

Public Opinion and Behaviors Regarding Child Abuse Prevention: *1999 Survey*

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OVERVIEW

For the past 13 years, Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA America), formerly the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, has commissioned national public opinion polls to determine the public's attitudes and actions with respect to child abuse prevention. The first survey, in December 1986, was conducted by Louis Harris and the subsequent surveys by Schulman, Ronca and Bucuvalas of New York City. Each year, the survey has sought to identify shifts in public attitudes and behaviors in four areas: the public's attitudes toward specific parenting behaviors; the frequency of various discipline practices; the public's optimism toward and involvement in child abuse prevention; and the extent to which parents reported the receipt of home visitation and other supportive services around the birth of their children. In addition, each survey has included a small number of unique questions regarding the perceived efficacy of various child welfare policies or prevention strategies.

The consistency of this survey effort both in its application and measurement strategies offers a unique data source for addressing the impacts of public education efforts over time and for monitoring how public attitudes and perceptions have been altered. The purpose of this document is to present data from our most recent survey. Specifically, this report examines trends observed in public perceptions of corporal punishment, parental discipline practices, the public's perception of and involvement in child abuse prevention, and the use and support of home visitation services.

METHODS

Sample

Each survey has involved a representative telephone survey of 1,250 randomly selected adults across the country of which approximately 36 to 38% are parents with children under 18 living at home. Each sample was a nationally modified random-digit-dial telephone sample. Random-digit-dial procedures substitute random digits for the last three numbers in each core telephone number. The sampling frame consisted of 200 sample points, stratified by region and type of place. The final sample was a representative sample of listed and unlisted telephone numbers weighted to account for households with multiple telephone numbers.

In households with more than one eligible respondent (an adult 18 years of age or older), respondents were randomly selected. As with all samples, this sample is subject to sampling error. The sampling error for the entire sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points, assuming a 95% confidence level. Consequently, differences greater than 3% in response patterns to the same question across years suggest a statistically significant change in attitudes or behaviors. In those instances where only a portion of the sample is analyzed (e.g. questions pertaining to parenting practices), the sampling error increases to plus or minus 5 percentage points or greater.

Measures

The survey items were developed jointly by PCA America staff, the survey firms and Dr. Richard Gelles, a consultant to the project. Where possible, items were worded and response categories structured to be similar to other national polls on child abuse and domestic violence. For example, items measuring parental discipline practices were drawn from the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) developed by Murray Straus and his colleagues at the University of New Hampshire.

KEY FINDINGS

Attitudes Toward Parenting Behaviors

Physical punishment and repeated yelling and swearing continues to be viewed by the majority of respondents as potentially detrimental to a child's well being, as indicated in Table 1. In the most recent survey, 18% of the public felt that physical punishment hardly ever or never injures a child, and only 5% of the public believed repeated yelling and swearing at a child hardly ever or never leads to long-term emotional harm. For the past 13 years, the public has consistently expressed greater ambivalence over the potential harm of physical punishment (e.g., hitting or spanking). Each year, roughly one-third of the respondents have felt that these forms of discipline often or very often harm a child, whereas three-quarters consider that repeated yelling and swearing often or very often harms a child's well being. While those who currently have children under 18 living with them were slightly more likely in the most recent survey to express concern over the potential negative impacts of physical punishment (35% percent of this group as compared to 33% of those without children in the home saw such punishment very often or often leading to injury), overall parental attitudes regarding this issue have closely mirrored the attitudes expressed by the full sample.

Parenting Practices

Given the diversity of opinion regarding the negative consequences of physical punishment, it is particularly interesting that parents in our sample continue to report decreased usage of this discipline practice as compared to the initial 1988 levels. As indicated in Table 2, only 41% of the parents in our most recent survey reported that they had spanked or hit their child in the last year, 17% fewer parents than reported this behavior in 1988. Another way of stating this decline is that almost one-third fewer parents are reporting the use of corporal punishment today than did so in 1988. This reduction in the use of physical punishment is also reflected in a continued decline in the percentage of parents reporting the use of verbal abuse. In the most recent survey, 38% of the respondents reported that they had insulted or swore at their child in the past 12 months, 15% fewer parents than reported this behavior in 1988. For the past three years, we have asked parents how often in the past year they have failed to pay attention to their child's emotional needs. As indicated in Table 2, the percentage of parents admitting to this behavior has remained fairly stable over this period. In the most recent survey, 51% of the respondents indicated they had failed to meet their child's emotional needs last year.

In addition to the decline in reported negative discipline strategies, the trend data suggests a relatively stable use of less authoritarian discipline strategies. The use of alternatives such as denying privileges or confining a child to a room or other "time out" strategies has been consistent over the study period, as reported in Table 2. Overall, 78% of the parents in the most recent survey denied their child privileges over the past 12 months and 51% reported confining their children to their rooms.

Examining these trends by subpopulation finds that the decrease in potentially harmful discipline practices has been virtually universal across income levels, race, educational status, residential location, and political and religious preferences. Although we had observed an increase in the reported use of spanking among the youngest group of parents (those 18 to 24 years of age), this trend was not supported in the most recent survey. The reported use of corporal punishment among young parents in the current survey was 38%, significantly lower than the proportion reporting this behavior in prior years. Because the number of parents in this cohort is relatively small, wide fluctuation in this percentage might be expected. Indeed, this year, as in the past 12 years, the reported use of corporal punishment declined as a parent's age increased, with the use of this form of discipline being far more common among parents under the age of 35 than among parents 35 years of age and older.

The relationship between parental age and discipline techniques is also reflected in the fact that parents with children of different ages tend to report the use of different discipline methods. As indicated in Table 3, the 449 parents responding to the most recent survey reported a total of 1,390 strategies in disciplining their collective 625 children. Parents with children between the ages of six and 10 reported the highest average number of strategies (2.5 strategies per child). In terms of the types of techniques reported, denying privileges was the most common type of discipline strategy reported across all age groups, although parents of older children (i.e., those 11 years of age or older) reported its use more frequently. Similarly, parents of children under the age of six were more likely to report the use of spanking.

A very small percentage of the parents surveyed reported that they kicked, bit or punched their child in the past 12 months. In the most recent survey, only 2% of the parents reported this behavior, a percentage comparable to that reported in prior PCA America surveys, as well as other larger, national household surveys on family violence conducted in 1975 and 1985. Overall, 6% of the parent sample reported hitting or trying to hit their child with an object (i.e., belt, strap, paddle, ruler, etc.) over the past 12 months. Of the 183 parents in the most recent survey who admitted to hitting, spanking, kicking, punching or biting their children, three reported that these actions resulted in bruising or injury. While the respondent in each of these three cases was female, the three children involved represented two different races, three different income groups and three different age groups. Overall, these patterns and percentages are comparable to those reported in prior surveys, suggesting that very little change has occurred in the percentage of children identified by their parents as having experienced severe corporal punishment or violence each year.

Public Commitment to Preventing Child Abuse

In prior years, the survey has asked respondents two questions regarding their perception of prevention efficacy:

- How much do you think you can do to prevent child abuse?
- Have you done anything, personally, to prevent child abuse in the past year?

Throughout this 12 year period, those individuals with children under the age of 18 living at home have been consistently more optimistic about their ability to prevent child abuse and more likely to take action to do so. Each year, approximately three-quarters of all parents reported feeling they could do a lot to prevent child abuse. In contrast, only about half of those without children living at home were as optimistic about the influence of individual actions on the child abuse problem. Indeed, those without children in the home were more than twice as likely to see nothing they could do to prevent child abuse than were those individuals currently caring for young children and adolescents. Looking across the various subpopulations, those less optimistic about their ability to influence the rate of child abuse included males, those in the youngest and oldest age categories, those with more limited education, and those with annual household incomes below \$25,000.

Independent of one's belief in the power of prevention services to impact child maltreatment rates, the prior surveys also sought to determine the proportion of respondents who made a personal commitment, by virtue of their behavior, to reduce maltreatment levels. Again, our findings over the past 12 years were consistent. One in four individuals reported taking personal action to prevent child abuse in each survey year, suggesting that very little change had occurred in motivating the general public to play an active role in reducing child maltreatment. As with the public's perception of their ability to prevent child abuse, a greater proportion of respondents currently living with children under the age of 18 report active, personal involvement in this issue than do respondents without children in the home. Among those currently parenting a child under 18 years of age, involvement rates rise to one out of three. When asked in past surveys what these actions involved, the most frequent responses were: utilizing both formal and informal opportunities to talk to parents about non-abusive methods of discipline (31%); volunteering and contributing to child abuse prevention agencies within their local communities (29%); actually intervening to stop someone from hitting or emotionally abusing a child either by talking to the parent or removing a child from a potentially dangerous situation (21%); and reporting an abusive parent to authorities (14%).

In the current survey, we elected to address the question from a slightly different perspective by first asking respondents if they had observed specific acts of abuse or neglect in their adult life, and then asking if they had taken any specific action to address any of these situations. As indicated in Table 4, a significant percentage of respondents indicated that they had observed acts of abuse or neglect. Overall, three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they had observed, on average, at least two instances in which parents exhibited what might be considered abusive or neglectful behavior. As might be expected, respondents currently parenting a child under the age of 18 were more likely to report observing all of these behaviors than those no longer caring for a minor child.

With respect to personal involvement in these cases, 56% of all those observing an abusive or neglectful act (40% of all respondents) reported intervening in the situation, often using multiple strategies. The most common response reported by these parents included some combination of the following: verbally reprimanding the parent; giving the parent a disapproving look; trying to calm the parent; distracting or physically removing the child from the situation; and reporting the situation to the proper authority. About half of those who failed to take action in these cases viewed the situation as “none of their business” or were uncertain how to respond. A small percentage of these individuals (less than 20%) noted that they were either afraid of the parent’s reaction to any comments or thought the parent’s conduct might be justified.

This level of personal action is significantly higher than the proportion of respondents indicating they acted personally to prevent child abuse in our prior surveys. One explanation for this change is the fact that the revised questions focus on a respondent’s lifetime experiences versus the prior year. However, both the percentage of respondents reporting action and the use of multiple intervention strategies indicate that a significant proportion of the public is indeed engaged in providing surveillance and some level of protection to children. Determining if this increased level of personal action is a reflection of the altered methodology or an indication of a sustained change in public behavior will require repeated implementation of this set of survey questions over several years.

Receipt of Home Visitation Services

For the past eight years, the survey has included questions regarding the frequency and characteristics of home visitation services parents might have received around the time any of their children were born. Table 5 summarizes the responses to this set of questions. As noted in this table, 14% of all parents surveyed in 1999, with children under 18 living at home, reported that they had received home visitation services at the time one or more of their children were born. Among those parents with children less than one year of age, 32% reported receiving these services, significantly more than the percentage of families in this category who reported receiving these services in any of the prior years. However, significant fluctuation in this figure has occurred over the eight-year reporting period, suggesting that caution is warranted in drawing any firm conclusions regarding the most recent increase.

Similarly, wide fluctuations have occurred in the proportion of families who report receiving more intensive home visitation services. This year, in contrast to last year’s findings, most families who reported the receipt of home visitation services received multiple visits. Again, the variation in response to this question over time makes it difficult to determine if home visitation programs are simply becoming more common or more common and more intensive.

With respect to participant satisfaction, 82% of the parents who received home visitation services when their children were young viewed this assistance as useful in learning how to care for their child. This figure is higher than the proportion of program recipients who expressed satisfaction with the service last year, but comparable to satisfaction levels reported in the 1994 and 1995 survey years. On balance, most new parents appear to welcome access to this service at the time they give birth and feel the intervention has positive benefits. Indeed, 74% of those who did not

receive the intervention indicated that they perceived such a service as being potentially useful for themselves and parents like them in learning to care for a first child. When asked how they would respond if someone came into their hospital room after delivery and asked if they needed any help to care for their child, 72% of the parents interviewed in our most recent survey thought the concept was a "good idea" in contrast to 16% who viewed the service as a "bad idea."

Those currently parenting a child under the age of 18 have consistently indicated greater support for government investment in family support efforts than those who are not currently caring for children under 18. In the most recent survey, 82% of the parents approved of government investment in home visitation, a position shared by 73% of those without children under 18 in the home. A key factor in this discrepancy is the percentage of older Americans included in the non-parent group. On balance, those individuals in the oldest age groups were significantly less enthusiastic about the government spending money on home visitation (only 60% approved of the idea) than individuals ages 18 to 24 (where 92% approved of the idea).

Respondents also were asked to identify other assistance they would have liked at the time their child was an infant. Among the most common services listed by the respondents in the most recent survey were medical services for the baby including immunizations (53%); a telephone number to call with medical or health problems (25%); out-of-home nursery care or day care for the baby (23%); a support group for new mothers and parents (14%); donations of food, clothing or baby equipment (13%); and someone to come in and help care for the baby (11%). Compared to prior survey years, a higher proportion of respondents this year indicated that these specific service needs had been addressed. This was particularly true in the cases of health care services. For example, 95% of those seeking medical services for their baby reported success in securing their needs and 77% of those who desired access to a medical help line were successful. Relatively high service utilization rates were also reported in the areas of donations of food, clothing or baby equipment (60% of those seeking this assistance received it); someone to come in and help care for the baby (57% of those seeking this assistance received it); and out-of-home nursery or day care (49% of those seeking this assistance received it). In contrast, only one in four (25%) of those seeking parent support groups were able to secure this service.

CONCLUSIONS

Annual survey data collected in a consistent manner can offer child welfare advocates and policy makers useful indicators on behavioral and attitudinal changes occurring within the general population. Among the most significant changes or patterns observed in this survey effort over the past 13 years are the following.

- Physical punishment and repeated yelling and swearing continues to be viewed by the majority of respondents as potentially detrimental to a child's well being. Over the past 13 years, no more than one-quarter of the respondents have felt that physical punishment hardly ever or never injures a child, and no more than 8% of the public has believed repeated yelling and swearing at a child hardly ever or never leads to long-term emotional harm.

- Parents in our samples continue to report less use of physical punishment today than was true in our initial 1988 survey. One-third fewer parents are reporting the use of corporal punishment and repeated yelling and swearing today than did so in 1988. Further, the use of alternatives to these behaviors, such as denying privileges or confining a child to a room or other "time out" strategies, has been consistent or has increased slightly over this same period.
- Examining these trends by subpopulation finds that this decrease in potentially harmful discipline practices has been virtually universal across income levels, race, educational status, residential location, and political and religious preferences.
- On average, parents report the use of at least two different discipline strategies, with denying privileges being the most common approach utilized across all child age groups. The reported use of spanking continues to be most common among parents caring for young children.
- Public commitment to and involvement in the prevention of child abuse continues to be high. The recent survey found that when observing an act of abuse or neglect, over half of the general public and almost two-thirds of all parents would take some action to reduce the child's risk of further harm. Of those individuals electing not to intervene in these cases, over half indicate that they either felt the situation was "none of their business" or were uncertain as to what action to take.
- Almost one-third of parents with children under the age of one reported receiving home visitation services at the time their child was born, a proportion significantly higher than that reported in any other survey year. However, significant fluctuation in this figure has occurred over the eight-year reporting period suggesting caution is warranted in drawing any firm conclusions regarding the most recent increase.
- Actual and potential recipients of home visitation services continue to express positive views of this intervention and overwhelmingly support government investment in strategies to support newborns and their parents.

Table 1: Public Attitudes Toward Parent Behavior (in percentage)

	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	1988	1987
Question: How often do you think physical punishment of a child leads to injury to the child													
Very often/ often	34%	30%	32%	33%	32%	38%	38%	36%	31%	35%	35%	33%	40%
Occasionally	33	35	36	37	36	34	35	38	44	37	35	38	31
Hardly ever / never	18	19	18	23	22	22	20	20	18	19	21	23	24
Not sure	9	9	7	7	10	6	7	6	7	9	8	6	5
Question: How often do you think repeated yelling and swearing leads to long-term emotional problems for the child?													
Very often/ often	74%	75%	76%	78%	75%	74%	79%	74%	75%	76%	73%	71%	73%
Occasionally	15	14	15	14	16	17	14	17	18	15	18	18	17
Hardly ever/ never	5	5	4	7	6	7	5	7	5	6	6	8	7
Not sure	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2
<i>Number of respondents</i>	1250	1250	1253	1274	1263	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250	1250

Table 2: Parental Discipline Practices (Percent Responding “Yes”)

	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	1988
Denying Privileges	78%	79%	78%	77%	79%	79%	79%	81%	75%	72%	73%	71%
Confine in Room	51	59	54	54	59	59	55	52	57	52	57	53
Insult or Swear	38	37	42	35	40	45	44	44	44	39	49	53
Spank or Hit	41	45	46	42	47	49	52	52	51	50	60	62
Failed to Meet Emotional Needs	51	49	53	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
<i>Number of respondents</i>	449	433	470	445	470	474	468	445	480	460	513	490

Table 3: Discipline Strategy By Child Age

Discipline Strategy	<6 years old	6-10 years old	11-17 years old	Total
Deny Privileges	33%	33%	39%	36%
Confine in Room	26%	29%	23%	26%
Insult or Swear	13%	17%	24%	18%
Spank or Hit	28%	21%	14%	20%
<i>Total Number of Strategies</i>	<i>415</i>	<i>421</i>	<i>554</i>	<i>1390</i>
<i>Total Number of Children</i>	<i>202</i>	<i>165</i>	<i>258</i>	<i>625</i>

Table 4: Respondents Observing an Act of Abuse and/or Neglect, and Their Response to Such Observation

Observation	Yes	No	Total
Have you ever seen an adult neglect a child? (e.g. ignore a child's needs, failure to feed, withhold affection, etc.)	55%	42%	47%
Have you ever seen an adult physically abuse a child?	36%	30%	32%
Have you ever seen an adult emotionally abuse a child? (e.g. insult, taunt, harass, etc.)	71%	63%	66%
<i>Total number of respondents</i>	<i>449</i>	<i>799</i>	<i>1250</i>
Response to Observation	Yes	No	Total
Took action	62%	52%	56%
Failure to take action	36%	47%	43%
<i>Total number of respondents</i>	<i>354</i>	<i>574</i>	<i>930</i>

Table 5: Home Visitation and Other Support for New Parents

	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992
<i>Service Utilization</i>								
Percentage of families with children under 18 receiving home visitation services	14%	9%	7%	10%	11%	8%	6%	7%
Percentage of families with children under one receiving home visitation services	32%	20%	12%	22%	15%	11%	17%	7%
<i>Service Intensity</i>								
One visit only	44%	58%	44%	59%	41%	49%	60%	66%
Multiple visits	56%	38%	53%	35%	56%	51%	40%	31%
<i>Public Support/Approval Letters</i>								
Percent of those receiving service who found it useful	82%	75%	79%	72%	80%	84%	73%	69%
Percent of those without children under 18 in the home who perceive home visitation services as potentially useful to them and families like them	74%	71%	73%	73%	75%	77%	71%	N.A.
Percent of parents who perceive home visitation as a "good idea"	72%	73%	73%	76%	74%	80%	70%	N.A.
Percent of parents who perceive home visitation as a "bad idea"	16%	17%	17%	16%	16%	12%	21%	N.A.
Percent of those without children under 18 living in the home who support Government funding for home visitation services	73%	72%	70%	65%	67%	67%	65%	69%
Percent of parents who support Government funding for home visitation services	82%	79%	77%	75%	80%	84%	79%	82%