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Commentary on "Strengthening Families: Parents' Voices on Discipline and Child Rearing"

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There is growing consensus among professionals working with parents and children, and advocates for child rights, that a ban on use of corporal punishment (CP) in raising children is justified in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989). In support of such a move proponents have pointed to the considerable literature to show that CP is linked to a number of adverse outcomes in children. A large number of studies have examined the negative effects of CP on children's development, with a wealth of evidence showing that frequent use of CP is associated with increased risk of child maltreatment and behavioral and emotional problems in children (Straus & Douglas, 2008).

Opponents of banning CP have attacked the scientific literature and made dire predictions of the adverse consequences for children if parents are not allowed to use CP, with predictions of children lacking self-discipline and becoming unmanageable. At times this issue has become heated and has attracted overstatements of risks and benefits on both sides of the argument, along with ill-informed commentary by media and politicians. The issue seems to polarize people; most parents have an opinion regarding whether CP is justified or beneficial. When signs of public dissent involving antisocial behavior, such as in the recent London riots, occupy the attention of the international media, a lack of discipline in the home is highlighted as a contributory cause that accounts for problems with wayward youth.

Breshears' study represents an effort to gain a clearer understanding of the reasons many parents in the US continue to support CP. The present paper sought to understand this resistance by using focus group, qualitative methods adopting a strengths-based approach to document the experiences and views of parents that varied with respect to their prior exposure to and endorsement of CP. The use of focus group methods to gain a consumer perspective is consistent with the recent call for greater consumer involvement in the development or adaptation of evidence-based parenting interventions (Sanders & Kirby, 2011). Several studies have illustrated the use of qualitative methods in tailoring evidence-based parenting interventions to the needs of specific groups of underserved parents such as parents of preterm infants, parents of children with cerebral palsy, parents of children with Asperger's Syndrome and grandparents of children with behavior problems (Sanders & Kirby, 2011). Specifically, Breshears' study conducted focus groups that canvassed the views of parents on topics such as learning to parent and sources of parenting information, parenting challenges in the 21st century,

experiencing discipline and CP as children, the impact of that discipline, and how parents choose discipline methods for their own children.

Using narrative accounts from a diverse range of parents, the author highlighted the significance and implications of the views expressed. The main conclusions were that parents need greater access to parent education and support, and a change in child welfare policy priorities is required so that parents have enhanced opportunities to strengthen their parenting skills and adopt less coercive parenting methods. Although this call is not new, with an increasing number of authors having made similar calls in the past for the adoption of a community/public health approach to parenting support (Kirp, 2010; Sanders, 2008; 2012), the study illustrates the value of capturing a consumer perspective of the issues they see as important in influencing their approach to parenting.

There is increasing evidence that such public health approaches to parenting support can be effective in reducing coercive parenting practices. For example, two large-scale population trials have implemented the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program—a multilevel system of parenting and family support—in an attempt to reduce the number of founded cases of child maltreatment, injuries due to maltreatment, the number of out-of-home placements and the level of psychosocial problems in the community (Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009; Sanders et al., 2008). In both of these examples, professional training in the delivery of parenting programs was supplemented by a media and communication strategy to promote positive parenting. Neither study involved public identification of the strategy as being a child maltreatment prevention initiative designed to reduce CP. Both involved public messages that stressed strengthening parents' skills in promoting their children's development to avoid the stigma often associated with parenting programs connected to a child abuse prevention agenda. Several replication studies of these population-level findings are underway in Australia, Canada, Scotland, Ireland and Sweden.

Parental resistance can be a major challenge to comprehensive parenting initiatives that directly seek to change specific parenting practices (including parents' use of CP). Parents often resist well-meaning, but largely unsolicited, parenting advice. Such advice may be labeled as preachy, intrusive, moralistic, or as reflecting the "nanny state" in action. To avoid such negative appraisals by parents and other members of the community, an alternative approach involves promoting parental choice and capacity to self-regulate. Self-regulation encourages parents to take control of their parenting decisions by accessing new

information and ideas, including evidence relating to “what works.” Better-informed parents make choices that promote good developmental outcomes for children and families.

So much attention has been focused on the “to spank or not to spank” issue that the developmental benefits for children (outcomes that matter to all parents) stemming from positive parenting have been largely ignored. For example, positive parenting programs not only reduce children’s behavioral and emotional problems and their risk trajectories for delinquency, alcohol and substance use, and early risky sexual behavior, but they are also associated with a number of very important benefits for adults. These include increased parental self-efficacy; reduced depression, stress, and anger; reduced risk of child abuse, couple conflict and increased work satisfaction; reduced occupational stress and burnout; and lower work-to-home and home-to-work conflict. Perhaps we should be emphasizing the benefits to adults when parents use positive parenting methods in raising children. Furthermore, the benefits of positive parenting are not confined to specific ethnic groups: improved child outcomes are evident in studies with a diverse range of ethnic and socioeconomic groups, including parents from Japan, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, various European countries, and Iran.

Breshears’ paper has argued that parents’ views about these issues are important and must be taken into account in planning intervention programs. Recent research on parent preferences regarding how they wish to receive parenting information shows that professional service providers are often out of sync with parents. For example, Metzler, Sanders, Rusby, & Crowley (2011) found that parents’ most preferred methods of accessing parenting advice were television and the Internet, and the least preferred methods included home visits, group parenting classes and seeing an individual practitioner. Nevertheless, we continue to emphasize the value of the least-preferred method of access to parenting advice. This occurs despite evidence that television programs on parenting are popular and can reach a very large segment of the parenting population. For example, a study involving UK parents evaluated the effects of a six-episode observational documentary series on parenting “Driving Mum and Dad Mad” (Calam, Sanders, Miller, Sadhnani, & Carmont, 2008). The study showed that parents viewing the program reported significant reductions in child conduct problems, and increases in parental self-efficacy and reduced dysfunctional parenting and parental anger. Although no specific measure of CP was reported, parents were less inclined to use coercive, escalative methods of managing their children’s behavior. Sanders, Joachim & Turner (2011)

also demonstrated that an eight-module online version of Triple P was effective in reducing child problem behavior, increasing positive parenting, and reducing coercive parenting.

The benefits of focus group methods in gaining a clearer understanding of parents' views on parenting has to take into account the limitations of focus group methods, including uncertainty about the representativeness of the views of a small sample of parents in capturing the voice of a very diverse range of parents. This paper argues for the value of mixed quantitative and qualitative methods in capturing the views of parents as consumers.

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