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Strengthening Families: Parents' Voices on Discipline and Child Rearing

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On the afternoon I walked into a workshop on corporal punishment (CP) of children, little did I know how profoundly that experience would change how I viewed parenting and child discipline. The message of the workshop was to examine what spanking teaches children: What does it model? What is the result? Like many others in the training, I had never thought about spanking as a *choice*. It was a natural, normal part of parenting, wasn't it? Its widespread use by parents suggests that for most U.S. parents spanking is an integral part of childrearing. According to Gershoff (2010) at least 85% of U.S. children are spanked, and Straus and Douglas (2008) contend that American parents' acceptance of CP is based on a "cultural myth" that spanking one's child "may sometimes be necessary" (p. 19). At the CP workshop, many participants shared their own CP experiences with voices that expressed shame, fear, betrayal, physical and emotional pain, guilt, and anger. A few shared stories of gratitude about their CP. One participant stated, "I'd probably be in jail today, if my parents hadn't taken the belt to me." A personal realization was that I could recall receiving CP and seeing my siblings corporally punished but could not in a single instance remember a transgression that was the catalyst for my parents' use of CP. That workshop triggered my interest in the U.S. cultural acceptance and use of corporal punishment of children.

In this article, corporal punishment (CP) is defined as the intentional infliction of physical pain, with or without an implement, for a perceived misbehavior. Some researchers insert "but not injury" (Straus & Douglas, 2008, p. 18) or "noninjurious" (Gershoff, 2010, p. 33), i.e., ". . . noninjurious physical pain" (Gershoff). However, the concern that CP causes injury to children is at the center of the CP controversy, so these terms are omitted from the definition. Physical punishment and physical discipline are used as synonyms for CP, and common examples include "spank," "swat," "smack," "pop," "slap," and "paddle."

Literature Review

One way to view CP is from a philosophical and human rights perspective. For example, in affirming the position that children are human beings (not property), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989) stated that children need "special safeguards and care" for their well-being and that they accrue human rights (Preamble). Article 19 requires countries to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence" (United Nations, 1989). With "near universal ratification" (UNICEF, 2011), 193 countries have ratified the CRC; only the United

States and Somalia have not ratified this treaty (Campaign for U.S. Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2009). One argument in support of human rights for children is that permitting CP "of children when hitting adults is subject to criminal sanctions seems arbitrary and unjust" (Bitensky, 1998, p. 437). Hindberg (2001), writing for Sweden's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, stated, "It is extraordinary that children, whose developmental state and small size is acknowledged to make them particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological injury, should be singled out for *less* [emphasis added] protection from assaults on their fragile bodies, minds and dignity" (p. 7).

In addition to human rights and ethical considerations, over six decades of research on parenting and child discipline provide a robust body of scientific evidence that physical punishment of children as a parenting strategy is high risk and can have severe consequences. Some problems linked to CP surface in early childhood, but others are long-term consequences not evident until adulthood. Due to space constraints, this article cannot provide an extensive literature review of the literally hundreds of studies on CP, but several key outcomes of CP addressed in the literature are briefly described in this section.[*]

One of the paradoxical findings is that CP, generally perceived as effective in achieving immediate compliance (e.g., stopping an unwanted behavior), is significantly correlated with "worse rather than better child behavior" (Gershoff, 2010, p. 37). Gershoff's (2002, 2010) meta-analysis found lower "long-term compliance" and "less moral and prosocial behavior" in 13 of 15 studies (87%) that examined this effect (p. 37). A number of studies link CP with aggression in children, antisocial behavior (Straus & Mathur, 1996; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997), and cruelty to animals (Flynn, 1999). Gershoff (2010) acknowledged the irony: "The more successful corporal punishment is at stopping aggression immediately, the more likely it is that children will themselves use physical force to get what they want in the future" (p. 38). Gershoff (2002, 2010) found that, in 27 of 27 studies that examined frequency, the more frequent parental use of CP, the more aggressive their children. CP is also associated with family violence (Straus & Mathur, 1996). For example, the more CP experienced in adolescence, the more likely an adult male will

[*] Readers are referred to Elizabeth Gershoff's 2002 article, "Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and Experiences: A Meta-analytic and Theoretical review," further explicated in her 2010 article, "More Harm Than Good: A Summary of Scientific Research on the Intended and Unintended Effects of Corporal Punishment on Children," as the most comprehensive meta-analyses to date.

think it is appropriate to slap his wife; this holds true whether or not he witnessed domestic abuse between his parents (Straus & Yodanis, 1996).

CP is linked to mental distress and depression during adolescence (Bachar, Canetti, Bonne, DeNour, & Shalev, 1997) and emotional and psychological problems in adulthood (MacMillan et al., 1999). Gershoff's (2002, 2010) meta-analysis reported that 12 of 12 studies with children found an association between parents' use of CP and mental health problems in childhood, and 8 of the 8 studies that examined mental health in adulthood found a similar negative association with CP (Gershoff, 2010). One concern expressed about CP is that it may teach what *not* to do, but it does not teach *what* to do, so children do not internalize the desired self-regulation. Gershoff (2002, 2010) found that moral internalization was negatively associated with CP in 13 of 15 studies examined.

Child abuse is often the result of an intended CP episode during which the parent loses control. In addition, a number of studies have found that frequency of parents' CP use significantly increases the risk of abuse (Gershoff, 2010). Ten of 10 studies "found a strong association between use of corporal punishment and risk for physical abuse" (Gershoff, 2010, pp. 41-42). Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, and Runyan (2008) found that parents who used an implement (e.g., hairbrush or belt) were almost nine times more likely to report use of behaviors that could be considered abusive. In total, after meta-analysis of 88 studies involving over 36,000 participants, Gershoff (2010) found that "110 out of the 117 effect sizes (94%) found that corporal punishment was associated with an undesirable outcome" (p. 50).

Use of CP around the world is decreasing. The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (Global Initiative, 2010), an international consortium of child advocates, reported that as of August 2010, 29 countries (see Table 1) prohibit *all* physical punishment of children. The United States, at the forefront of so many innovations, technology, and some could argue, cultural changes, is absent from that list of countries, although much of the research discussed in the previous paragraphs was conducted in the United States. As numerous postmodern societies have eliminated corporal punishment as an acceptable child-rearing strategy, the United States, with its retention of widespread CP use, has become an outlier. Why and how has the U.S. retained its cultural support of CP? Friedman (1998), a criminologist who studies society and violence, asserted that "modern violence [cannot be blamed] on a 'tradition' or a 'history' of violence in the United States" (p. 1128). Friedman argued that most traditions do not survive, so "if we ask

why something does survive, we are looking for a contemporary answer and not a historical one" (p. 1129). He pointed out that other countries have had violent traditions and have "outgrown" them, so our violent past "tells us nothing about why we have a violent present" (Friedman, 1998, p. 1129).

Purpose

At the heart of this qualitative inquiry, then, is a search for answers that explain (a) the contemporary and continuing support for CP of U.S. children and (b) how to facilitate a cultural shift in U.S. society toward more effective, less violent discipline methods. Answers to these questions, when observed through the lens of a strengths perspective, may inform the U.S. child welfare system, which costs an estimated $103.8 billion in federal and state dollars annually (Wang & Holton, 2007). Secondary research questions explore how U.S. parents meaningfully frame their CP practices and construct child discipline and what may effectively neutralize the U.S. cultural myth that CP is necessary in child rearing.

Several important assumptions undergird this research. First, this inquiry assumes that U.S. parents want to be "good" parents, at least to the extent that parents in other countries want to be good parents. Second, it assumes that "all families have strengths, regardless of their structure, function, development, ethnicity, or culture" (Johnson & Yanca, 2010, p. 312). Third, an underlying tenet is that "all families must be permitted and assisted in caring for their members" (Saleebey, 2009, p. 18). Lastly, this research is guided by ideological theories, which provide a framework that is "clearly (and proudly) value-laden" and that has the intent "to raise consciousness, liberate, and contribute to social change" (S. L. Morrow, personal communication, July 2002). Ideological theories view parenting, child discipline, and CP of children as social constructions. Consequently, despite physical punishment being an integral part of parenting in U.S. society, what we *know* about CP is "subjective rather than being the objective Truth" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 4).

Method

This qualitative study involved 27 participants, 22 women and 5 men, ranging in age from 25 to 84 years old, with multiple educational, marital, and ethnic backgrounds (see demographic data in Table 2). A single researcher conducted focus groups and individual interviews in three cities of a small western state over a 24-month period. Data were generated from two four-session focus groups (10 participants in group 1; 8 in group

2) and nine individual interviews. Purposive sampling incorporating several recruitment strategies was used to recruit participants who were interested in examining parenting and child rearing. Because the literature cites religion as a factor in parents' discipline beliefs and strategies, the source of participant recruitment for focus group 1 was through three mainstream religions. A participant recruitment flyer (see Figure 1) asked, "What are the characteristics of the person you most admire?" and posed questions about the connection between these characteristics and parenting. The flyer described the series of focus group meetings and invited interested parents and grandparents to provide contact and demographic information.

A second focus group was recruited through email to teachers in a Head Start program, a source of participants with formal education in child development. Each of the two focus groups met four times in two-hour sessions. Recruitment of participants for individual interviews employed a snowball method in which foster parent trainers, health educators, and youth sports organizers were asked to refer parents and grandparents who they thought exemplified characteristics of good parenting. Through snowball recruitment, nine individuals were referred and participated in individual interviews lasting from 1.5 to 2 hours each.

Data were generated through semi-structured interview guides[†] with open-ended questions. Topics included: learning to parent and sources of parenting information, parenting challenges in the 21st century, experiencing discipline and CP as children, assessing the impact of that discipline, and choosing discipline methods for their own children. Focus group sessions were videotaped (yielding 16 hours of tapes), audiotaped, and transcribed; individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcriptions totaled almost 600 single-spaced pages for analysis. Focus group and individual interview formats were flexible and responsive to emerging issues; and data were content analyzed for categories and themes known through the literature and emerging themes. In the focus groups, each session began with a summary of the previous session

Compatible with the strengths perspective and ideological theories underpinning this study, participants' roles were those of experts and co-researchers. They were invited to help make sense of, develop meaning from, and create knowledge from the data. During focus group sessions and each of the individual interviews, participant dialogues included analysis and critique: Are these data representative of your experience?

[†] Contact author to discuss or obtain copies of focus group session guides and individual interview guides.

Are the data credible? Are the interpretations consistent with the meanings you ascribe to your experience? Much of the content was unexplored territory, so trustworthiness of the data was an important consideration. In addition, an intent was to mine generalizations to facilitate a deeper "process of reflection, rather than seeing them [solely] as a structure of rule-based interpretations" (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p. 98). To illustrate, focus group 2 dialogue specified "thinking outside the box" as beneficial to parenting. Participant reflection moved the discussion beyond a general principle to a specific memory, shared by one participant, of going to a movie in the eighth grade in opposition to her parents' wishes:

> They [parents and siblings] showed up [at the theater] with those Groucho Marx glasses with the nose and the mustache. And they spied on me. My brother and my sister—they were all wearing them. I watched the movie and when I came out, they were all standing there.

This quote illustrates that discipline outside the box can take many forms and involve humor.

Results

This results section is organized into three major sub-sections: (a) how participants learned to parent; (b) participants' key child discipline strategies and personal insights; and (c) recommendations for systems and supports that could help participants become better parents and that could benefit other parents. The common thread of wanting to parent well and make effective child discipline decisions runs through participants' narratives regardless of their position on the continuum of accepting or rejecting their parents as models or their choice of discipline methods.

Forming a Child Discipline Construct: Does the Seed Fall Far from the Tree?

Participants overwhelmingly identified their own parents as the primary source for learning how to parent and discipline their children. Whether they accepted or rejected the model their parents provided, the parenting they received was central to development of a construct of child discipline and CP. Members of focus group 2, the Head Start teachers and teacher aides recruited specifically because they had formal education on child development, also identified their own parents as their primary source of information.

Some participants fully adopted a discipline style modeled and espoused by their parents. For example, Adam, father of 12-year-old twin

boys and two daughters, 10 and 8 years old, shared, “I used to talk to my mom and my dad; I can talk to my mother about anything.” Adam's mother taught him that a parent must begin physically disciplining children when the child is quite young. Adam explained,

> They have to know from the get go, and that’s when they start walking. My mom always said, “If they know what a comb is for, then they are ready to get their little hands slapped or their little butt popped.”

Several participants' experiences were the catalyst to reject their parents as their model. For both Kathleen and Lynette, single mothers, the parenting they received was the impetus for their motivation to be better parents with their own children. Kathleen, a white birth mother of an 18-year-old daughter and foster parent for a group home of teenage girls, recalled, “My whole upbringing had been very critical, very judgmental.” She described a home with physical and emotional abuse and little accountability on the part of her parents:

> A lot of these things I did not want to visit on my parenting with my daughter. Though I didn’t quite understand all of this, I knew that I didn’t want to do some of the same things. I wanted to meet my daughter’s dependency needs. My needs were not met in childhood. I knew what not to do; I just wasn’t sure what to replace it with. So there was a lot of searching and exploration on my part and a lot of reading—a lot of trial and error to find methods that worked better, but it was pretty much self-directed. I really did not have a lot of outside assistance in figuring out how to be a better parent though I was very much aware of wanting not to be a parent like my parents.

Lynette, an African American mother of three children, 10, 8, and 6 years old, had a “stressful” relationship with her mother. Lynette shared that she “didn’t really have anyone to look up to” and wants her own children’s lives to be different. Lynette explained,

> I need to be my children’s mentor, because who else is going to be there for them? Who else is going to watch them grow and help them grow and help them to not commit the same mistakes that a lot of young kids out here are doing?

Lynette has worked her way through three years of college and recognizes the importance of being a role model, something she feels she never had. Throughout her interview, Lynette expressed the goal of wanting to be able to give her children more security than she experienced:

> I didn’t want them to have to struggle, you know, to have to grow up

> in terrible neighborhoods to where they have to duck to walk through the living room. I wanted them to experience a lot of the finer things in life. Maybe not the finest things, but I wanted them to experience walking outside their house and feeling safe.

Participants discussed that even with a negative relationship with one's parents, when disciplining their own children people tend to revert back to how they were parented. For example, Cyd, an MSW student who is Jewish and has a toddler, described her husband's family as "very, very strict" and said that his relationship with his parents was antagonistic "to the point where he dropped out of college and moved to South America. [He] traveled the world for five years and didn't speak to his family. That was his way to get out." But despite a strained relationship with his parents, their parenting style is evident when he parents their 16-month-old daughter. Cyd said,

> I am much more liberal with Julia and he's much more, "No, this is what you're eating because it's on your plate." Whereas I'm like, "I'll fix you something else." It's an example of how we are both operating from how we were parented.

Members of focus group 2 had all taken community college or university classes with elementary education, social work, or child development content yet all still struggled with their own parenting and looked to the parenting they had received for answers. Participants described class content as geared for educational settings rather than application from a parent's perspective. Courtney joked about students in her Head Start classroom who wish she was their mother: "I tell my kids when they want to come home with me from school, 'Ms. Courtney is not this nice at home.'" Focus group 2 participants found strategies for the classroom generally helpful but inadequate for addressing parenting challenges at home. During the dialogue, Courtney shared the following, sounding troubled:

> I am wondering if education really always works. Because with one of my children, even though I'm educated in child development, he has the ability to bring things out in me where I do want to lose my self-control, and I have. And it's scary to me.

The finding in the current study, i.e., that one's own parents are the primary source for learning how to parent, differs from a recent study that examined resources parents used to learn about parenting. Radey and Randolph (2009) interviewed over 1000 randomly selected parents from a southeastern state with children age 10 or younger and found that parents used an average of 5.47 different sources, with books or magazines (94%) the most frequently used resource, followed by family members (75-84%)

and school staff (70%). One finding from Radey and Randolph, similar to the current study, was that among the least commonly used resources were parenting classes (29%). In the current study, only three participants had taken parenting classes per se: Janelle through her church, Louise as a high school elective, and Mia, who at age 16 took high school parenting classes for pregnant teens. The three foster/adoptive parents had taken foster parent training, required for licensure, but that training is not available to parents in general.

Participants' CP Experiences in Childhood

All but two participants remembered receiving CP as children, and all participants' families espoused CP as a needed and natural disciplinary tool. Consequently, all of the participants in this study believed, at least initially, that spanking their own children was appropriate as a way to enforce discipline. Leanne discussed her surprised response when her husband Bobby told her she didn't need to spank. She said: "Isn't that what good parents do? They discipline." Leanne continued, "I thought I was a good parent. I mean, I didn't like being spanked, but I thought that's the way things were done." Leanne's comments reflect a theme that surfaced during focus group dialogues. From their own upbringing, a number of participants viewed CP as *analogous* to discipline; no spanking was the same as abdicating a parent's disciplinary role. When Faye, the great-grandmother, said, "When I had to discipline and I had to spank them . . . ," her phrasing conveyed that spanking was not understood as a strategy or choice but as necessary in child rearing.

Toni from focus group 2, a white divorced mother living with her boyfriend and five children, "his kids and mine," listed spanking as her primary discipline method with her first two children "because that is how I learned to parent. My mother was a firm believer." Toni also used another lesson from her childhood. She said that she had caught her 3-year-old daughter hitting her brother and noted that the "one thing I won't allow in my house is hitting. I grew up where I was terrified when Mom and Dad left, because my sisters would just, we would all beat up each other and end up in hospitals." To Toni, it was important that her children not "beat up each other." Toni explained that to teach her daughter not to hit, she spanked her and said, "We don't hit." Toni remarked to her fellow group members, "What kind of mixed message was that? 'Don't hit your brother.' Whack!" She continued, "I never hit any of my kids after that. Well, spanked them."

Toni's last comment, changing her terminology from "hit" to "spank," reflects another theme expressed by some participants and found in the

literature. Two participants were adamant that "hitting" and "spanking" are not synonymous. They contended that spanking is not a form of violence. Hitting children is wrong, but spanking children is not hitting and is not wrong. For example, one participant commented:

> I don't agree with hitting, you know bodily hitting, but a good swat on the bottom—I don't see why that is wrong if it's just to get their attention or if it's just to snap them back into reality if they're getting carried away.

The assertions that CP is not violence and that spanking is not hitting and the use of euphemisms, such as "swat," are discussed in the literature as a means to minimize and avoid acknowledging that CP is a violent act (Straus, 2001).

Two women participants, one from each focus group, could not remember ever being spanked. In their 40s and 50s, their stories are somewhat similar. Both reported that their brothers were spanked and that as children they always feared that they would be spanked. Both reported that they were required to participate in their family's ritual of being sent outside to find a "switch" that could be used to administer a spanking. Smiley from focus group 2 recounted:

> My dad would say go out to the back yard, because we lived on a huge farm, find the biggest pussy willow switch that you can find. Pluck them (the pussy willows) off and bring me the stick. After bringing a branch to him, he would say, "Nope that's not big enough; go find another one."

Smiley said, "He never used the stick on me," but she remembered her brothers being spanked and that they were told, "Boys don't cry." Overall, women participants reported that their brothers were more severely punished than they were and received more CP, a trend that is consistent with previous research (Straus & Stewart, 1999; Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

Spouses, Culture, and Other Factors That Shaped Discipline Constructs

Other factors that informed participants' development of parenting and discipline constructs included observing how the family of one's spouse parented or how friends parented and learning from one's own parenting experiences. As interviews and focus group sessions progressed, narratives emerged about parenting influences, other than those from one's family. One key source was observing a different model of discipline in the family of a spouse or significant other. According to Leanne, her husband's relatives, particularly her sister-in-law, served as role models.

Leanne stated that she started out spanking her children, because "that's what I thought a good parent did." However, her husband's family did not use spanking to discipline children. Leanne continued:

> Then I watched his sister because we had children all about the same time, and it kind of floored me. It was like, whoa, she was able to accomplish this without spanking her kids. They actually did what she wanted. You don't have to spank.

Leanne shared that her parents had provided a very different model:

> When I was growing up, we were spanked. And not just spanked. We were spanked! I mean like major! Yeah. So that's what I did, and that's what my sister did. The way that she disciplined her children, because she's quite a bit older than I am, was similar to the way we were raised.

Cecilia, a Head Start teacher aide in focus group 2, reports that with her Mexican upbringing she experienced CP. Speaking of her own children, she said, "I do spank them on the bottom once in a while." She regards CP as a multi-generational phenomenon: "See, that is the way I was raised. My parents were raised up in Mexico, and that's the way they were raised over there."

Three participants were licensed foster parents and had extensive training on parenting and discipline, with particular focus on children with special needs. Kathleen, introduced earlier as a foster parent in a group home for teenage girls, shared, "In fostering, corporal punishment is not allowed in any form." She chose to apply this principle with her daughter when she began to foster but indicated that new skills were required: "I needed to learn different ways of dealing with stuff." She considered this a good change, "because corporal punishment is very shaming, and it's also very negative as far as role modeling. But I think the shame part of it is probably the most detrimental." Kathleen believes that, while the physical part ends quickly, "the emotional damage of corporal punishment and the shame that comes with it is the harming part of it, which can also be done through words, through actions. This became very obvious to me over time."

Half of the participants expressed the belief that their discipline strategies evolved as they "learned from their experience." Anne, a white grandmother who raised five children as a single mom, stated, "I think I was a lot better parent at the end of the line than I was at the front of the line because I figured out that certain things are not important." Anne related: "By the time I got to my fifth child, I was really laid back. And it's a whole different thing than where I was—all wound up and with my expectations for my first child." Several participants discussed parenting

in terms of "trial and error," and Lynette attributed much of her parenting learning to her mistakes. She said,

> Parenting is something that you learn. There's no perfect parent. And I learned what to do by the mistakes that I made. I've learned when they get a D in school, I can't do "that"; I have to try "this" approach. And I keep trying and trying and trying until I find something that works.

A member of focus group 2, Toni, commented to her fellow group members, "Don't you wish we could do it all over again once we figure it all out?"

Participants' Personal Insights and Awarenesses Regarding Discipline

During the focus groups and individual interviews, 16 different discipline strategies were identified. Their use varied by age of the child, type and seriousness of the transgression, parental state (e.g., stress level, tiredness, personality), and religious background among other factors. This section discusses communication, picking your battles, parents' self-regulation, the uniqueness of each child, "positive" discipline, and the need for support.

Communication. The discipline method used most frequently was "communication"—every participant discussed its importance. Communication was so integral and interwoven in parenting dialogues that it eclipsed all other forms of discipline combined. For example, Sara, widowed two years previously and parent of two birth sons, 13 and 10 years old, and the 17-year-old son of her late husband, tries to "educate them." She described one incident with no punishment, "other than the miserable ten minutes of hearing me tell him how he could have done it better, why it was so horrible the way he dealt with it, and why it was inappropriate." Since the behavior had not been repeated, Sara counted it as "a good ten minutes spent" and admitted with laughter, "My kids probably hate my little dissertations more (than being punished)."

Kathleen said that both her daughter and foster children might pass up a behavior that would result in "teaching," since she is "very verbose." She described teaching as "a good deterrent," and stated, "They perceive it as a lecture; I perceive it as education [laughter]." Similar to Sara's approach, Kathleen shared that she "talks them to death." She clarified:

> I articulate everything . . . the emotional response in a dynamic, different outcomes of their choices . . . things like embarrassment that comes up in admission of a mistake, what that feels like, and

how hard it is to admit.

Bernardo, also a communication advocate, is an engineer who immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. He and his wife, Rosa, are avid soccer fans, and Bernardo expressed pride at Rosa's soccer-playing ability "even though in Latin America it is hard for a woman to play on a team." Bernardo coaches the soccer team of his 13-year-old son, Bernard, and looks forward to coaching his 19-month-old daughter if she becomes interested in soccer. Bernardo said that he tries to guide "mostly with words and example." Bernardo emphasized the importance of *how* the parent communicates:

> You always have that in the back of your mind: Did I say the right word? Did I express myself properly? Did I communicate the right message to Bernard, or is he going to take it in the wrong way? There's always that worry.

He added that, "especially [when parents] have high expectations" of their children,

> You need to praise more than, uh, what's the contrary of "praising" in English? Denigrate. You need to praise the positive and whatever little improvement there is . . . rather than to diminish or belittle them. Build up their high self-esteem. You will see it in Bernard. He could be in a group and knows nobody, but in a couple of minutes he's talking to some kid. He just starts talking.

Adam, the father for whom a comb provided the litmus test for spanking, said, "I was probably harder on the kids as they were younger, but the older I get and the older they get, the more I am mellowing out." He has essentially discontinued spanking and replaced it with a new strategy of restricting privileges or taking away something, such as going to "basketball games—you know, stuff that they like to do." He combines privilege restriction with communication. For example, a privilege "isn't going to happen until you think about what you did." Adam described his response to misbehavior, "I'll go in, and I'll talk to them. I'll explain it to them. Then I'll tell them, 'This is what I'm doing. Do you understand why?'" Sara uses a similar strategy and believes that with teenagers a parent has many options, because as she said, there are "a lot of things that they are in love with." Her older son "is absolutely in love with his radio. Oh, my gosh! All I have to do is say, 'I'm going to take away your radio.'" Sara's experience is that this results in a quick behavior change. Her advice: "Take away something that is important to them."

Communication goes two ways, and both Kathleen and Sara discussed the need to listen and ask questions. Kathleen shared that listening to a foster child "assisted in creating some compromise between

us because she felt heard. And even when there wasn't agreement on everything, feeling heard made a lot of difference in being able to get to a resolution." Kathleen also discussed trying to find out what need is driving a particular behavior:

> Sometimes you need to help them find the words for the emotions, so I might give them a variety of emotions if they can't seem to articulate. "Were you disappointed in something?" "Were you hurt by something?" "Were you feeling afraid?"

Sara, widowed two years previously, described listening to her son talk about having a "sad day" and sharing similar feelings to show, "It's okay, and that it's expected," so her sons "will know it is safe to talk about grieving." She understands this is part of dealing with their father's death.

Rose probably summed up best the participants' feelings about communication. An African American foster parent, with a birth daughter, nine adopted children, and the children in her foster homes, Rose said, "Communication is very important to me." She described her process:

> I don't put anything into play until we talk about it. I want them to know what's my reason. I mean, it's all talked about so everybody understands exactly what's happening and why I feel that this is wrong and maybe we can find a way to correct this so that you don't do it again. But before I take any actions, I always sit down and we're going to talk about it.

Pick your battles. Parents and grandparents concurred that an important discipline strategy is that parents must pick their battles. Adam, introduced in the previous section, explained that all four of his children have chores to complete, but he added:

> A lot of times you have to let things go by. Kids are kids. You have to pick your fights. And it depends on what it [is]. It's gotta be something, I think, something that is hurtful to somebody else.

Sara presented a similar position: "If I yell every time they do something wrong, or I am disciplining every single time, eventually it's going to have no effect." She thinks about her goal and when, or when not, to draw the line:

> If I tell my boys, "Go make your beds," and they don't, and I tell them again, "go make your beds," and they don't, because they are in the middle of a movie, is it important enough that I need to go turn the TV off and make them go in and make their beds? Sometimes. But that's not a battle that I have to [fight]. I can wait until the movie is over. The beds are not going to go anywhere. Is it that important that it get done right that minute, just because I

said? No, to me it's not.

Sara acknowledged that she has the power to force her boys but does not want the focus of the dispute to become the power struggle. She wants the boys to learn to assume some communal responsibility for helping keep their home neat and clean.

Kathleen laughed and said:

> By the time we got to adolescence, I had learned that power struggling with teenagers doesn't work at all. And when you must power struggle, you need to win. So you better pick and choose your battles, otherwise *life* is a battle.

One strategy Kathleen and Sara use to minimize power struggles is giving choices and putting the burden of the decision back on the child. However, Sara limits her sons' choices: "They don't have a choice of piercing their ears, or their nose, or their tongue."

Self-regulation. Related to parents' power and control was the theme of self-regulation, including self-reflection, self-monitoring, and self-control. Should parents consider whether they have made a mistake? If they are wrong, what should they do? Some parents would apologize. Bernardo shared that Rosa has taught him her perspective about children's behavior which helps when he is "overcritical or strict" with Bernard. He stated:

> Sometimes I get upset on the soccer field when he's not performing, and I'll say, "You are supposed to do this or supposed to do that." But then I go back to: No, every single kid is different. And you just have to sometimes stop and think about, "Why did I do that?" And I will apologize and say, "I am sorry. You're doing great."

Kathleen said that "taking a break" is a good way to diffuse anger and noted that sometimes she's the one who needs the break. She said that if she gets angry

> and pops off before I take the break, then I have to do two things: One, I need to take the break. And two, when I come back I need to apologize for my misbehavior and revalidate that that child didn't deserve my behavior. So as much as I, like any human being, hate to admit misbehavior, I use it as a positive teaching tool and positive role modeling.

Both focus groups talked about the need for parents to model self-discipline, to regulate themselves, and even to put themselves in "time-out" if that is needed to regain control. Kristin, from group 2, is concerned that parents should self-monitor to assess whether they are disciplining a

child as a reaction to their own frustration or embarrassment. She described observing parents' reactions to small children screaming in a grocery store and said:

> There's a tendency for the parent to say, "Hey, knock it off." But they're not doing it for the benefit of the child. They're not doing it to teach the child to become a better person. They want the child to be quiet and it's for their benefit.

Kristin believes that a parent's frustration or embarrassment is "not a good reason to spank a child ever"; when a parent disciplines, "it needs to be for the child's benefit" and not the parent's.

Cyd discussed the importance of monitoring oneself as a parent in order to be self-aware. By being self-reflective, parents can begin to understand cause and effect, a process she uses to shape parenting and discipline decisions with her daughter. She commented,

> I think everything starts with awareness, and it's the first step. You should be aware of what you're doing and when you're doing it. Maybe not necessarily trying to stop it or trying to change it, but just be in tune with what I'm doing. You just start with awareness if you want to be a good parent, but you always have to be thinking. With Julie, I'm always thinking, "What am I doing as a parent right now?" I think what my actions are doing with her, little things, 'cause it's in your face.

The same theme emerged in focus group 2. Mia suggested that parents can ask themselves, "How they were feeling when they hit their child. What their state of mind was and just being aware how they are at that moment, because usually when they spank, it's when they're uptight and they are frustrated." Courtney added that spanking usually occurs in "the heat of the moment." Mia said that parents can focus their self-awareness on "how they can calm themselves down." This will help parents "then work to other means of discipline." Mia expressed her belief that it is crucial that "the parent identify and manage themselves first before moving on to other facets [of parenting]."

In group 1, Sandi, a white 56-year-old grandmother of four and a school nurse, stressed that through self-awareness, parents can understand their triggers, those things that "pushed you to wherever—to that point where you're nuts. You know you're out of control, and you need to walk away from it." Katie stated that when she knows she cannot "deal with kids right now," she has learned to be honest and say, "I'm really tired. I just need 15 minutes with it quiet, and I'll be a better mom and I'll be out to help you with your homework or fix dinner or whatever." The group articulated that solutions do not work for everyone and that

even if parents want their own "time-out," they may not be able to leave if they are outside the home or if the child is too young to leave alone.

Kathleen reflected that as she became more self-aware, she realized her own emotions rather than her daughter's misbehavior sometimes influenced the punishment. She said:

> There were times that my daughter would get "popped on the butt." Looking back again, often I judged her behavior and the severity of it on my emotional response to it depending on if she made me really angry. . . . She received harsher discipline depending on my emotional reaction to what was going on.

Some other thoughts. In general, participants believe that in U.S. society, people are not prepared to become parents. Per Anne, "We certainly don't prepare them for the role of parenting. We don't get a guidebook on how to do it." Although participants may wish that parenting challenges could be answered with something as simple as a "guidebook," a recurrent theme in the focus groups was that each child is unique; as a result, what may work with one may be ineffective with another.

Cyd thinks that identifying what parenting strategies are effective for each child is the most important part of parenting. She said:

> Every kid is just so unique and there isn't "a way" to do it. One of your children could require a time-out or praise and attention and be really sensitive; another one may not. Figuring out what works for each one of your kids is really the challenge.

Mack, a single father with custody of his three teenage children, agreed: "Boy, I know. I, too, with my kids see three different personalities and all of them different." Katie shared,

> I think the hardest part about parenting is that it changes. You have birth to 3, then 3 to 5, and 5 to whatever. You're having to constantly be up on what might have been appropriate at this age is no longer appropriate at another age. And having two older kids out of the house and just one at home, I see I do things very, very differently with the third one.

Focus group 2 discussed that even if we can teach parents effective parenting skills for this generation, as society changes those strategies may be ineffective in the future. As a parent with adult children, Toni said:

> You have different ideas for different generations. I'm looking at you guys and thinking, "What I did would never work these days." And in ten years you're going to be looking at somebody else sitting here doing a whole new thing.

Katie, in focus group 1, is convinced it is not necessary to wait 10 years for an effective parenting technique to become ineffective. She stated that, as a parent, there are

> days that everything you do is like gold, and then the next day you do it the same way and your kids look at you like, "I don't think so." Some days, parenting is a breeze, and then other days, you feel like you've never parented a day in your life or like you're walking down a whole new road.

Support. Almost all participants expressed concern about little or no availability of peer support and few opportunities to discuss their child-rearing successes and challenges. Anne stated, "I'd a lot rather talk, if I'm a parent, to somebody that's already done that or try to figure it out. Self-help books are wonderful but they're not the end-all." Cyd belongs to a "mommy group" of mothers with young children and finds some of the discussions on child rearing helpful; however, no other participants belonged to a group or organization that provided peer support for parenting. Several interact with other parents as they congregate around their children's activities, but it appears that these de facto parent groups offer neither a place nor a forum for discussions about parenting, and the groups were not perceived as providing support on parenting issues.

Support systems were identified as an important need, particularly by single parents and those who lack a supportive relationship with their own parents. Katie, a teacher and single parent who has raised two sons and a daughter with one son still in high school, talked about feeling added pressure with no one to back her up. She identified a level of exhaustion exacerbated by lack of support when one is the sole parent:

> I grew up in a two-parent family, and my mother did everything for us until a certain time. When my Dad came home, he kind of took over, and it's not that my Mom was not present, but he stepped in. In single-parent homes, some parents get tired and some kids act out because they know they can beat down one of his parents. You don't have that other person to come in and say, "Your Mother said no." And I remember my Dad saying, "Don't ask! Your Mother said no. It's done."

These comments are compatible with McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge's (2010) discussion of the importance of co-parenting. These researchers pointed out that in the United States, individuals generally assume that co-parenting refers to a husband and wife, "an unfortunate, unnecessarily limiting constraint, because co-parenting alliances exist in all families where more than just one person assumes responsibility for a child's care

and upbringing" (p. 357). Co-parenting alliances can include an unmarried parent, gay or lesbian partner, child care provider, grandparent, extended family members, and others (McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2010). McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (2010) argued that co-parenting is a key aspect of adult mental health. They asserted:

> [Among] essential existential motivations of human beings, including those suffering from mental illness, is the wish to be a good-enough mother or father. Co-parenting alliances are hence critically important because the odds of being good enough improve when the adult is supported by an effective co-parenting partnership. (p. 358)

Developing systems and programs that involve "understanding and fortifying co-parenting relationships" would support individuals' intention to be "good-enough parents" (McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2010, p. 358).

The Big Picture: Participant Recommendations

This section identifies resources that participants believe will help them continue to grow and become better parents. Their recommendations, if implemented, would benefit not only themselves but also other parents throughout the United States. Participants provided firm recommendations to redesign and create new U.S. systems to provide encouragement, support, information, and services. Participants identified desired outcomes and were not shy about describing how these systems should work to achieve the outcomes. Recommendations are discussed as follows: parenting education, public education campaign regarding CP, education in public schools, community and neighborhood programs, and parenting support provided by medical providers.

Parenting education. At the top of the list, "education" was stressed as necessary but not enough. Participants pointed out that there is no national system to disseminate information about parenting, child development, and discipline. Two adoptive/foster parents who participated in the individual interviews, Rose and Louise, talked about receiving training specifically on parenting and specifically about discipline. Louise, who is herself a trainer of pre-adoptive parents, said, "I also took parenting classes because I'm a foster-adoptive parent. And that was part of the orientation. We deal with strictly special needs kids. So it's like ongoing trainings." The training for Louise and others who are foster-adoptive parents begins prior to children being placed in their homes. The training includes modules about parenting children who have experienced neglect or abuse and also addresses a variety of child

development and behavioral issues.

Rose, 45 years old, with one birth daughter (age 18 years) and nine adopted multiracial, multiethnic children of various ages, is highly respected for the group homes she operates. Rose described the young mothers of children in her foster home as "TV babies." By this, Rose means, that these mothers, children themselves, were often raised sitting in front of a television with minimal nurturing. They know very little about how to parent or care for their children, and Rose tries to encourage and mentor them. Mia, one of the Head Start teachers from focus group 2, shared that she had been a teenage mother and that she received education about parenting in a high school teen parenting program. Mia said, "I was in parenting classes at 16. I had him so young so I had to do all that." Mia noted that she took parenting classes during her 3 years of high school. She explained:

> It helped me understand how to understand my child. I was a teenager, and I was able to comprehend and understand, and it was interesting. It was interesting to see how children evolve into teenagers---which I was—and to see how you evolve into an adult.

Mia felt fortunate to have that opportunity, and other focus group members viewed her as an informal mentor because she was knowledgeable and "seemed to know the right questions to ask." The group and several individual interviews pointed out that programs such as Mia's are not universal and that many young women and men have little or no access to teen parenting programs.

Through the dialogues, and particularly through Rose's insights, the irony of who really receives services became evident: the U.S. child welfare system removes children for abuse or neglect from their *untrained* birth parents and places them in homes of *trained* foster or adoptive parents whom the system itself has trained. That training, received by foster and adoptive parents, is unavailable to birth parents prior to, during, or after their pregnancies. The foster parent, however, receives training that is ongoing, occurs prior to having children in their homes, and includes content on parenting and how to respond to children's challenging behaviors and developmental issues.

Unless one is a foster or adoptive parent, there appears to be little training on parenting for the 40 million family households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) of parents, grandparents, or other family members raising 71.8 million children under the age of 18 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2005). A number of nonprofit agencies offer parenting courses in communities in most states. However, there are few resources for parents and no national system to help them obtain

parenting education.

Public education campaign about corporal punishment. Both focus groups articulated the need to receive more education on parenting and child rearing. During her individual interview, Rose agreed with the focus groups' conclusion: "I find that the most effective way of empowerment is educating yourself, getting knowledge and being educated. With those tools you can do anything." Miss G., a divorced, 59-year old grandmother and administrator in a university health promotion project, is raising two of her son's children aged 5 and 6. During her individual interview Miss G. stated that as a member of the African-American community her belief is that "parents may be quick to spank because that handles things right now, and they don't have anything else to compare it to." She contended that parents think they are good parents:

> A parent will look at you and tell you, "I am an excellent parent." And they mean every word that they say. From the bottom of their heart they mean that, because that's what they defined as being a good parent.

Miss G. believes we must help parents think about their priorities and create a new vision but in a way that that does not "insult" parents. She worries that if education is not done well, parents may "become extremely defensive." One approach that Miss G. favors is the creation of a multifaceted public education campaign that speaks to a variety of ethnic groups and cultures in the United States.

Lynette and Louise also recommended a public education campaign. Louise stated that we should invest "whatever it takes" and that perseverance is important:

> The key thing is to have someone who is persistent about getting it out there. You're going to get knocked down five times. And if you say it the sixth time, you never know. It may take 20 years. But on that 21st year, you may have thousands and thousands of people if someone is being persistent.

Lynette believes the campaign's approach is critical. She said, "If you just start off with 'spanking is not good' it's going in the trash." Lynette recommended that the way to engage parents is "to pose a question first." She suggested that a question could be "something along the lines of 'Do you believe spanking to be harmful to your child?' Or 'If you spank your child, walk by and lift your hand and see their reaction.'" Lynette stated that the approach must show, "I understand where you're coming from, but look at this suggestion. Try thinking this way." She continued, "If you

go in there pointing fingers, they're not going to listen. You have to propose a question to get them to look and realize and open their eyes."

Lynette emphasized that messages about parenting children are important: "The key word is 'cherish.' You need to cherish them. And whether we received spankings or not, it is time for us to cherish our children respectfully." One of the strengths of a public education campaign is that parents "can hear it in the privacy of their own home." She added, "If they can hear it generalized, it may sink in better than it would if they were being accused. You have to sway them into your point of view without being accusatory."

Janell, a health educator and African American mother of a teenage son, advocated for a public education campaign because these campaigns "can be effective in planting seeds, to elevate the consciousness." In focus group 2, Kristin, a participant who supports a parent's use of CP, discussed the successful public awareness campaign that elevated the public's knowledge about dangers of "prenatal smoking and drinking" and its parallels to CP:

> Maybe 15, 20 years ago no one knew that that was bad, [but through] education, prenatal education, doctors telling parents, media—there's just been a whole huge campaign to get that message across that that is devastating to children and maybe you have to look at spanking the same way. People just don't know.

Participants expressed in a number of ways that, in order to develop new parenting methods, it is imperative that parents become aware of societal changes that have occurred and how those changes impact families and child rearing. Parents unaware of the complexity of child rearing and the impact of social, technological, and other changes may not feel they need to examine the effectiveness of their parenting strategies. Miss G. explained: "If a person believes that everything they're doing is okay, then they're not going to seek help, and you can't give them any, 'cause they don't believe that they need it."

Several participants thought that public service announcements "are a good idea" but that they are not enough because they lack specific information. One participant commented that most parents have not heard "don't spank" and that they "haven't heard the research that goes behind it." Janell asserted that the critical element of parenting education is "getting that information to them, even if it's just in the form of a pamphlet." Many participants recommended the Internet as one source for providing "specific" information. Although the Internet was not identified as a source of parenting information by participants in this study, one national survey indicates about 40% of parents search the Internet at

least once a month for child development information (DYG, 2000).

Education in public schools. Most participants recommended that individuals learn about parenting when young—in high school or even earlier. The two participants, Louise in her individual interview and Mia in focus group 2, who had taken child development and parenting in high school believe their courses have been valuable in their ability to parent. Emily, from focus group 2, recommended starting in high school: "We could start with the kids who are 16 now and may not become parents, well we would hope they wouldn't become parents, until later. But even if you plant that seed, then you know it might carry through to when they had their own children." Smiley said, "I think that and even starting younger—starting in junior high."

Miss G. recommended teaching parenting in school, particularly to pregnant teens: "If you had the very young girl—14, 15, 16—still in high school during the pregnancy, they'd have to continue to work on their GED. And then begin giving them parenting skills while they're there." Miss G. believes that schools must reach pregnant teens and close that "big gap between being in school and being out on the street. Once they're out there, [it is] kind of hard to get them back." Only one participant, Janell, who had taken parenting classes through her church, believes parenting should not be taught in high school or in college and identifies "academic freedom" and "teaching a particular philosophy" as concerns.

Community and neighborhood programs. Participants identified community programs as needed but emphasized that whether the programs succeeded or failed would depend on the way in which they are provided. Two types of programs were recommended: education on child development and parenting support programs. Each is discussed below.

Community education on child development. Throughout the course of this study, participants articulated that parents are not given skills in child rearing and that they lack even basic knowledge in child development. Curtis, from focus group 1, a retired school administrator and grandfather, commented:

> I think there's too many parents who—not just parents, too many adults—are not aware of what is age and developmentally appropriate for children. That in itself is a box, because we tend to think that the 4-year-old is going to respond this way. Yet within the 4-year-old population, you still have a normal curve, so you're going

> to have a wide range of abilities.

Curtis maintained that we need to show parents how to get "outside the box."

Participants emphasized that, in addition to content, how community education classes are marketed is critically important to their success. Focus group 2 cautioned that how the message is framed can be offensive. Emily illustrated: "If Kristin said to me, 'Emily, I think you need to go to a parenting class,' it would offend me even though Kristin and I are very good friends." Hannah said,

> That's why you should do it prenatally. If I went to Emily and said, "Your child is 4 years old. I think you should go to a parenting class" [versus] if I went to Smiley and said, "You're expecting a child. Would a parenting class be helpful?" You might think it might [be helpful] because you haven't done this. Emily's done this for four years.

Miss G., the grandparent raising two grandchildren, believes that grandparents will be more open to change and learning something new. She said, "Most grandparents you talk to would be more thoughtful and be more [receptive]. Because you've reached a point in your life where you see things differently." Miss G. discussed that, as a grandparent, she has "seen the mistakes that I made, or the things that I didn't do, or what I should have done. So I have reference points. I have something to compare things to."

Participants were concerned that currently parenting classes carry a stigma. They noted that to draw broad participation, community classes must eliminate the stigma. One of the foster parents explained:

> When people lose their children to CPS [child protective services], they have to go to parenting classes. Usually people's first thought is, "I didn't abuse my child, so why do I have to go to parenting class?" In order for them to get their kids back, they have to go to parenting classes. So automatically there's a negative connotation right there.

Hannah, mother of a 3-year old daughter, articulated a concern of focus group 2, when she said that whether the class is called "parenting class, or child development class, positive discipline, whatever the term," changing the title would not necessarily make a parent more receptive. Kristin concurred and explained what has worked for her:

> When I try to talk to parents, I try not to put it to them that you're doing anything wrong. That would be offensive. I am sure that would offend Emily. But if Emily looked stressed out, I would say, "Look, there are so many new things to learn. You know, I always

> want to learn new things. And it's just an opportunity to learn another trick, another tool to pull out of your bag when you need it." Because, then it's not like, "You need to learn this 'cause you're bad."

Neighborhood support programs. Rose insisted that programs to support parents and parent figures should be available "automatically." In particular, grandparents raising grandchildren should not have to request services or assistance. Rose asserted, "When they place these kinship families together, there should be some type of a service where someone goes out to these homes. It needs to be there." She explained further:

> I know a great-great-great-grandmother who is 78, who has custody of six children, and the youngest is three. She's 78. She doesn't have a clue, but she didn't want those children—her great-great-great-grandchildren—in the system. And the state jumped on it right away because they had a placement. But they didn't think of the other things that come along with it—the services, support. She needs to be re-taught on how to deal with these rappers. You know what I mean? These kids are a whole different thing.

Miss G. agreed that there should be programs to help grandparents raising grandchildren and to help parents as well. She recommended that churches, community centers, and other sites be used and that that those teaching be "appropriately trained." She added, "The training would be standard, and certain requirements would just become necessary." Miss G. explained that the importance of offering parenting training through multiple sites is that

> it would be available for wherever a person may feel the most comfortable. You could take it to them. Place it in all the places where a young person would be willing to go, or need to go, or has already been, so they would feel safe being there.

Warm lines and respite programs. While Rose appreciated the benefits of public education campaigns and making information widely available to parents, she believed these efforts are not enough to truly help those who are parenting. Rose insisted that we should be asking, "How can we support them?" About public education programs, she said, "Those are good. But are they personal?" Rose believes there is a benefit to building personal relationships: "I think we need to get back to more of that personal touch, personal contact with people." Rose noted her concern that "we wait until parents fail" and that we then take the child out of the home, whereas earlier interventions and services could have

prevented removal of the children. Rose commented that people "don't know where to go. So I think [an array of services] needs to be put in place from the very beginning, and it would probably help eliminate these repeated problems."

One issue identified by multiple participants is that many parents, particularly single parents, have no one to talk with about parenting. Although participants did not use the term "warm line," the service they describe as needed fits well with the warm line concept. Participants said that parents need someone they can talk to regularly, who will lend an understanding ear, and who can empathize with the "weird or wonderful" things children do. Warm line workers are often volunteers with specialized training. Warm lines "offer a solution for non-crisis, habitual callers" and help to create "supportive peer relationships" (Pudlinski, 2004, p. 72). Pudlinski has evaluated different models of "peer-run warm lines" and views them as a "beneficial service for most communities" (p. 72). Pudlinski (2004) asserted that "warm lines have the potential to mutually empower both caller and call taker" (p. 72).

According to participants, another support service needed is respite services for parents. The inability for parents to obtain respite falls disproportionately on the shoulders of single parents and single grandparents raising children. Families with two adults may be able to rely on each other. Although participants did not use the term "respite program," they discussed that at times parents need help in taking care of their children, such as when parents are sick, under stress, or exhausted. Such services should be high quality and low cost; specifically, these services should not be *un*available to those who need them most as a result of prohibitive costs.

Parenting support by medical providers. Participants had specific recommendations regarding the medical profession and health settings. Doctors were identified as experts and viewed with high status and trust. Participants identified three opportunities for parenting support that could regularly be used by medical providers. Each is discussed below, beginning with obstetrician-gynecologists. Several participants pointed out that a woman is often most interested in new information about parenting when she becomes pregnant. One participant said, "I would start with the ob-gyn having information available right from the start. Because when you're carrying that baby, you're open. You're teachable." Another participant said that, upon becoming pregnant, a person is "open to this new role as a parent [because] I know I've got to do something now that I've got this child coming." Parenting and child development

information provided by the obstetrician should become part of that "basic prenatal situation" and that it "would be more casual. It would be more at the parent's pace."

The second medical provider identified was pediatricians. Janell said she obtained information because she searched for it but was disappointed, because "Even the pediatrician, they don't have that kind of information out on the tables." Participants emphasized that obstetricians and pediatricians should always have parenting and child discipline materials for their patients. Miss G., herself a health educator, said, "Posters are good; pamphlets are good."

A third medical resource was hospital childbirth classes. Available for pregnant women and their partners, childbirth classes are offered by most hospitals with obstetric wards. Emily advocated incorporating more about parenting, especially discipline, "because I think every group of parents takes Lamaze class or a childbirth class." She thinks parenting education should start then

> because you've got a captive audience and maybe they're more willing because you're excited about having a baby. I think most parents want to be good parents. So maybe incorporating it into that or even before they're discharged from the hospital with their new babies.

Emily asserted that before and immediately after birth is a prime time for parenting and child discipline education. She shared that when she had a child, "I had to jump through every hoop imaginable to get myself out of the hospital. I had to watch a movie about car seats, and they had to come down and look at our car seats. At that point, I would have done anything so they'd let me go home." Hannah recommended that classes be given "before childbirth." She said:

> Once the child is born, people always want to think they are good parents. . . . Before the child is born, they realize they don't know. So I think expectant parents are more, because the fear is there, they are more willing to take a Lamaze class, a baby care class. You should incorporate parenting, disciplining, and things like that.

Hannah declared, "Once the child's born, number 1, you don't have time, and number 2, people always want to assume they are doing the best they can, and they are doing a good job."

Discussion and Implications

This study explored U.S. cultural support of CP of children and its continued use by most parents despite decades of research documenting risks associated with CP. In addition, the study sought participants' views

on how to neutralize the cultural myth that CP of children is needed in order to be a good parent and sought recommendations for ways to facilitate a cultural shift away from high risk and toward more effective, nonviolent discipline strategies.

The findings from this study indicate that parents' and grandparents' discipline methods are intended to help children grow into healthy and productive adults, and even when participants espoused punishment strategies shown through research to be "high risk," thoughtfulness about child discipline and motivation to be good parents was evident. A major methodological underpinning of this research was use of the strengths perspective as the instrument through which to listen to participants' voices, as opposed to traditional methodologies which customarily have examined perceived parental deficits.

A key finding was that parents' primary, sometimes sole, resource for learning about parenting and child discipline was their own parents. Participant narratives demonstrated commitment, caring, and the intentionality of their actions to use what they "knew" to benefit their children. Few had received formal education about parenting, but among those who had, the education described as most beneficial was high school parenting classes taken by a Latina participant who became a mother at 16 and an African American mother who took high school courses because they were “interesting.” Head Start teachers and aides in focus group 2 had child development coursework but described the focus as classroom-oriented rather than family-oriented, with sparse content on child discipline. The insufficient coverage of discipline or CP in child development classes is congruent with Straus and Douglas's (2008) content analysis of child development textbooks published over a period of three decades (1980-2005) that “showed an average of only half a page on CP and that none recommended parents should *never* spank” (p. 19).

A second important finding is that participants were uninformed about the risks associated with CP and that most were unaware of a recommendation to never spank. Only the three foster/adoptive parents had ever heard that children should not be spanked. Once they learned that spanking foster children is prohibited, they chose to implement nonviolent discipline methods with their own children. However, these parents also were not educated about risks associated with CP. Rose, parent of ten, including nine adopted children, described that in her training, “they definitely encourage not to spank, but you never hear the reason why—why not to, you know. I don’t think it’s being taught.”

Another finding of the study was that participants lacked, but wanted, venues to facilitate conversation and discussions about parenting

and discipline. Focus group members networked and shared parenting experiences, observations, and philosophies during this study, and they readily critiqued what works for them and what does not. Through the dialogue process, some participant narratives changed over the course of the focus group sessions. For example, in the first session, Katie stated that using an implement to spank can be beneficial and less harmful to the child than a parent using his or her hand. She said, “I had a friend who was a nurse and she said they were treating more children with injuries from spanking with the hand than they ever treated with a wooden spoon or something.” Katie explained, “If you took the time to get a wooden spoon, or to get a brush, or whatever it is, it’s a good cooling off time for the parent.” By the fourth session, Katie had altered her position on CP. During that session, she commented, “If the person who loves you the most is hitting on you, what does that say about you?” Later in the session, Katie said, “I think when you spank, you’re teaching the child to hit. I think you also are destroying their self-esteem, or making them feel they’re not okay.” It was apparent that Katie was unfamiliar, as were other participants, with research demonstrating that parents who used an object to spank were almost nine times more likely to report engaging in “potentially abusive behaviors” (Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff, & Runyan 2008, p. 368). Despite now viewing CP through a new lens, Katie still had no exposure to the literature. I believe she used her focus group participation as an opportunity to discuss and process issues about discipline and parenting—fulfilling the need for a “venue” as articulated by parents at the beginning of this paragraph. What might occur if parents regularly had access to groups and discourse about child-rearing challenges, similar to Katie's use of the focus group sessions? What might occur if parents, like those in the focus groups, regularly received educational materials through an ongoing information campaign for parents?

Despite being unfamiliar with the literature, most participants expressed a level of discomfort with CP as a disciplinary strategy, and several had discontinued spanking their children. Participants discussed that, like themselves, other parents want to be good parents and need education and support to make more informed child-rearing decisions. Even if a participant him- or herself was unconvinced, the consensus was that *all* parents should have information about the risks of CP. Participants also wanted catalysts, such as public service announcements, to trigger parents to think about their actions and consequences. One announcement that appealed to participants is Straus’s (2001) recommendation for a new U.S. Surgeon General’s

warning: "SPANKING HAS BEEN DETERMINED TO BE DANGEROUS TO THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF YOUR CHILD—DO NOT EVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SPANK OR HIT YOUR CHILD" (pp. 211-212). One participant thought the slogan would go well on diapers.

21st-century Changes in Parenting Contexts and Environment

The finding that participants replicated many of their parents' disciplinary practices with their own children is interesting in light of their acknowledgement that the context and environment in which they parent is so different than that of previous generations. Participants emphasized that parenting in the 21st century calls for new awarenesses and responses. Innovative, or at least different, parenting and discipline strategies may be warranted today, and participant discourse reflected consideration of many contemporary contexts in parenting challenges.

John and Caroline, a married couple with 8- and 12-year-old boys and members of focus group 1, discussed that parenting needs to reflect the "different world" that children live in. John said, "Our skills have to change with the times, you know." Many participants identified a parent, or other significant adult from their childhoods, whose piercing look was a dramatic deterrent. Caroline discussed the effectiveness of "the look" in her childhood and said almost wistfully, "The glaring at them doesn't work. You know, the old-fashioned dad comes home and gives you a 'look,' is gone." Her husband, John laughed, "I don't understand why it's not working for me."

Other, significant, 21st-century changes discussed included:

- The immediacy and massive amounts of information to which children are exposed, not only through television but also through computers and the Internet. One focus group participant said, "You can see a war today—now, across the continent."
- Child safety issues, ranging from safely playing outside in a child's neighborhood and instructing children to keep windows and doors locked while parents are at work to never speaking to strangers.
- Differences in child care as a result of the greater number of working women, societal change in the role of women, increased single-parent households, very young mothers, grandparents raising grandchildren, and parents' substance use. More women in the workforce means families must deal with less availability of "mom," "wife," or "homemaker." Hannah observed to her colleagues in focus group 2: "You know, we talk about working in a preschool. We really spend more time with other people's kids than

we do our own." Toni affirmed, "We're not raising our own children. Nowadays, the mother's at work and the children are at day care or home alone, and neighbors aren't as watchful 'cause the neighbors work." She believes that in previous generations children "were more carefully monitored."

- Financial considerations which often cause both parents to be employed. In focus group 1, Anne said: "Being able to afford to buy a house or being able to afford to have what you need in your household is sometimes dependent on both parents working today. I mean it doesn't come easy for young couples." Leanne agreed: "It's not just being able to buy a house and a car, but sometimes to just live. I struggled when my first was born almost 25 years ago. I had to go back to work when she was only six weeks old." Speaking of the African American community, Rose said, "In most families, just to make it, parents have to work two and three different jobs. And they're not able to spend a lot time with children."

In the words of Greenwood and Levin (2000), as participants began "to understand the contextual conditions" under which their knowledge of child discipline had been created, they had to examine "whether or not the previous knowledge made sense in the new contexts" (p. 98). Indeed, all participants in this study recognized that changes in environmental and social contexts of child rearing demand development of new knowledge and traditions to be effective parents.

Conclusion

This article presents multiple narratives in multiple contexts of 27 individuals who were willing to spend some time talking about child discipline and parenting. Were the 27 individuals in this study exceptionally caring, thoughtful, and reflective? Were they more motivated, passionate, and committed to good parenting than other U.S. parents? Were they particularly flexible and open to new information? I think not. I believe that these participants are not significantly different from the over 80% of U.S. women (Dye, 2005) and men (Bachu, 1996) who become parents and assume a responsibility that, for most, involves a 20-year commitment.

It is ironic that parenting, a process so complex, so important, and experienced by so many, receives so little attention and public policy support. Little or no training on parenting or services exist for the millions of family households of parents, grandparents, or other family members raising nearly 72 million children under the age of 18. Viewed from a

holistic perspective, the United States has no nationwide system to support and assist with child rearing, although the creation of a national system of parenting education and services could conceivably prevent instances of abuse or neglect and the trauma experienced by children who are removed from their homes.

The participants in the current inquiry had much to say on parenting and child discipline and how they, and other parents, can be supported and assisted. I believe their words can inform child welfare policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. If we listen to their voices, what can we learn?

First, much of the body of research about CP and child discipline has focused on parents' deficits and factors that bring families into the child welfare system. A plethora of research on dysfunctional or risky parenting can be found. Less research is found on parents' strengths and how to support the vast majority of parents' intentionality of good parenting. This study's results revealed that participants were mostly unfamiliar with child development research, CP research, or other countries' legislation banning CP. Most expressed loyalty and respect for their parents. “They did the best they could” was a frequent comment, as participants described how as children they had experienced violence at the hands of their own loving parents. Participants discussed their beliefs that they had perpetuated the pattern of CP through their own desire to be good parents. Participant awarenesses developed and changed over time, and a number altered discipline strategies or ceased spanking their children or grandchildren. Most, even if they still used CP, expressed some discomfort with physical punishment because it did not “feel right.” Participants had not seen the End Physical Punishment of Children (EPOCH) Web site, which states, “Hitting people is wrong, and children are people too” (EPOCH, n.d), but all intuitively recognized and understood that in today's society other, nonviolent discipline methods may be necessary for a child's optimal development.

Perhaps most importantly, results suggest that an unprecedented opportunity exists to change society's paradigm, i.e., to affect the dominant parenting paradigm that spanking children is necessary and effective. Participants' recommendations indicate that the timing is ripe for a national initiative that builds on parent strengths and the intentionality of effective parenting. Participants called for giving U.S. parents more knowledge of child development and increasing awareness of positive discipline methods. Participants further discussed that child discipline is not part of the national discourse—but is something they want to have conversations about. In short, they concluded that parenting and child

discipline should become part of the national discourse. The recommendations acknowledge and propose to build on core strengths, i.e., parents' aspirations and efforts to be good parents. Participants' recommendations rejected the assumed inadequacy of parents, a traditional paradigm found in many service systems that "focus on what is missing rather than what is already there" (Johnson & Yanca, 2010, p. 312).

Specific recommendations involved creation of a comprehensive system, in essence, a new national initiative, to include: (a) a nationwide public information and education campaign; (b) parenting education at multiple levels, including schools, communities, and medical settings; (c) neighborhood-based services including respite and other supports that involve forming personal connections to assist parents, grandparents, and others who have assumed parenting responsibility; and (d) formalizing opportunities and venues for parents to engage in dialogue, share questions and experiences, and network about parenting and child discipline.

To develop and implement these participant recommendations would require new and revised public policy. Adopting the recommendations would alter funding priorities and invest a greater proportion of resources in prevention. Lastly, these recommendations require a fundamental shift in the perceived child welfare paradigm from one that punishes parents for their deficits and wrongdoing to one that supports parents and builds on their strengths.

In this study, respondents' voices were viewed as experts. Participants' constructions of parenting and child discipline demonstrate that a national campaign and freely available parenting support systems and information may have significant impact if designed to: be culturally sensitive, community based, and respectful; develop personal relationships; and build on parents' strengths. According to Schorr, Sylvester, and Dunkle (1999), for real change to occur, a long-term view is needed: "A long-term view of change means a two-generation focus, recognizing that strong families are the key to healthy children" (p. 13). Given that strengthening families through the fundamental philosophical and policy changes recommended may take a long time, can we afford to wait any longer to begin?

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Table 1

Countries That Ban Corporal Punishment of Children by Date of Passage

Time Period	Country	CP Ban Legislated
1970s	Sweden	1979
1980s	Finland	1983
	Norway	1987
	Austria	1989
1990s	Cyprus	1994
	Denmark	1997
	Latvia	1998
	Croatia	1999
2000	Germany	2000
	Israel	2000
	Bulgaria	2000
2003-2004	Iceland	2003
	Romania	2004
	Ukraine	2004
2005-2006	Hungary	2005
	Greece	2006
2007	Netherlands	2007
	New Zealand	2007
	Uruguay	2007
	Portugal	2007
	Venezuela	2007
	Spain	2007
2008	Costa Rica	2008
	Republic of Moldova	2008
	Luxembourg	2008
	Liechtenstein	2008
2009-2010	Poland	2010
	Tunisia	2010
	Kenya	2010

Note. Italy's Supreme Court (1996) ruled corporal punishment illegal; however, the ruling has not been affirmed through legislation. Nepal's Supreme Court (2005) invalidated legal defenses against a "minor beating," but the Child Act has not been amended. Both countries are omitted from this table. Table data were obtained from *States with Full Abolition* (Global Initiative, August 2010).

Table 2

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Children	Grand-children	Educa-tion	Ethnicity/ race	Religion	Relation-ship status
Focus Group 1								
Katie	F	44	3	0	BA	W	Lutheran	Divorced
Cyd	F	32	1	0	MSW	W	Jewish	Married
Caroline	F	36	2	0	BA	German, English, Welsh, French	Episcopal	Married
John	M	38	2	0	BA	W	Episcopal	Married
Leanne	F	48	3		3 yr college	W	Lutheran	Married
Faye	F	84	5 + 1 foster child	8 + 2‡	HS	W	Episcopal	Widowed
Curtis	M	65	2	2	PhD	W	Episcopal	Married
Sandi	F	56	2	4	RN, MPH	Swedish, Scott, Irish, Norwegian	Lutheran	Married
Anne	F	66	5	4	AA	Scott, Irish	Lutheran	Married§
Mack	M	43	3	0	Trade School	Hungarian	Lutheran	Divorced
Focus Group 2								
Courtney	F	34	2	0	AA	W	Christian	Separated
Kristin	F	25	0**	0	BSW	German, Czech	Christian	Married
Hannah	F	30	1	0	AA	W	Christian	Married
Emily	F	32	1	0	BS	English	Christian	Married
Mia	F	30	2	0	AA, BA	Hispanic	Christian	Married††
Cecilia	F	27	3	0	HS	Hispanic	none	Married
Toni	F	43	5	0	AA	Polish, Norwegian	Lutheran	Divorced‡‡
Smiley	F	48	0	0	--	Irish, Native American	Protestant	Married

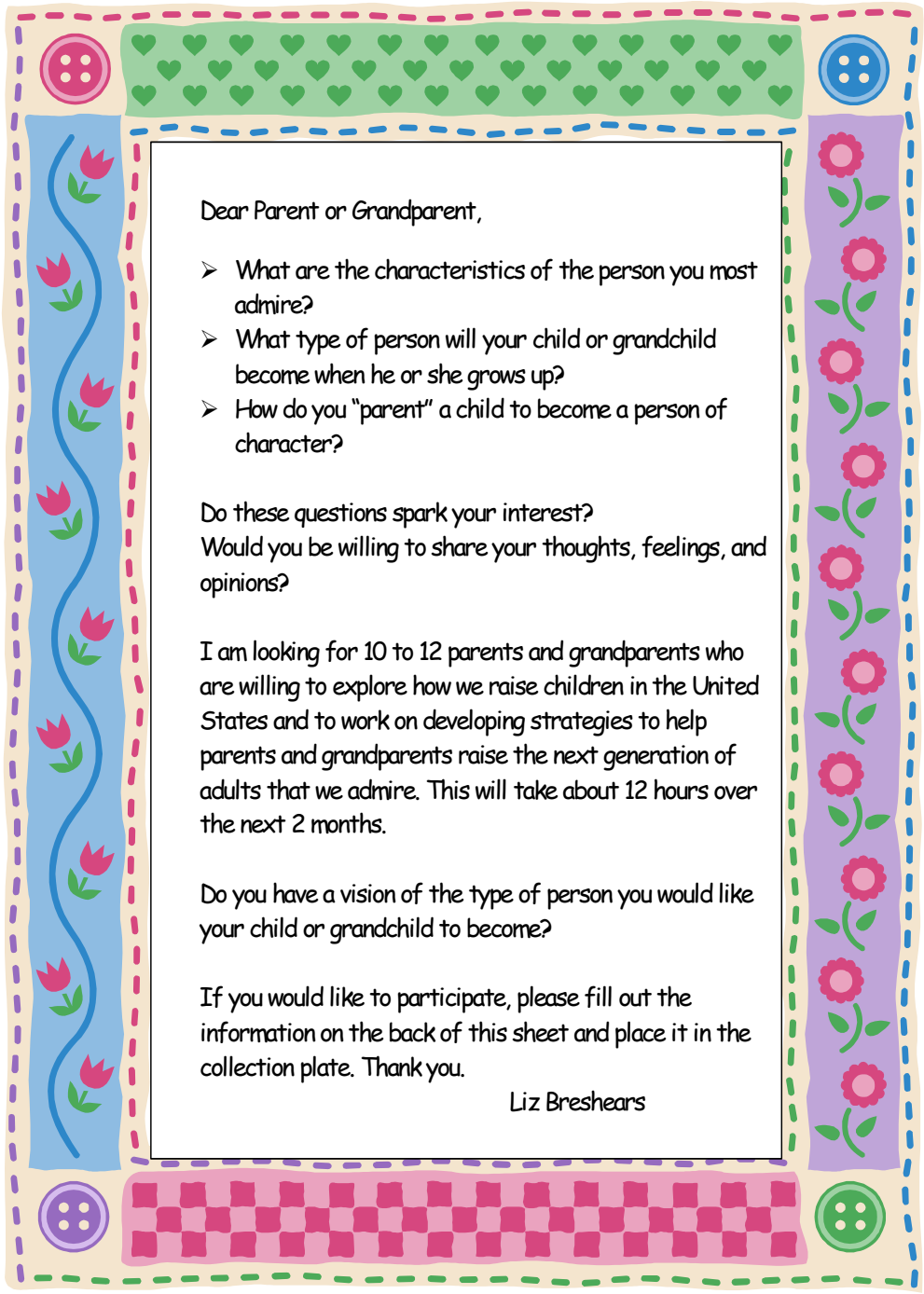
‡ Great-grandchildren
§ Divorced while raising children
** Two foster children
†† Single parent until son was 6 years old
‡‡ Lives with boyfriend, his children, and own children

Table 2 (continued)

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Children	Grand-children	Educa-tion	Ethnicity/ race	Religion	Relation-ship status
Individual Interviews								
Sara	F	36	3	0	BA	W	Catholic	Widow
Kathleen	F	49	1[§§]	0	HS	W		Married[***]
Bernardo	M	42	2	0	BS	Latino	Christian	Married
Adam	M	37	4	0	Trade school	W	Catholic	Married
Janelle	F	42	1	0	2 yr college	African American	Non-denomina-tional Christian	Divorced
Lynette	F	35	3	0	3 yr college	African American	Southern Baptist	Single
Louise	F	40	4[†††]	0	--	African American, Native American	Baptist	Married
Rose	F	45	10[‡‡‡]	0	--	African American	Southern Baptist	Married
Miss G	F	59	2	2	3 yr college	African American	Baptist	Divorced

[§§] Also has foster home with six teenage girls
[***] Single parent until daughter reached puberty, has been married 6 years
[†††] Includes one step-child, three adopted children
[‡‡‡] Includes one birth child, nine adopted children



Dear Parent or Grandparent,

- What are the characteristics of the person you most admire?
- What type of person will your child or grandchild become when he or she grows up?
- How do you "parent" a child to become a person of character?

Do these questions spark your interest?
Would you be willing to share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions?

I am looking for 10 to 12 parents and grandparents who are willing to explore how we raise children in the United States and to work on developing strategies to help parents and grandparents raise the next generation of adults that we admire. This will take about 12 hours over the next 2 months.

Do you have a vision of the type of person you would like your child or grandchild to become?

If you would like to participate, please fill out the information on the back of this sheet and place it in the collection plate. Thank you.

Liz Breshears

Figure 1: Front of flyer to recruit focus group 1 participants