

## Chapter #25

# MANAGEMENT OF BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES: TOWARDS PARENTAL TRAINING AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS IN GREECE

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### ABSTRACT

The role of the family is extremely important in a child's social development. Parenting style and strategies can be either a protective factor or a risk factor (Earle, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the opinions of parents on the use of behavior management strategies. This study asked (a) which strategies parents used to manage behavioral problems and (b) if there were differences in the use of such strategies between the parents of children with disabilities and the parents of children without disabilities. Parent Practices Interview (Webster-Stratton, 1998b) was used as an instrument in this particular study in which 110 parents of children with and without disabilities have participated. The sample was randomly selected and came mostly from cities in Central and Northern Greece. The results show that, in general, parents manage behavioral problems mostly by using positive verbal discipline strategies, which contradicts Harman and Blair's (2016) previous study, according to which parents manage behavioral problems by stating clear expectations. Also, there seems to be no statistical significance regarding parenting practices between the parents of children with and without disabilities, except for the subscale of appropriate discipline: parents of children with disabilities are using more such strategies.

*Keywords:* parents' opinions, behavior management strategies, children with and without disabilities.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the family is extremely important in a child's social development and it can be a protective factor, as with an effective parenting style. It can also be a risk factor, though, as with a harsh and inconsistent parenting style, thereby generating or escalating behavioral problems (Earle, 2013; Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Patterson, & Dishion, 1985). Those are often the hardest child's problems to deal with (e.g. Earle, 2013). Of course, discipline techniques and parents' attributions about child behavioral problems are considered to affect the development and persistence of conduct problems (Dix, 1993). Parenting style and techniques have formed the aim of various studies (e.g. Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Snyder, Cramer, Afrank, & Patterson, 2005).

There seems to be a correlation between parenting style and children's behavioral problems, and indeed a correlation between conflicting aspects of a parenting style (for instance the mother's affection in combination with her authoritarianism which conveys confused messages to the child) that increases behavioral problems (Aunola, & Nurmi, 2005). Certainly, no one could state that parenting a child is an easy task and the demands of everyday care, emotional distress, interpersonal difficulties, financial problems and adverse social consequences, all add stress for the parents of children with disabilities

(e.g. Gupta & Singhal, 2004). Precisely, because of family stress and distress, but also because of negative attributions, the use of positive discipline strategies to manage behavioral problems at home appears to be a great challenge.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In the first place, parents' perception of what constitutes a problem forms a research question of its own. According to studies (e.g. Turnbull & Ruef, 1996), two main areas dominate in parental answers: dangerous behavior and difficult to manage behavior, with dimensions such as observable attitudes, parental views and third-party opinions. The result of the difficulty in management is that parents often feel ineffective in their parenting role.

Parents' self-efficacy is then shaped accordingly. According to Bandura (1989), parents' self-efficacy should incorporate both a level of specific knowledge about child upbringing and a degree of self-confidence in their ability to perform the behaviors defined by their role. It appears therefore that research in this field play an important role in shaping parents' style of education (e.g. Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Sanders & Woolley, 2005). High self-efficacy is a predictor for positive parenting practices and it is also a mediating variable on the consequences of important research correlations into the quality of parental education such as poverty, temperament of the child, stressful situations (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). On the other hand, in Sanders and Woolley's research (2005), low self-efficacy has been shown to be associated with at times over-reaction (harsh discipline) and softness (permissive and inconsistent discipline).

According to previous studies, discipline techniques and parents' attributions about child behavioral problems are considered to affect the development and persistence of conduct problems (Dix, 1993). As mentioned by Snyder, Cramer, Afrank and Patterson (2005), many mediation and moderation models have been formulated and interventions for children with behavioral problems through parent training have been designed. More specifically, according to mediation models, interventions targeting parents' discipline practices are sufficient, as those practices are considered to have been the main contributor to children's behavioral problems and, also, to parents' hostile attributions. On the other hand, according to moderation models, interventions must change both the parents' attributions concerning behavioral problems and their discipline practices, since, despite possible improvement in practices, it may be difficult to create or maintain parents' behavioral changes if hostile attributions are still present.

Thus, there are 3 types of parenting styles according to studies (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Patterson & Dishion, 1985):

- a) Authoritarian: parents are demanding, but not responsive; they expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation, they favor punitive methods and they do not encourage verbal "give and take" with the child;
- b) Authoritative: parents are both demanding and responsive; they monitor and impact clear standards for conduct; they are assertive, but not intrusive, and they share their reasoning behind their policy with the child;
- c) Permissive: parents are highly responsive, but not demanding or directive; they are lenient, set no behavior rules and avoid confrontation.

Other researchers also add the neglecting/uninvolved type (Earle, 2013) according to which parents are neither responsive nor demanding and seem not to care what their children do or become. Noteworthy, though, is Earle's (2013) observation which emphasizes that this categorization omitted important factors, such as the environment and the child and the interaction between each other, as parent-child relationships are not just a result of parenting style, but the result of a multiplicity of factors that need to be specified.

As far as Greece is concerned, ever since 1962, when the first “Parent School” (the term used in Greece for “Parent training program”) was founded in Athens according to French standards, many parent training programs –in terms of prevention- are being implemented in almost every city in Greece by the Parent School in Athens or other private bodies such as Municipalities, Parents and Guardian Associations, Schools and others (Konstantinidis, 2011). Unfortunately, though, most studies concerning programs’ effectiveness remain unpublished and the research results of the published ones, mostly concern the assessment of effectiveness through use of satisfaction questionnaires/scales (Konstantinidis, 2011). Only few studies have utilized standardized measures and questionnaires when evaluating their parent training programs (e.g. Giannopoulou, Lardoutsou, & Kerasioti, 2014; Konstantinidis, 2011; Konstantinidis, Gkogka, & Mavreas, 2008).

Significant issues like self-esteem, behavior problems and child development are being discussed in many parent training programs implemented in Greece (Prevention Center PYXIDA (2010), as mentioned in Konstantinidis, 2011), but without first studying the practices that parents already use. The lack of a questionnaire in Greek might be a hindering factor. Apart from the research on programs’ effectiveness and prior to design and implementation of such programs, it is of great importance first to specify the strategies and techniques used by parents.

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

The aim of the current research is to investigate Greek parents’ opinions on their management of their children’s behavioral problems. Specifically, to achieve this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

- a) Which strategies do parents use to manage behavioral problems?
- b) Are there differences regarding the use of behavior management strategies based on existence and the categories of disability?

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1. Participants**

Participants in the current survey were 110 parents/ caregivers from Central Greece (31.5%), Northern Greece (57.7%), Southern Greece (5.4%) and the Greek islands (5.4%). Mothers mostly completed the questionnaire (83.8%). Only 12.6% of respondents was fathers and 3.6% were guardians, who are authorized to act as the child’s parent. In the current study, the term *parents* will include both biological parents and guardians of a child.

Regarding the children about which the questionnaires were completed, 64.8% were boys and 35.2% were girls. The age groups and the percentages were as follows: 0-5 years old (1%), 6-14 (95%) and 15-20 (4%). As for the diagnosis, there were 54.9% children without disabilities and 45.1% with disabilities, of which: 23.9% with autism, 0.9% with cerebral palsy, 5.5% with Asperger syndrome, 7.3% with mental disability, 6.4% with ADHD and 1.8% with learning difficulties.

#### **4.2. Instrumentation**

Parents completed the Parent Practices Interview (PPI: Webster-Stratton, 1998b, 1998c), which was utilized in this study. The instrument is a 72-item questionnaire adapted by Webster-Stratton from the Oregon Social Learning Center’s Discipline Questionnaire and

revised for young children. The Copyright of the instrument belongs to the Incredible Years project (IY), which is a series of interlocking, evidence-based programs for parents, children, and teachers, supported by over 30 years of research by Webster-Stratton and her scientific team. The goal is to prevent and treat young children's behavior problems and promote their social, emotional, and academic competence. The programs are used worldwide in schools and mental health centers, and have been shown to work across cultures and socioeconomic groups (<http://www.incredibleyears.com/>). Indeed, Incredible Years project is listed as a validated, evidence-based program by many organizations, as stated in the official project's website (<http://www.incredibleyears.com/about/awards-and-recognition/>).

The instrument was translated into Greek with the back-translation method after written permission from and in cooperation with the Incredible Years project' Administrative manager. Only some, mainly, linguistic changes were made, such as adding articles, because in Greek they cannot always be missed out.

The Parent Practices Interview is composed of seven subscales:

- a) Appropriate Discipline (12 items),
- b) Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline (15 items),
- c) Positive Verbal Discipline (9 items),
- d) Monitoring (5 items),
- e) Physical Punishment (6 items),
- f) Praise and Incentives (11 items)
- g) Clear Expectations (6 items).

The items in each section are offered on Likert scales, different for each section e.g. ranging from: 1- "Never" to 7- "Always" or from 1- "None or almost none" to 5- "All or almost all", depending on the type of question. Scoring directions were retrieved from the IY program's official web page (<http://incredibleyears.com/for-researchers/measures/>).

### 4.3. Procedure-analysis

The survey was conducted during the school years 2015-16 and 2016-17. Initially, the participants were informed about the aim of the survey in writing. The questionnaires were completed anonymously, either in written form or in Google form made available online by the researcher. The answers were analyzed with the statistical package SPSS 24.0 to extract results from the research questions.

Reliability score for the whole questionnaire, measured with Cronbach's Alpha, is  $\alpha=.768$ , suggesting that there is satisfying internal consistency ( $\alpha \geq .70$ ) (George & Mallery, 2003). It must be mentioned though that the instrument has not yet been weighed on the Greek data so that by means of factorial analysis there would be subscales. Thus, the analysis was made on the basis of the subscales mentioned on IY's official website (<http://www.incredibleyears.com/for-researchers/measures/>) and that is possibly the reason for low reliability scores for some of them. The reliability of the subscales for the current study is presented in descending order, as follows:

- «Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline»  $\alpha=.846$ ,
- «Physical Punishment»  $\alpha=.792$ ,
- «Appropriate Discipline»  $\alpha=.762$ ,
- «Clear Expectations»  $\alpha=.687$ ,
- «Praise and Incentives»  $\alpha=.568$ ,
- «Positive Verbal Discipline»  $\alpha=.276$
- and «Monitoring»  $\alpha=.188$ .

## 5. RESULTS

Based on the results, parents mostly use *Positive Verbal Discipline* (M=4.98) and *Praise and Incentives* (M=4.08). *Appropriate Discipline* (M=3.73), *Monitoring* techniques (M=3.33) and *Harsh and Inappropriate Discipline* (M=3.00) are the next most used techniques, whereas *Clear Expectations* (M=2.32) and *Physical Punishment* (M=1.27) seem to be the least preferred strategies.

At the level of individual items, regarding the subscale *Positive Verbal Discipline*, the most preferred technique seems to be “discussing the problem with the child or asking questions, in case of their child hitting another child” (M=6.29) and the least preferred technique is praising children when they do well (M=2.64). In the subscale *Praise and Incentives*, when the child behaves well or does a good job, parents state that they quite often give their child a hug, kiss, pat, handshake or “high five” (M=6.52), and the least used technique on the same occasion is giving points or stars on a chart (M=2.41). Regarding the subscale *Appropriate Discipline*, parents state that when their child fights, steals or lies, they will most likely punish their child (M=5.64) and they would least likely have the child correct the problem or make up for his/her mistake in case of non-compliance (M=1.85). In the subscale *Monitoring*, parents state that 75% of the time they know where their child is when s/he is away from their direct supervision (M=4.31), while within the last two days their child was involved in activities outside the home without adult supervision for less than half an hour (M=2.28). In the subscale *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline*, Greek parents state that if their child hit another child, they would most probably raise their voice, scold or yell (M=4.12) and they would least likely ignore their non-compliance (M=2.08). As for *Clear Expectations*, parents seem to slightly agree that they have made clear rules or expectations for their child about going to bed and getting up on time (M=4.20), while, when their child misbehaves, they sometimes give the child extra chores (M=2.66). Lastly, concerning *Physical Punishment*, when their child misbehaves, they seldom slap or hit their child (but not spanking)<sup>1</sup>, and they almost never slap or hit their child (but not spanking) in case of non-compliance (M=1.15).

In addition, T-tests and One Way ANOVA tests revealed that parents of children with disabilities use more *Appropriate Discipline* strategies than parents of children without disabilities (M=4.04 versus M=3.64) (statistical significance was  $p=0.036<0.05$ ). Concerning the use of *Clear Expectations* strategies from parents, statistical significance ( $p=0.035<0.05$ ) was pointed out between the children’s gender with parents using more such strategies with boys (M=2.42) than with girls (M=2.13). There is also a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.013<0.05$ ) between mothers and fathers concerning *Monitoring* of children (M=3.24 versus M=3.90).

As for differences among groups of children depending on the type of disability, statistical significance ( $p=0.001$ ) was revealed concerning the use of *Praise and Incentives*: they are used more with children with learning disabilities (M=5.50) and least of all with children with cerebral palsy (M=3.54). We must also note that *Clear Expectations* strategies seem to be used more with children with learning difficulties (M=3.50) and less with children without disabilities (M=1.99) with statistical significance ( $p=0.001$ ).

Furthermore, Pearson correlation coefficient statistical analysis revealed quite noteworthy associations between certain variables (mean score for each subscale). There seems to be a negative correlation between *Positive Verbal Discipline* and *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline* ( $r=-0.29$ , N=104,  $p=0.003<0.005$ ) and between *Positive Verbal Discipline* and *Physical Punishment* ( $r=-0.21$ , N=104,  $p=0.033<0.05$ ). Positive correlations were pointed out between *Physical Punishment* and *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline*

( $r = 0.50$ ,  $N=106$ ,  $p=0.001<0.005$ ), between *Positive Verbal Discipline* and *Appropriate Discipline* ( $r=0.22$ ,  $N=106$ ,  $p=0.027<0.05$ ), between *Positive Verbal Discipline* and *Praise and Incentives* ( $r=0.25$ ,  $N=104$ ,  $p=0.01<0.05$ ) and between *Clear Expectations* and *Praise and Incentives* ( $r = 0.40$ ,  $N=106$ ,  $p=0.001<0.005$ ).

## 6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Results of the current research contribute to the specific field in as much as it is a fundamental step for the designers of parent training programs to obtain information about parents' behavior management strategies before the design or implementation of any program of this type. Especially in Greece, it is -to the best of our knowledge- the first study on this issue, so it is important that we weigh the questionnaire on the Greek data, so that then it could be used prior to the design of any future parent training program. Our current research is based on subjective measures, though, thereby posing a risk for overstating positive behavior (Gupta, & Singhal, 2004). Therefore, the aim of a future research could be obtaining and comparing data both from observation measures and questionnaires about parenting practices. In addition, the number of participants may be adequate, but a further research with a larger number of participants could allow for more accurate generalizations.

Moreover, obtaining information about parents' discipline practices and their attributions about their child's behavioral problems is a core issue for the design and implementation of parent training intervention programs: it could form the focus of future research. Specifically, the results of the present research could be used as a basis for the design of a parent training program on the management of problem behavior.

## 7. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

The results of the present research were examined in comparison with results in other countries since, to the best of our knowledge; this is the first study in Greece that examines parents' management strategies of their children's behavioral problems.

Regarding the first research question, on which management strategies parents use, according to the current study, Greek parents state that they mostly use *Positive Verbal Discipline strategies*, which is not consistent with previous studies of Harman and Blair (2016) in North Carolina, U.S.A., according to which parents manage behavior problems by stating *Clear Expectations* or another study in Colorado, U.S.A., the results of which showed that parents mostly use *Monitoring strategies* (OMNI, 2011). This difference could be explained in terms of different cultural contexts or even different methodological choices in each study. Unfortunately, no similar research has been conducted in Greece, so that the results could be compared within the same cultural context.

Answering the second research question, concerning possible differences in the use of behavior management strategies between the parents of children with disabilities and the parents of children without disabilities, results from the current study indicate no statistical significance, except for the subscale of *Appropriate Discipline* with parents of children with disabilities using more such strategies. This result is in line with Putnam, Sanson and Rothbart's study (2002) which concludes that parents with difficult children try to exert more positive efforts with them. However, Nicholson, Fox and Johnson (2005) state that parents of children with behavioral problems tend to use more punishment in general (both verbal and corporal) and harsher techniques than other parents. Results on this issue still seem ambivalent and this might be explained by differing methodological choices.

In contrast to other research (Kerr, Lopez, Olson, & Sameroff, 2004; Straus & Stewart, 1999; Smetana, 1989) according to which the gender of both parent and child is important in terms of *Harsh Discipline* and specifically, boys at all ages seem to be more likely to receive harsh physical discipline (Straus & Stewart, 1999), the current study has shown a statistically significant difference in the use of *Clear Expectations* strategies, with parents using more such strategies with boys than girls.

As for the subscale *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline*, the parents of children with and without disabilities state that if their child hit another child, they would most probably raise their voice, scold or yell, and they would least likely ignore in case of non-compliance. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Norlin, Axberg and Broberg (2014) which postulates that there was no difference in harsh parenting practices between parents of children with and without disabilities. It is also in accordance with Patterson and Dishion's study (1985) which indicates that parenting practices associated with the development of conduct problems include inconsistent and harsh discipline, and low nurturing. In addition, parents state that they consider punishing their child when he or she fights, steals or lies, probably because these actions are considered important deviant behaviors and parents might want to be stricter in the hope of curbing them.

Furthermore, as far as *Physical Punishment* is concerned, parents in this research state that when their child misbehaves, they seldom or almost never slap or hit their child (but not spanking). This is quite a significant outcome because, even though some researchers relate *Physical Punishment* with immediate obedience, it contains no message about alternative, appropriate behavior, it focuses the child's attention away from the consequences of their behavior for others and, according to a meta-analysis of 27 studies, it is highly correlated with child aggression (e.g. Gershoff, 2002).

Moreover, according to Pearson Correlation Coefficient analyses, parents who state that they use *Physical Punishment* also use *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline* strategies and vice versa. This result is consistent with previous research (e.g. Patterson, 1982 and Snyder, 1995, as mentioned in Gershoff, 2002). According to the aforementioned research, it is logical, and even expected, for the problem behavior to escalate, rather than diminish, as a result of harsh and inconsistent discipline. Therefore, a vicious circle of negative reinforcement is created, as the parent reacts with corporal punishment and continues, being reinforced negatively by the child's temporary compliance. As a result, the problematic behavior constantly worsens.

Further analyses of Pearson Correlation Coefficient revealed quite enlightening correlations between certain variables (between average scores of each subscale), as presented further on. Parents who favor the use of *Positive Verbal Discipline* strategies to manage their child's behavioral problems seem to use less *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline* strategies or *Physical Punishment*, as stated by other research as well (Hastings & Grusec, 1998): this is possibly related to the parents' objectives for their child's socialization. Parents who aim for their child's immediate compliance, for example in the case of the child or others being in danger, might resort to physical punishment and other punishment methods, even though the parents' need to teach the child how to identify and avoid risks might not be met. In contrast, parents use *Positive Verbal Discipline* strategies when their target is long-term and child-oriented, when they want the child to be taught through logic, dialogue and attempts to compromise aiming to instill standards of conduct (Hastings & Grusec, 1998).

Moreover, the relationship between *Positive Verbal Discipline* strategies, *Appropriate Discipline* strategies and *Praise and Incentives* seems directly proportional. This result was expected since all the aforementioned strategies are directly related to (and are indeed part of) the Positive Behavioral Support approach, which refers to providing warmth and

sensitivity, emotional experiences and possible rewards for positive behavior (Waller et al., 2015). Therefore, they also are intervention elements in various parent training programs (e.g. Webster-Stratton, 1998a).

Another interesting result from the current study is that *Praise and Incentives* is not the most preferred strategy for parents generally, but parents of children with learning disabilities use it more than parents of children with any other type of disability. Children with learning disabilities are vulnerable to low self-concept (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999) and it may be that parents attempt to boost their children's self-esteem by praising them. Another noteworthy result concerns *Clear Expectations* strategies: they seem to be used more for children with learning difficulties, even more than for children without disabilities. Possibly, parents of these children facing the impact of processing deficits associated with Learning Disabilities (Rourke & Fisk, 1981) feel the need (or may have been advised by experts) to clearly state their expectations to their children.

In conclusion, Greek parents in this study state that, overall, they use *Positive Discipline strategies*, either in the form of *Positive Verbal Discipline* or *Praise and Incentives*. However, to a lesser extent, they also use *Harsh and Inconsistent Discipline* strategies without any differentiations between children with or without disabilities and regardless of the child's gender or age. Preference for positive methods of discipline is particularly encouraging, as it is scientifically proven that a child-centered parenting style, high levels of positive family relationships and warmth, parental supervision, rule-setting and positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviors are associated with fewer behavioral problems, increased self-confidence, better academic performance and cognitive development (Hutchings et al., 2007). On the contrary parenting practices that have been found to have negative effects on emotional and behavioral adaptation include tough and inconsistent discipline, high levels of criticism, poor supervision, poor child care and lack of warmth in parent-child interaction (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).

Taking everything into consideration, even if this is the first study in Greece on this issue, we hope that it will be a starting point for further research on how parents choose to manage their children's behavioral problems. Moreover, the results of the current study contribute to global research in this specific domain since it is essential for researchers who design parent training programs to gather information on parents' management strategies prior to any design or implementation.

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Management of Behavior Problems of Children with and without Disabilities:  
Towards Parental Training and Intervention Programs in Greece

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Management of Behavior Problems of Children with and without Disabilities:  
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<sup>1</sup>One of the common arguments parents use to defend their use of spanking is that “Spanking is not hitting – and certainly not abuse” (Gershoff, 2017). “Slap or hit your child (but not spanking)” and “Give your child a spanking” are two of the practices, about which parents are asked in Parent Practices Interview. *Hit* means striking someone (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hit>), but *spanking* means the act of striking mostly the buttocks of another person, generally with an open hand (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanking>). So spanking is indeed a form of hitting (and a popular one in U.S., as in 2016 76% of men and 66% of women agreed that a child sometimes should be spanked (Child Trends, 2018). They are being dealt separately within the questionnaire, possibly due to their slight difference in meaning, but they both are considered *Physical Punishment* practices.