

Discipline and Deviant Behavior in Our Youth

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Abstract

Are American youth under disciplined, over coddled? The question has been asked and studied by experts frequently in the last few years. The number of young people involved in deviant or criminal behavior has not only tripled, but the age of those involved has gotten lower. People have been worried by such matters as the rise in juvenile delinquency, and often criticize schools as being too soft. Trouble in the American family has also led to trouble with today's youth. Never before have the advantages been so great, yet the great majority of young people today are filled with hopelessness and despair. Juvenile crime is increasing in the nation. This research is a critical look at how parents are disciplining juveniles in the home, and at what is causing the increase in violence in juveniles. This paper will explore the correlation, if any, between discipline and the rise in juvenile crime in Florida.

Introduction

Discipline is defined as a mental and moral training, obedience to rules, correction and/or chastisement (Hoffman 1994). During this research different methods of discipline will be explored, as well as the lack of discipline and its effects on our present juvenile population. Statistics show that juvenile crime has risen at an alarming rate. Since 1970, the juvenile population in Florida has only risen 45% according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) Statistical Analysis Center (SAC Notes, 1995). The FDLE report advises that between 1971 and 1994 the number of juveniles involved in crime, particularly violent crime, has risen significantly as shown in table 1.

The FDLE report further indicates that the age range of those involved has become significantly younger, with ages ranging from 11 to 24 years old. The profile of the typical offender is male, between the ages of 15-17 years old. Dobson (1992) quotes Dr. Louis Sullivan, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services during the Bush Administration as saying, "during every 100 hours in the streets of America, more young men die than during the first 100 hours of the ground war in the Persian Gulf."

Methods

The methods for this research were primarily literature review. Literature from the disciplines of criminal and juvenile justice, developmental psychology, learning theory, and communication was examined.

Child Discipline

Sears (1995) revealed that discipline is necessary to ensure that children become comfortable in expressing themselves, learning to handle anger, and developing self-confidence. Discipline brings out the best and worst in parents. It forces the parent to act like the adult they want the child to become. Discipline is about having the right relationship with a child. Lack of discipline demonstrates a lack of sensitivity toward oneself and others. Sears (1995) has identified three approaches to discipline: Authoritarian, a Communication approach, and Behavior Modification.

Change in reported rate for juvenile crime from 1971 to 1994

Murder	319%
Sexual Battery	350%
Robbery	399%
Aggravated Assault	519%
Burglary	43%
Larceny	106%
Auto Theft	238%

Table 1. Increases in juvenile crime in selected categories. Increases are 1994 rates when compared to 1971.

Authoritarian approach

Sears has identified this method of discipline as the traditional method. Parents are authority figures whom children must obey. Spanking is appropriate with this style. It makes clear that the parent must take charge. Many of today's discipline problems are a result of adults avoiding responsibility for the behavior of their children. Sears believes that children need wise authority figures in order to learn what to do and what not to do.

Problems with this type of discipline include the following: Children don't feel loved. Children internalized the fear of the parent's power to the point it controls their lives. Parents tend to focus on "stamping out" the bad in their children rather than focusing on the good. Parents learn to punish, but fail to find effective ways of dealing with their children's behavior problems. Children end up not respecting authority, but fearing it. The lack of respect shown in the home carries over to lack of respect for teachers, police officers, and others (Sears, 1995).

Communication approach

The communication model of discipline focuses on communication rather than punitive measures. In this model, there are no "bad children," just bad communication. Parents using this model focus on learning to listen and talk to their children. The parents learn to respect the child as a person and delve into the feelings behind unacceptable behavior. Parents focus on learning constructive ways to convey to their children what behavior is expected. Drawbacks with this model include parental loss of authority with the child. They take on the role of amateur psychologist, negotiator, and diplomat.

Behavior Modification approach

This model of discipline focuses on influencing the child either negatively or positively through his or her environment. "Time out" is a form of behavior modification where a child who is disruptive to the group, is removed from the group. Positive reinforcement and the teaching of "natural consequences" can be called upon when other approaches fail. Parents using this type of discipline focus on shaping behavior and conditioning, rather than judging a child.

According to Sears (1995), this model of discipline requires more energy and numerous techniques for it to continue to be effective. Most parents cannot maintain the energy or desire to ensure that this type of discipline is effective. Parents tend to focus on

"techniques" and the child's environment, rather than developing the parent-child relationship.

Dreikurs and Grey (1993) have a slightly different perspective about discipline. They discuss the idea of teaching children about "logical consequences." They feel that young people no longer accept that their parents' judgement is "absolute". Parents are called upon to justify their actions. Further, they feel that resistance to authority by young people is a result of living in a democratic society which encourages individuality.

Responsibility is the key to a disciplined society. Children must be taught that with freedom comes responsibility. Without accepting responsibility, a child will learn that poor behavior only brings about another form of authoritarianism which could be more oppressive. This model focuses on actions as mistakes and is concerned only with teaching what happens next.

Literature Review

Trouble in the American family has led to trouble with today's youth. Never before have the advantages been so great, yet the great majority of youth today are filled with hopelessness and despair.

There have been many studies done on the family. The Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency has commissioned many studies on "at risk" youth. Cantelon (1990) states that according to John J. Wilson, a "healthy childhood" is crucial for a child to become a well-adapted and productive member of society. The article goes on to say that too many children today are growing up poor, fatherless, left in the hands of child-care workers, or at home alone (latch-key kids). Other children are being raised by parents who abuse alcohol or drugs, are engaged in crime, or abuse and neglect them. This all leads to a child who has no role model and no boundaries. Parents, who fail to provide adequate supervision at home are more likely to produce anti-social children.

Cantelon (1990) states lacking proper role models, children develop their own norms based on their desires. In conclusion, the author advises that the "influence of the family environment on the child's social development lasts a lifetime." Accordingly, effective delinquency prevention efforts must involve the family, and should incorporate family strengthening.

In the wake of another juvenile being indicted for murder, Executive Director of the Florida Center for Children and Youth Mr. Jack Levine (1995) feels that Florida needs to "get honest" and focus on prevention and education programs. Florida's ranking as 47th out of 50 states in term delinquency treatment programs for children, makes Florida one of the worst states for children to live according to Levine. Levine goes on to state that, "unless we develop the political will to provide quality care right from the start, Florida will continue to pay its debts in child abuse, school failure, and crime."

Jim Booker, Coordinator for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, also feels that prevention programs are critical to reducing the number of kids involved in crime. Levine & Booker (1995) cite the following factors common to those kids involved in crime:

- 92% have only one parent
- 75% have a parent or sibling with a criminal record
- 85% are substance abusers
- 70% are from disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In 1988, the Department of Juvenile Justice, Office of Delinquency Prevention launched a major parenting initiative entitled Effective Parenting Strategies for Families of High Risk Youth. The objective of this study was to identify those programs which taught family strengthening skills which would reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in delinquent behavior. The study produced an assessment of 25 different intervention strategies for family discipline and role modeling within the family.

McKenzie (1993) reports that due to the "lack of parental discipline", society has responded in the form of "boot camps." These camps target non-violent offenders in the hopes of rehabilitating the offender, and reducing recidivism.

Glueck & Glueck (1962) cite in their study of delinquency, that discipline practices had a profound effect on the children in the study that became delinquent. Approximately ninety-six (96%) percent of those involved in the study were found to have been subjected to a faulty discipline process. They found that "over strictness" or inconsistencies in discipline practices contribute significantly to the development of certain traits. Over strictness seems to lead to feelings of isolation and resentment. Erratic discipline leads to impracticality and a lack of conscientiousness.

Dobson (1992) advises that children need limits and boundaries in order to develop into responsible individuals. Discipline outlines for the child what not to do and must be coupled with rewards for good or acceptable behavior. Children imitate or model what they see or hear from others, therefore it is important that the bond between parent and child be properly established, so that the child learns appropriate behaviors. It seems apparent from the literature that discipline plays an integral part in the development of a child. The lack of discipline or improper discipline has a profound effect on how a child behaves. "Boot camps" and the "Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program" are attempts to restore order to our society, and reform the youth of today.

Discussion

The literature appears to support the notion that without discipline children have no guidance, direction, or knowledge of the limits and rewards established by society in terms of acceptable behavior. The result is children who feel anxious, hopeless, and full of despair, reacting to the stimuli in a sometimes-violent manner.

Discipline obviously plays a significant role in the development of a child, but with confusion about what kind, how much, when and who should administer, it is very difficult to implement. The key is responsibility. Who is responsible for teaching the next generation the rules? Parents must take the lead. Parents must learn to not let ego, or anything else, stand in the way of learning proper parenting, skills that will enable them to raise a child.

It's always difficult to come to conclusions about whether one generation of children is being brought up with less discipline than another generation. There's always a tendency among adults, as they grow older to see widespread evidence that the younger generation is being pampered outrageously and is turning out weak and worthless. Clearly, parents must take the lead in establishing limits with firm but balanced discipline for their children.

At the 11th National Conference on Preventing Crime in the Black Community, Janet Reno (1996) states, "We must hold parents accountable for their children and we must do it firmly and with respect".

Captain Ron Bell has been with the Melbourne Police Department since 1980. During that time he has held a number of positions in the department including assignments in Patrol, as Detective Supervisor, and in several specialty units. His interests include all areas of law enforcement, but Ron has a special interest in goal setting for young people and other issues related to youth and families. Ron also serves as Vice President of the Police Community Relations Council, and is a certified criminal justice instructor.

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