate or

severe transgressions which did not differ from each other.

These findings seem to indicate that the more severe the discipline is relative to precipitating transgression the more severe that discipline is evaluated as being. While this interaction effect is not as pronounced for severity evaluations as it is for abusiveness evaluations, the effect is similar.

As stated earlier, the third hypothesis, predicting that evaluations of deservedness of discipline would vary as a function of transgression type regardless of discipline type was fully supported in the current study. The mild transgression type was evaluated as least deserving of discipline, the moderate transgression more deserving and the severe transgression was evaluated as most deserving of discipline. Therefore, when evaluating discipline in terms of “how justified” it is, observers consider the kind or degree of infraction, that is, the more severe the transgression the more deserving of discipline that transgression is evaluated as being.

The fourth hypothesis, predicting a negative correlation between evaluations of effectiveness of discipline and abusiveness of discipline was only partially supported. There was a negative correlation in the moderate transgression/moderate discipline and severe transgression/severe discipline vignettes. Therefore, for the moderate and severe discipline types, when the discipline was matched with the transgression type, the more effective the discipline was evaluated as being and the less abusive it was evaluated as being. This finding may help explain earlier research demonstrating that the more adults value corporal punishment the more at risk they are for becoming abusive themselves. Although the current research is correlational, it implies a relationship between perceived effectiveness of a discipline and lower evaluations of the abusiveness of that discipline

which may mean a greater likelihood of using that discipline. One reason why a similar correlation was not found in the mild transgression/mild discipline vignette, the other evenly matched scenario, is that evaluations of abusiveness were extremely low in all vignettes using the mild discipline type.

The fifth hypothesis, predicting that women would evaluate each discipline type as more severe and abusive than men was not supported. Although past research (Herzberger and Tennen, 1985) demonstrated that women evaluated moderate discipline as being more abusive than men, the current study did not support this finding. Similar populations were used for the current study as were used in the earlier study and the sample size of the current study was slightly larger than that of the Herzberger and Tennen study. It is possible that this larger sample size affected the results, or that over the last 15 years or so gender differences in evaluations of disciplinary situations have significantly lessened.

The current study investigated the effect of specific situational factors (e.g. child's transgression) on evaluations of abusiveness and severity of disciplinary situations involving physical discipline. While previous research (e.g., Cruise, et al., 1994; Bower and Knutson, 1996) has focused on how individual factors such as age and personal discipline history effect evaluations of discipline, contextual factors have been largely overlooked. Since research shows that up to 66% of physical child abuse begins as a disciplinary reaction to a child's misbehavior (Greenwald et al., 1997), it seems logical to study how individuals perceive disciplinary scenarios in context rather than having them evaluate discipline as if it occurred in isolation of other situational factors. The current study indicates that situational factors such as the behavior of the child did have a

significant effect on how abusive and severe a particular discipline type was perceived as being. Particularly when evaluating moderate discipline (e.g. spanking with a bare hand) the more severe and deserving of punishment the precipitating transgression of the child, the less abusive the discipline is evaluated as being. Similarly, the more severe the child's initial transgression the, less severe the discipline is evaluated as being, particularly in the moderate discipline type. This indicates that justification of the discipline is a factor in evaluating the abusiveness of disciplinary technique and that this justification is determined by considering the situation as a whole rather than just the discipline itself.

Limitations of the current study include the fact that only hypothetical scenarios were used. Evaluations may differ in real world situations when individuals actually witness disciplinary situations. Also, participants were forced to respond to limited choice questionnaires rather than open questions. Answers may have differed qualitatively had participants been able to respond more freely and thoroughly. The current study also focused on mother-son disciplinary situations. Previous research has indicated that the gender of the disciplining parent and the target child can have a significant effect on evaluations of abusiveness. Each of the vignettes written for the current study portrayed the target child's transgression in the area of interpersonal violence. This particular type of transgression was chosen because previous research has shown this to be the type of transgression most likely to elicit physical discipline from a parent (Holden, et. al., 1994). Evaluations would probably differ if different types of children's transgressions were studied. Finally, the participants of the current study were of a limited age range and very few had children. Previous research has shown that age has a significant effect on



evaluations of discipline and one proposed explanation for some of these differences is parental experience or lack thereof.

How adults evaluate parent-child disciplinary situations has received scant attention. The current study has produced some intriguing results that suggest areas for future research. It would be interesting to see if evaluations varied with age of evaluator or even the age of the target child which was a variable kept constant in the current study. Future research could also be done to investigate if evaluations of abusiveness of a particular discipline type vary as a function of not only the severity of the child's transgression but also the type of transgression (for example, violation of social convention or violation of personal rights such as theft as opposed to interpersonal violence). It will also be interesting to study the effect of varying the gender of the parent and or child in the vignettes to see if that part of the Herzberger and Tennnen study could be replicated.

In conclusion, the current study convincingly demonstrated the importance of considering contextual factors on adult evaluations of parental discipline. Specifically, when evaluating discipline in terms of abusiveness and severity, observers made use of important situational information (e.g., type of discipline and type of transgression) in making judgments. Clinicians and professionals concerned with child welfare and in the areas of child discipline and abuse can use the results of this study to better understand how adults evaluate discipline. It indicates that the abusiveness of moderate discipline is best determined on a case by case basis considering the justification of the discipline for the precipitating transgression. Future research may bring an even greater understanding of this largely unresearched topic.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

You are being invited to participate in a project looking at how adults evaluate parent-child disciplinary situations. The knowledge gained from this project will be of use to researchers and social service workers concerned with understanding parent-child disciplinary situations. If you decide to participate, you will be presented with a series of short hypothetical stories and will answer some questions based on your opinion of these stories. You will be able to complete the survey in your classroom. The entire survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants' names will not be used and no individuals will be identified. Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Auburn University at Montgomery. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at anytime without penalty. If you have additional questions we will be happy to answer them for you. Thank you for your help.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE, HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

Boun M. Smith 409-0165

Dr. Glen E. Ray 244-3690

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Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Parent-Child Disciplinary Vignettes

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### 1. (mild transgression/mild discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy accidentally run into another child, knocking him to the ground. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother take him gently by the arm and pull him over to sit next to her on the bench.

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### 2. (moderate transgression/mild discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy push another child to the ground and take the ball from him. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother take him gently by the arm and pull him over to sit next to her on the bench.

---

### 3. (Severe transgression/mild discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy attack another child, punching the other child and giving him a black eye and taking the ball from him. Then you see the other young boy's mother take him gently by the arm and pull him over to sit next to her on the bench.

---

### 4. (mild transgression/moderate discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy accidentally run into another child, knocking the other child to the ground. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother spank him on the buttocks with her hand.

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### 5. (moderate transgression/moderate discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy push another child to the ground and take the ball from him. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother spank him on the buttocks with her hand.

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### 6. (severe transgression/moderate discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy attack another child, punching the other child and giving him a black eye and taking the ball from him. Then you see the other young boy's mother spank him on the buttocks with her hand.

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7. (mild transgression/severe discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy accidentally run into another child, knocking the other child to the ground. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother slap him across the face with the back of her hand.

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8. (moderate transgression/severe discipline)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy push another child to the ground and take the ball from him. The child who was knocked to the ground gets up and is apparently unharmed. Then you see the other young boy's mother take him gently by the arm and pull him over to sit on the bench next to her.

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9. (severe transgression/severe transgression)

As you are walking through the park one day, you see a group of children playing ball. You see one young boy attack another child, punching the other child and giving him a black eye and taking the ball from him. Then you see the other young boy's mother spank him on the buttocks with her hand.

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## Appendix C: Questionnaires

**Instructions:** Read each of the following scenarios very carefully. The child you will read about in each scenario is a seven-year-old boy. After reading each scenario, answer the questions that follow. Evaluate each scenario independently. That is, these different scenarios are unrelated, so evaluate each scenario by itself as if it were the only scenario you evaluate. For the questionnaires, you will circle a number ranging from 1 to 6, with 1=lowest and 6=highest. If you feel that you need to reread a particular scenario please do so, but only evaluate one scenario at a time. Before turning in your packets, please be sure to read and follow the instructions on the last page.

---

How severe was the child's misbehavior?

1      2      3      4      5      6

Not at all severe

very severe

How deserving is the child of discipline for this misbehavior?

1      2      3      4      5      6

Not at all deserving

very deserving

How severe is the discipline used?

1      2      3      4      5      6

Not at all severe

very severe

How appropriate is the discipline used?

1      2      3      4      5      6

Not at all appropriate

very appropriate

How effective do you think this discipline is in this situation?

1      2      3      4      5      6

Not at all effective

very effective

---

1      2      3      4      5      6

---

Now that you have evaluated each of the scenarios, please go back and review each scenario. At the end of each of the questionnaire pages you will notice that there is a scale that does not have a corresponding question. Please use this scale to answer the following question: How abusive do you think this discipline is in this situation? 1 = Not at all abusive, 6 = Very abusive. It is fine if you need to re-read the scenarios to answer the question. Please answer this last question on each page.