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Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

CHILDREN AND PUNISHMENTS (RUSSIAN PRESCHOOLERS INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS)

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a qualitative analysis of structured interviews with children aged 5 to 7 years ($N = 72$; 37 girls, 35 boys) who attended preschool institutions in Moscow. Its purpose was to identify the children attitudes to punishments practiced at home and in their preschool. The children in our sample were very well aware of what punishments were: only 11% of respondents were never punished at home, and 48% were never punished in their preschool. The children understood very clearly the behavior norms and the punishment rules, and submitted themselves to the adults authority, which was revealed in how they talked about the punishments necessity overall, and their intentions to punish or not to punish their own children in the future. However, although families use hand slaps and belts as means of physical punishment, most children said they were not going to practice such punishments with their own children. The punishments that our respondents experienced in their preschools were perceived by them as routine procedures that did not cause any intense emotional reactions. The emotions that the children experience in regard to their punishments at home depend on the family context. When the family situation is favorable, the children are ready to bear responsibility for their behavior and usually justify the adult's actions, even when it comes to slaps or the belt. However, the situation when a parent scolds his or her child may appear no less traumatizing for the child than the aforementioned physical punishments.

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1. Introduction

In every day and age, child-rearing practices, no matter what definitions are given to these processes by adults, in the end are focused on shaping the child's unique identity. The science of psychology has accumulated a great deal of data on emotional and intellectual development and preschool children socialization. Nevertheless, the children punishment issue to this day remains an area of concern in Russian science not for psychologists but rather sociologists and teachers.

Punishments differ from simple violence because they are a part of the social system and the normative culture, and are, therefore, "quite legitimate and rule-based, recognized by both parties in the relationship and third parties" (as cited in Kon, 2012, p. 18). Based on extensive empirical data, as far back as in the previous century, Russian scientists came to a conclusion that positive behavior reinforcement is definitely more effective than the punishment that contradicts the usual child activity (Bozhovich, 2008). However, the real child-rearing practices seldom follow the theory behind them; the public opinion differs considerably on the issue of various punishments imposed of children: some people categorically object to any punishment form, while others are as vehement about the need for punishment. A survey of parents with children under 18 in Bashkortostan showed that punishments are very common in Russian families: just 17% of respondents report that they never punish their children; 19% say that they applied some forms of physical punishments – hand slaps, belt slaps, slaps with some other article (Burkhanova & Mukhamadiyeva, 2012).

According to a WCIOM survey (The belt no longer works, , or about modern methods of educating young people, 2017), the most often used child-rearing practices in Russia today (just as twenty years ago) include "admonitions and moral teachings." A total of 78% of respondents say that they had experienced these in their childhood, while 80% of surveyed parents say that they use the same practices with their own children. The second most popular form of punishment is removal of privileges (TV, music, walks). A total of 43% of respondents say that they had experienced this in their childhood, and 45% of parents say they used these measures on their children. The third most popular form of punishment takes the form of taking away the child's computer (this is practiced by 43% of parents who responded to the survey). We were happy to see that WCIOM data reflected a considerably softer approach to child-rearing practices, first and foremost when it came to spanking one of the most severe forms of punishment. A total of 12% of parents confessed that they had used corporal punishment on their children, while 33% of the parents recollected that they were subjected to spanking when they were children themselves. Other forms of physical punishment are becoming less and less popular; 49% of respondents were given timeouts as a form of punishment, however, this measure is used today by just 29% of parents; 37% reported that they were slapped in their childhood, but only 27% of parents use the same measure with their own children.

What is the situation like with punishment for children in other countries? Kon (2012), having studied the data of Human Relations Area Files on socialization of children in 186 cultures, provides a list of punishments practiced worldwide. These include derogatory nicknames, ridiculing bad behavior; reprimands, verbal abuse, use of curse words; warnings, threats on behalf of supernatural beings or strangers; corporal punishment. Obviously, any such punishment is capable of offending the child, making him or her worried, scared, and, in addition to all this, sometimes cause physical pain.

Over the past several decades education and psychology made great advances in understanding the necessity of studying various opinions children hold and feelings they experience (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Formosinho & Barros, 2004; Woodhead, 1999). Conclusions on how the child perceives the circumstances of his or her life must not be made only on the basis of parents' observations; children, too, need to be asked (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). Their opinion is seen as a necessary element in the study of the problem and they must be viewed as experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994). In preschool education, the right of children to be heard is expressed through children's direct participation in the educational process, implying the freedom of choice and expression for the child (Bruce, 2005; Roberts, 2006), through the so-called "mosaic approach" (Clark & Moss, 2001), wherein adults use a variety of practices to identify the interests and opinions of each child.

To understand what children think and feel, adults need to pay close attention to how they behave and what they say. These skills determine the level of professionalism of scholars working with young children (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Such qualitative studies that recognize each child's right to express his or her opinion freely, include the project with the goal of establishing the worldview of Russian preschoolers (Egorova et al., 2001).

2. Problem Statement

Lack of reliable data on what child-rearing practices are being used in families and preschool institutions, and lack of data on the attitude of children to disciplinary action applied toward them constitute a very characteristic problem for Russia. Surveys of parents and teachers cannot eliminate this deficit because firstly, they deprive children of their own voices, and secondly, their responses can be distorted because they would be tempted to give socially approved answers.

3. Research Questions

What do children think about child-rearing practices in families and in their preschool institutions?

What do children feel when they themselves or their close friends are punished?

4. Purpose of the Study

To reveal the attitudes of preschoolers to punishments in their families and their preschool.

5. Research Methods

We asked a series of open questions to Moscow pre-schoolers aged 5 to 7 years ($N = 72$, 37 girls and 35 boys) about their lives. We used the structured interview format with no time limit, seeking to create a comfortable situation where children would trust us. The fact that no one else was present during the interview, and the respondents' age helped us minimize the factor of giving preferred or insincere answers. During the conversation our respondents could ask their own questions or deviate from the topic of discussion that gave us an opportunity to obtain additional valuable information. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed. The data were used to create the thesaurus of utterances.

6. Findings

6.1. How do parents punish their children?

Most frequently parents would use relatively soft methods of punishment for their children's transgressions. An especially popular form of punishment will be "placing the child in a corner" or giving them a short timeout (for instance, make them leave the room). One child mentioned that he could sometimes be "locked up in the bathroom." Adults will sometimes take away the child's favorite treats ("no sweets," "no candy.") The punishment can include removing some of the privileges, entertainment ("we did not go to the circus," "we did not watch TV," "they took away my phone") and can be quite lengthy. Unfortunately, in a number of cases (17% of families) adults use more radical measures. The children have reported being spanked on their bottoms "with bare hands" or "with the belt." It must be noted that slaps or spanking with a belt may hurt but adults still do it only symbolically (although these punishments are not recommended and the child might suffer a psychological trauma), and so the child is usually not offended for long and his or her relationship with the parent remains harmonious.

This is what the children said about the most severe types of punishment:

"They put me in the corner, and if I cry then they spank me with a belt."

"Dad chases us with his belt. Well, not often."

"They spank me with a belt, scold me."

"If I say a bad word, they slap me on the mouth, and if I do something bad they slap me on my bottom."

"They would spank me and put me in the corner. They would hurt me".

6.2. What are children scolded for?

The stories children tell make it clear that when they are scolded they view this as punishment, especially when other forms of corrective actions are not used or are seldom used in the family. The reasons why parents scold their children are generally the same as the reasons for punishing children as described above. Most children (49%) are periodically scolded ("sometimes yes, sometimes no"). The reasons for praise or reproof can be briefly summarized as follows: "I am praised for being obedient and scolded for being disobedient."

Judging by their answers, children usually know very well why they are scolded, and agree that the adults are right when they do so. Sometimes, however, they view admonitions as unfair or hurtful: "Mom always scolds me for something... and grandpa always is unfair... I don't do anything wrong and he scolds me anyway..." "They scold me for I don't know what, like when I do not put on slippers".

Unfortunately at times the situation becomes clearly traumatic for the child, and the words the adult says hurt him or her no less than physical punishment: "if children are often scolded, they clench their fists, they get scared".

6.3. Punishments at preschool

Children are also punished in their preschool: they are given timeouts or are reprimanded orally; children know that these reprimands are a form of punishment and view them accordingly. Preschool teachers use this form of punishment on children who are too noisy, run around, fight or in any other way

violate the kindergarten rules. The punishments in their preschools are viewed by children as an inevitable ritual and are usually described with no particular emotional expression (albeit perhaps still leave a mark in the child's psyche). And although 48% of our small interlocutors said that they had never been punished at preschool, all of them know very well what children get punished for there.

Preschoolers are placed in the corner or have to take a timeout on a bench, they are scolded or admonished. One of the boys came up with a radical conclusion: "You never learn anything in the kindergarten. You always get scolded here".

6.4. Could children be punished? If yes, what for?

The interview data suggests that most preschoolers did experience that or other form of punishment (at home or in their preschool). A total of 11% of children said that they were never punished at home; for kindergartens this number is higher (48%). But even though some of the children said they were never punished, every respondent mentioned that they were well familiar with the situation of punishment, as it were. That is, either the child him- or herself was punished, or they have seen someone else being punished.

It must be said here that children clearly understand what they are allowed or not allowed to do. Here is what they say about this: "You cannot treat small children badly, you can't hit your mom and dad, or give them a hard time, misbehave, get bad grades." The punishment situation is usually viewed by respondents as "just and fair," and any punishments by parents or grandparents (even slaps or spanking) usually do not affect the warm climate of the family. Children could provide a detailed description of their transgressions and try to guess what a fair punishment would be: "they should be scolded," "given a timeout," or even "be given a spanking with a belt." A total of 84% of preschoolers said that children could be punished.

The children said that "there was no punishment without transgressions," and they could describe in detail why they should be punished. The children say that the punishment is legitimate when children break the rules established by adults, create hazardous situations (e.g., touch electricity), break or damage something, offend someone or fight with someone. Children could be punished because "kids can do wrong things – not eat their meals, misbehave, wreak havoc, bother mom and dad or a small baby when they try to sleep." Adults do not punish children just because, they do so "when the child does not want to do anything," "because I misbehave, because I do not eat something, because I... lie," "because I fought with someone or broke something."

When they mention the reasons why adults punish them, our young respondents often were too self-critical ("because I am a hooligan," "because I behave badly quite often") thereby accepting all the responsibility for the adults' disciplinary action themselves. What adults do is seen as something that had to be done, and they are wholeheartedly justified: "It was alright, my eyes were well-rested as a result" (when a child had his ipad and television taken away for some transgression for a week).

Only in two cases our respondents complained that the adults were very unfair with their punishment.

"She (Grandmother) scolds me even for no reason."

"Grandpa punishes me very severely. Grandpa always punishes me very severely. Just because! I went for a walk with him, and rode my scooter, and did watch where I was going. And then Grandpa pushed me on purpose, I fell, and he scolded me because I got dirty. So what did I do? He pushed me himself!"

Although adults have every right to punish children, some children, in the opinion of our little respondents, should not be punished after all. The children “who are just fooling around” (that is do things that are harmless in the child’s opinion), and very young children (“you should not punish little ones”) should be spared. It is a totally different thing when hypothetical children “get older,” then “they better be punished”.

Only 5% of children in our sample tentatively said that they thought punishment was excessive, trying to find a compromise between their own understanding of punishment and the authority of adults: “children better not be punished,” “punishment makes them hurt badly,” but if they misbehave, they may still be punished. A total of 11% of our respondents mentioned that children were not to be punished.

6.5. Can a child punish an adult?

Most children believe that a child cannot punish an adult:

“Because adults control the situation, and children do not”;

“Because adults are older... they make mistakes, too, but they correct them later”;

“Because children dare not do it”;

“Because he has no right to do it, he is still young”;

“Because children must not get angry”;

“They cannot, because they are not too smart yet”.

But you can still “punish” mom for a broken toy, scold her: “I scolded Mom very, very much!” One girl said that children cannot punish adults, but that they “can only offend them”.

Although children cannot punish adults (even when asked this question, children tend to laugh), if an adult breaks rules, some children say, he or she will get punished anyway. Firstly, “grandma and grandpa” can punish them, and if an adult “does something wrong at work, they can simply be fired.” Additionally, as one girl wistfully remarked “adults punish children, and God punishes adults”.

6.6. Will you punish your own children?

A total of 76% of our respondents said that they were going to punish their own children; 11% were not going to do it. Your children could be “placed in the corner,” “scolded,” “told not to do it again.” Only one of the children (a boy who was 6 ½ years old) said confidently that he would spank his children with his belt. The interview revealed that the boy’s parents had used hard punishments on the boy, and that the parents sometimes argue and fight.

Most children agreed that although they would punish their own children, they were going to do it “very seldom!” Punishments are possible, but “children suffer when they are punished, they cry.” Just like during the discussion of whether children could be punished and what for, when the children talked about punishing their own children, they mentioned the topic of fairness. They said they would punish their own children but only for a good reason, and far from every time something happens. Little children should not be punished because “older children can do something wrong, and little ones never do anything wrong”.

A total of 13% of children are not so sure about their child-rearing tactics. The children may be hesitant with their responses because while children themselves are against punishment, their own

upbringing, upbringing of their friends and child-rearing practices in their preschool plus the authority of adults (“my daddy punishes me”) make young children believe that punishments are necessary and unavoidable. Hence, one 6-year old girl offered her sententious argument in favor of punishment: “If the child is not punished, they can become spoiled. They will be spoiled, start getting bad grades...”.

7. Conclusion

All the children we surveyed say they know well what punishments are: most children are punished in that or other way at home or in their preschool. Even if the child him- or herself is not punished, they could observe others being punished. In their preschool, children are placed in the corner, given a timeout on a chair, or scolded. Their teacher does not punish every child, but each child sees other children being punished. In their families adults use a broader range of disciplinary actions: from making a child stand or sit still (stand in the corner, be given a timeout), and verbal admonitions, to (much more rarely) slaps or spanking with a belt.

Children who are 5 ½ - 7 years old know well what the boundaries are, recognize the adult person’s authority and his or her right to punish the child for breaking rules. They also have a good sense of right or wrong: a punishment is legitimate only when it has been deserved, you cannot punish “little children” or for harmless antics.

When they talk about their own child-rearing tactics, our respondents said they recognized punishment as something necessary but thought that corporal punishment was out of the question (only one child disagreed).

The emotional attitude of the child to punishment (not matter how severe), and the consequences of the punishment for the child’s mental state depend on the family context and how warm the family climate is. When children feel loved and cared after, they are often ready to take responsibility for their own behavior and forgive adults for their failures as parents and guides (often these failures are quite serious).

When adults admonish or scold children, this experience can be as traumatic for little ones as slaps or even belt spanking.

Although children spend considerable amounts of time in their preschool, their punishments there do not cause such intense emotions as the punishments at home, although they, too, must have some influence on the young person’s self-awareness.

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