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Situation Differences in Punitiveness of Iowa School Children*

By WILLIAM H. LYLE, JR. AND EUGENE E. LEVITT

The present report is part of a larger study in which punitiveness of grade school children was found to be related to certain facets of what is commonly called the authoritarian personality. Punitiveness was measured by means of hypothetical situations involving transgressions by children. The subject is asked to prescribe the proper action to be taken against the transgressor by adults or peers involved. The test consists of 28 such problem situations each having six possible choices of action of which three are classed as punitive and three non-punitive. Punitive action includes physical and verbal punishments, coercion, and deprivation.

The situations covered a wide range of behaviors including aggression between siblings, peers, and toward authority figures, moral transgressions like lying, stealing and cheating, and situations in which the problem posed was an outgrowth of some personal problem of the hypothetical child such as shyness, withdrawal, overly ascendant behavior or fear of physical pain. In the correlational section of the research, only total punitiveness scores on the Problem Situations Test (PST) were treated. The purpose of the present paper is to report an analysis of punitiveness as a function of the nature of the situation. The preliminary presentation of the PST was in open end form which provided an opportunity to recommend an appropriate response without alternative responses being suggested. The situations were presented in the following form: "Jack and Jim are fighting on the playground. The teacher comes out and stops the fight. What should she do next?" Twenty eight situations were used. The percentage of punitive responses per situation ranged from 9 to 79 for one class of 34 fifth grade children and from 3 to 82 in a second fifth grade class of 33 pupils. The correlation between the percent of punitive responses per situation for the 28 situations was .88. This indicates a rather high

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degree of consistency of the children's responses. Relatively independent groups are similar in the extent to which punitive action is a recommendation. Even the use of a multiple choice form of the situations in a completely different population of 157 fifth grade children did not substantially change this relationship. The correlation between the percentage of punitive responses for 22 situations which were presented to both groups was .53. This certainly seems to be an indication that the responses of the children were dictated by more than momentary influences.

Grouping of the items according to similarity of the situations posed led also to the observation that there were marked differences in the degree to which a situation seemed to evoke a punitive response. The manner in which the items were grouped is presented in Table I together with the mean frequencies for the grouped items. Those situations which arose because of personal problems

Table 1

Type of Situation Posed	Number of Situations	Mean Freq. of Punitive Response	Mean % Punitive Response
I. Interaction with authority			
A. Over personal problem	4	10	15%
B. Over disobedience	4	44.25	72%
C. Over lying, stealing, cheating, etc.	3	23	48%
C ₁ Over suspected stealing	1	17	29%
D. Over truancy	1	37	64%
E. Aggression against and resistance toward authority	2	37	58%
F. Miscellaneous	2	16	24%
II. Interaction with peers			
A. Sibling in authority interceding			
1. Aggression against younger sibling	1	51	81%
2. Aggression against older sibling	1	28	43%
B. Siblings without authority			
1. Younger sibling creating problem for older sibling	2	11	16%
C. Peers with authority interceding			
1. Over fighting and aggression			
a. With teacher interceding	2	32	48%
b. With parent interceding	1	12	21%
2. Suspected stealing	1	10	18%
D. Peers without authority interceding			
1. Lying, aggression, dominance	3	16	22%
TOTAL	28	25.07	39.85

were responded to punitively by only 15% of the 67 children. The situations which dealt with disobedience toward parents were responded to punitively by 72% of the children. The former group of items had a mean frequency of 10 with a sigma of 4.47 while the latter group had a mean of 44.25 with a sigma of 4.20. The resulting t is 9.39 which for six degrees of freedom is significant beyond the .001 level of confidence. We might conclude that there is sufficient recognition of the personal problem that punitive action, either physical, verbal, deprivational, or coercive is seldom recommended. On the other hand, the children are just as quick to recommend punitive action for disobedience as they are reluctant to recommend it in the case of the personal problems. The mean frequency for the remaining 20 items was 24.24, sigma 12.23. Both of the previous groups of items differ significantly from these. For the personal problem group of items with the remaining items the resulting t is 3.74, $df=22$, $p<.01$; while for the situations dealing with disobedience the t is 5.38, $df=22$, $p<.001$.

For the situations dealing with a personal problem rather explicit recommendations are made in place of punishment. The recommendations made in general were for assistance in overcoming fears, encouragement and support in conquering problems, and frequent attempt on the part of the interceding adult to "understand" or "try to find out" the reason for the problem. Some representative answers were: "Talk it over with him," "Speak to her nice," "Ask her what's wrong," "Talk to him and see if he gets interested," "He should tell Frank not to be afraid," "Ask him what's troubling him," "Explain to Frank that footfall would not hurt him as bad as he thinks," "Ask her why she is crying and if she is afraid of the teacher."

It is known that small children tend to prescribe the same kinds of punishment which they receive from their parents (2). The fact that the children in our sample appear to give due recognition to the personal problem possibly casts some light on the many studies (1) which seem to indicate that parents and teachers are inadequate in dealing with this kind of problem. On the other hand, it may be that the limited punitiveness and the tendency toward constructive action are functions of empathy and identification which are not commonly manifested by adults.

The preponderance of punitiveness on the items dealing with disobedience toward parents indirectly supports the view that there is rather widespread authoritarianism in the contemporary home. Apparently no child behavior is more frowned upon in the home

than defiance of parental authority. Our observations suggest that parents are more inclined to punish than teachers or peers. Disobedience is more apt to lead to punishment than any other kind of problem, even before lying, stealing, cheating or truancy.

The item which described the hitting of a younger by an older sib received the highest number of recommendations of punishment. Eighty-one per cent of our 67 children recommended punishment of some sort. On the multiple choice form, however, when an alternative is provided which reads, "Tell her that her sister is smaller and so don't hit her" the per cent of punitive responses decreased to 55%.

The situations which deal with interaction between older and younger siblings without adult intervention where the younger sib is creating a problem for an older sib rarely evokes recommendation of punishment. That is, children see older sibs as not punishing younger sibs in any way, even by scolding. This seems generally characteristic. The 5 situations which do not have authorities interceding have a mean percentage of punitive response of 22, while the remaining 23 items have a mean percentage of 44. The intervention of the authority (parent or teacher) seems to lead to more frequent punishment if we see the recommendations as supported by reality.

Our children recommended punishment for disobedience but are inclined to question disregard of the "moral" issues. With regard to situations which arise because of personal problems, the most frequent recommendation is not punishment or forced compliance but assistance. Children probably expect these kind of responses both from parents and teachers and it seems likely that their approval of either is in a high degree based on the extent to which those adults adopt the expected approach to problems.

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