The use of parental authority (disciplinary practices) in children’s lives is an often-debated issue. In what manner that authority should be exercised, how often it should be exercised, in what contexts it should be exercised, and whether or not it should be exercised have been discussed at great length and with considerable conviction (Buri, 1991; Holden, 2002). In the year 2001 alone, the controversy was reflected in more than 50 articles published in North American newspapers and magazines. The issue of whether parents should use corporal punishment with their children is unique in that it polarizes respected psychologists who are also united in their goal of promoting children’s well-being (Gershoff, 2002a).

“Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child’s behavior” (Straus, 1994; p. 597).

Corporal punishment has been an integral part of how parents discipline their children throughout the history of the United States, and has been a focus of psychological research for decades (Greven, 1990). Ringwalt, Browne, Rosenbloom, Evans, and Kotch (1989) measured mother’s approval of corporal punishment by means of the “Belief in the Value of Corporal Punishment” subscale from the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984). They found that the more punishment children received related to a higher approval of corporal punishment. However, Ringwalt et al. (1989) did not test males’ approval of corporal punishment.

Over the course of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the notion of the intergenerational transmission of a pattern of abuse has been supported by numerous clinical and empirical investigations (Carroll, 1977; Freedman, 1975; Oliver & Taylor, 1971; Silver, Dublin & Lourie, 1969). Research in the area of parenting has been extensive; however, research looking at the continuation of less effective parenting has been limited. Despite the research in the late 1960’s and throughout the 1970’s, additional research is needed to more completely understand the transmission. A thorough understanding of whether and how corporal punishment affects children has not been reached (Gershoff, 2002b).

A number of investigators have identified meaningful relationships among mothers’ childhood his-

Intergenerational Factors Related to Belief in Corporal Punishment

Previous research indicates that the degree to which people were punished as children by either parent was a very important determinant of their current approval of corporal punishment (Ringwalt, Browne, Rosenbloom, Evans, & Kotch, 1989). This study was conducted to address people’s child rearing attitudes early in their adult life and to determine if there are additional factors that affect approval of corporal punishment. Two hundred and nine undergraduate students were recruited to participate. Consistent with previous studies, participants raised by authoritarian parents had more favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment. The best predictor of a belief in corporal punishment was found to be lack of empathy for children’s needs.
Looking at the attitudes and information that are carried over from generation to generation may help to break the cycle of abuse that continues today (Egeland et al., 1988).

There is a disagreement as to whether or not corporal punishment is passed from generation to generation. One study found a tendency toward intergenerational transmission of aggression in close relationships due to a strong tendency for parents who were corporally punished to continue the practice with their own children (Fry, 1993). However, according to Bluestone and Tamis-LeMonda (1999), parenting is determined by multiple factors in the broader social context and the characteristics of the child. Because adult behavior is determined by more than one factor, a number of researchers have cautioned that the methodologies of many intergenerational violence studies are faulty. They point out that most abused children do not grow up to become child abusers and that many abusive parents were not abused as children (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

The current study will examine the three parenting styles: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative (Baumrind, 1971). The authoritarian parenting style is characterized as demanding (with rules and punishment) but unresponsive to children’s needs. The permissive parenting style can be characterized as either indulgent (warm, accepting, responsive; but few rules) or indifferent (unresponsive and uncontrolled). The authoritative parenting style falls somewhere between the extremes, and can be described as warm, responsive, and involved with children. Neal and Frick-Horbury (2001) examined the idea that parental behavior characteristics of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles seem to parallel the parental behavior connected with secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles. Secure attachment is seen when children explore while the parent is there, show distress when the parent leaves, and beam with delight when the parent returns. Insecure attachment can be either avoidant or ambivalent. Both forms of insecure attachment are seen by indifferent and detached emotional relationships.

The present study was designed to assess the effect of the parenting style on current attitudes about parenting. This study examined parenting styles experienced, but also lack of empathy for children’s needs, inappropriate development expectation, and reverse parent-child roles (having expectations that the child should take care of the parent) as determinants of a belief in corporal punishment. The current study tested how participants’ experiences of their parents’ child rearing can influence attitudes about discipline.

How are people’s attitudes about parenting learned? Will abusers’ children continue the cycle of...
abuse? A correlation between Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) scores and Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI) scores will be examined. The specific hypotheses are as follows: Participants who rate their parents high on the authoritarian subscale will have favorable attitudes related to using corporal punishment with their own children. Participants who rate their parents high on the authoritative subscale will have favorable attitudes related to using non-violent discipline with their own children. Participants who rate their parents high on the permissive subscale will have favorable attitudes related to reverse parent-child roles as well as lack of empathy for children’s needs with their own children.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 212 undergraduate students recruited from the General Psychology classes at a small, public, Midwestern university. Students participated in this study as one possible way to fulfill course requirements. Three participants’ questionnaires were not completed within the 20-minute time limit and were omitted from the analysis of the data. The resulting number of questionnaires used in statistical analyses was 209. The mean age of the participants was 19.27 years (SD = 1.71 years). Of the participants, 116 were men and 93 were women. Five participants had children. Ninety percent of the participants were Caucasian. All students read a written consent form, and turning in their questionnaires served as implied consent for participation. Participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the APA.

**Materials**

The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) and the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI; Bavolek, 1984) were used to measure participants’ parenting experiences and attitudes. The Parental Authority Questionnaire was revised with “mother” replaced by “parent.” The PAQ contains 30 questions and has been tested previously. It reliably measures a person’s recollection of their parents’ use of parental authority and has been validated with fairly good construct validity. Authoritative parental authority was correlated with nurturance ($r = .56, p < .0005$), authoritarian parental authority was inversely related to nurturance ($r = -.36, p < .0005$), and permissive parental authority was unrelated to nurturance ($r = .04, p > .10$). It has been demonstrated that the PAQ was not vulnerable to social desirability response biases (Buri, 1991). An example of one question from the revised (“mother” replaced with “parent”) PAQ is: “As I was growing up my parents would get very upset if I tried to disagree with them.” The PAQ score is divided into three subscales: permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative. Responses to each item were made on a 5-point Likert scale. Scores on each of the subscales can range from 10 to 50; the higher the score, the greater the appraised level.

The AAPI contains 32 questions and has been tested previously. It reliably measures parenting (child rearing) strengths and weaknesses. Responses to each item were made on a 5-point Likert scale. The AAPI has been validated and it has excellent construct validity based on expert judgments and construct validity data (Bavolek, 1984). An example of one question from the AAPI is: “Children are more likely to learn appropriate behavior when they are spanked for misbehaving.” The AAPI score is divided into four sub-scores: inappropriate development expectations (unrealistic ideas about children’s growth), lack of empathy toward children’s needs (view that caring for children’s needs will spoil them), belief in the use of corporal punishment (feeling children need physical punishment to learn), and reversing parent-child roles (having expectations that the child should take care of the parent). Scores on each of the subscales can range from 8 to 40; the lower the score, the greater the appraised level.

Participants were also required to complete a demographic information sheet which asked for the

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Subscale Scores for the Parental Authority Questionnaire and the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PAQ</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Permissive Parental Authority</td>
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<td>Authoritarian Parental Authority</td>
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<td>Authoritative Parental Authority</td>
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<td><strong>AAPI</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Developmental Expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Empathy for Children’s Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in Corporal Punishment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reverse Parent-Child Roles</td>
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participants’ gender, age, race, university standing, academic major, and academic minor. The demographic sheet also asked if participants had children, if participants could be any age again what would it be, and one specific question was: “If you had the opportunity to be a child again, would you take it?” This question was intended as a measure of participants’ attitudes about their childhood. Attitudes about parenting should conjure up recollections, good or bad, of past experiences with parenting styles.

**Design and Procedure**

This was a correlational study. The PAQ was always completed prior to the AAPI because parental attitudes may have influenced the participants’ memory and biased their responses on the AAPI. The ordering was intended to help limit bias in the responses. Participants were tested in classroom-type settings in groups ranging in size from 10 to 40 participants.

All participants were instructed that the study involved the completion of two questionnaires, and that the questionnaires asked about their experiences and attitudes with respect to parenting. They were instructed to answer all questions truthfully and in a timely manner. After listening to (and reading) the informed consent, all participants completed the set of surveys. This was followed on all occasions with a written debriefing. The total testing time was approximately 25 minutes.

**Results**

The mean scores and standard deviations for the three Parental Authority Questionnaire subscales and the four Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory subscales are presented in Table 1.

In order to determine if there were significant correlations among subscales, bivariate correlation analyses were conducted. The correlations between the three Parental Authority Questionnaire subscales and the four Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory subscales are presented in Table 2.

Authoritarian parental authority scores were significantly negatively correlated with lack of empathy for needs scores ($p < .01$), belief in corporal punishment scores ($p < .01$), and reverse parent-child roles scores ($p < .05$). Lower scores on the AAPI (empathy, punishment, reverse roles, and expectations) represent a greater appraised level of that parenting aspect. If persons were raised by an authoritarian parent, they are more likely to have lack of empathy for needs, belief in corporal punishment, and reverse parent-child ideals. Authoritarian parental authority scores were not correlated with inappropriate development expectations scores.

Authoritative parental authority scores and reverse parent-child roles scores were significantly negatively correlated ($p < .01$). If persons were raised by an authoritative parent, they are more likely to have reverse par-

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**Table 2**

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<tr>
<td>Permissive Parental Authority</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian Parental Authority</td>
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<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authoritative Parental Authority</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Developmental Expectations</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Empathy for Children’s Needs</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in Corporal Punishment</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.34**</td>
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*Note. * indicates <.05, ** indicates <.01*
ent-child ideals. Authoritative authority scores were not correlated with inappropriate development expectations scores, lack of empathy for needs scores, or belief in corporal punishment scores.

Permissive parental authority scores were significantly negatively correlated with inappropriate development expectations scores ($p < .01$) and lack of empathy for needs scores ($p < .01$). The permissive parenting style scores were not significantly linked to belief in corporal punishment scores or reverse parent-child roles.

A linear regression analysis was performed with the AAPI Belief in Corporal Punishment subscale used as the criteria variable. Lack of empathy for needs, permissive parental authority, authoritarian parental authority, and inappropriate development expectations were used as predictors of belief in corporal punishment and the result was significant. The adjusted R-squared resulting from this analysis was .40 indicating that approximately 40% of the variance in belief in corporal punishment is explainable by the predictor variables. The linear regression analysis showed that lack of empathy for needs was the strongest significant predictor of belief in corporal punishment ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$). Permissive parental authority ($\beta = .14$, $p = .03$), authoritarian parental authority ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .02$), and inappropriate development expectations ($\beta = .21$, $p = .01$) were all significant predictors of belief in corporal punishment.

An independent samples $t$ test was conducted to determine the effects of participants’ attitude about being a child again. Participants were divided based on responses to the question: “If you had the opportunity to be a child again, would you take it?” This resulted in 138 participants responding yes and 71 participants responding no. There was a significant difference in the scores on the AAPI lack of empathy toward children’s needs between people who desired to be a child again, and those who did not ($p < .02$). People who did not desire to be a child again were found to have a higher lack of empathy score.

Consistent with previous findings on the PAQ, permissive parental authority was negatively correlated with authoritarian parental authority but was not correlated with authoritative parental authority. Authoritative parental authority and authoritarian parental authority were negatively correlated.

Consistent with previous findings on the AAPI, inappropriate development expectations were positively correlated with lack of empathy for needs, belief in corporal punishment, and reverse parent-child roles. Lack of empathy for needs was positively correlated with belief in corporal punishment and reverse parent-child roles. Belief in corporal punishment and reverse parent-child roles were positively correlated.

**Discussion**

As predicted, participants who rated their parents high on the authoritarian subscale had more favorable attitudes related to using corporal punishment with their own children. Further, if someone rated their parents high on the authoritative scale (PAQ), they were likely to have reverse roles and lack of empathy. These results lend themselves to the idea that authoritative parental authority is about rules and punishment, with limited regard for the child’s needs.

The hypothesis that participants who rated their parents high on the authoritative subscale had negative attitudes related to using violent discipline with their own children was supported. The results indicated that an individual who had authoritative parents was less likely to believe in corporal punishment, more likely to have empathy for children’s needs, and more likely to have appropriate expectations for their child’s development. Further, if someone had an authoritative parent, they are more likely to have reverse parent-child ideals. These results may seem suspect at first, but it is possible that authoritative parents set their expectations for their children and then let them make the correct decisions to achieve their goals. Parents who know their children’s needs and respond with the appropriate guidance and support are treating their children with the respect an adult deserves.

The present findings supported the hypothesis that participants who rated their parents high on the permissive subscale had attitudes related to lack of empathy for children’s needs and inappropriate development expectations with their own children. The findings failed to support the hypothesis that participants who rated their parents high on the permissive subscale had favorable attitudes related to reverse parent-child roles with their own children. It seems as though permissive parents would not expect their children to take care of them because they never took care of their own. Parents who are permissive and at times unconcerned with their children’s actions may not be paying enough attention to treat their children as adults. Having parents with the permissive parental style was not associated with attitudes toward using or not using corporal punishment, possibly because there were not many rules set and the parents were uncontroUlling, therefore there would not be much discipline or punishment used.

The central findings of the study supported the findings of Ringwalt et al. (1989). They found that the degree to which respondents were punished as
children by either parent was a very important determinant of their approval of corporal punishment. The current results indicated that lack of empathy for children’s needs was the best predictor of participants’ belief in corporal punishment. The results could be due to the fact that when children’s needs for guidance and instruction are overlooked, corporal punishment may be used. As part of the current study, it was found that high authoritarian parental authority scores and scores representing high inappropriate development expectations, as well as low permissive parental authority scores were predictors of belief in corporal punishment.

Participants were asked whether or not they would like to be a child again, if given the chance. The idea was that participants who responded by saying, “yes,” they would like to be a child again, had a good childhood and to some extent felt their parents had done a decent job raising them. The only significant difference between people who answered “yes” and those who answered “no” was the AAPI’s lack of empathy toward children’s needs variable. The results demonstrate that those who did not have a desire to be a child again were more likely to have a lack of empathy for the needs of children. It is possible that participants who were more likely to have a lack of empathy were not shown enough empathy as children, and thus did not want to go back. The results indicate the type of parental style that participants were raised under did not have a significant impact on their thoughts about returning to childhood. For instance, participants who were raised by an authoritative parent (which is supposed to result in the greatest number of well-adjusted people) were no more willing to return to their life as children than were children of permissive or authoritarian parents. The results would indicate that there was another variable at work that influenced the desire to return to childhood.

In the present study, there were several limitations. The questionnaires used could be modified. They were good scales, but the somewhat dated questions could be improved. Individual subscales could be elaborated and the information updated. Or a new questionnaire to look more in depth at a belief in corporal punishment could be used. For instance, more questions could be added to the AAPI to produce stronger results. With an increased number of reliable items, a better prediction of participants’ attitudes could be assessed. As noted by Bluestone and Tamis-LeMonda (1999), parenting is determined by multiple factors in the broader social context, the experiences and psychological functioning of the parent, and characteristics of the child. Therefore, a broad array of questions is appropriate, and there may be other subscales that need to be added to the current inventories.

Beyond the questionnaires, there is the order in which the questionnaires were administered. In this study, the PAQ was always addressed before the AAPI. As stated earlier, this was done in an attempt to limit bias caused by recalled memories of childhood. However, it may actually be more beneficial to counterbalance for order. If that is the case, this procedure may have been a major limitation of the study.

Another issue of concern may be the different size of the groups in which people were administered the surveys. It is possible that a more consistent group size could produce a more reliable result. In a smaller group, people would not feel rushed at the end as they see others turning in their surveys. This may lend itself to testing individually. The results could end up more accurate because some individuals may not have put as much thought and consideration into the final questions as they approached the time limit.

The population from which this sample was drawn was predominately rural, White, and all university students. One way to increase the external validity of this type of research would be to include people in the sample who come from different ethnic backgrounds, different socioeconomic statuses, and different educational backgrounds. The biggest limitation may be the fact that scores on the PAQ depend on the participants’ recall of their parents’ actions. A more valid score may be provided if children were asked at a younger age, and if parents were asked to report their own attitudes about parental authority (using a different questionnaire). It is also a possible problem when participants report their own scores. Firsthand observation of the child-rearing practices would be a more reliable measure.

Because Ringwalt et al. (1989) could make no claim to test the approval of corporal punishment with respect to males, this study attempted to address this by testing both females and males. This study strengthened the stance that parental, and more generally adult behaviors, are determined by more than one factor. Parental behavior is influenced by the characteristics of the child, the experiences of the parent, and the parent’s functioning psychologically. Much work remains to be done to identify determinants of corporal punishment. Future research in the area could use vignettes to possibly provoke reactions from people to more accurately determine their attitudes. Future research may also be able to look at participants in a longitudinal study to see if parents actually reared their children in a way which they previously reported, and compare it to their upbringing.
CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Smith

References


