

Effects of Parental Discipline on Juvenile Crime Rates

Research Synthesis: The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community

1. Importance on Proper Supervision and Discipline

The absence of parental supervision and discipline often is due simply to a lack of parenting skill, particularly if the parents were not supervised properly by their own parents. Summarizing the findings of the Oregon Group, a team of social science researchers under the leadership of Gerald R. Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center, Travis Hirschi of the University of Arizona writes:

[I]n order for the parent to teach the child not to use force or fraud, the parent must 1. monitor the child's behavior; 2. recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and 3. punish such behavior. All that is required to activate the system is affection for or investment in the child. The parent who cares for the child will watch his behavior, see him doing things he should not do, and correct him. Presto, a decent, socialized human being.¹⁾

Summarizing the Oregon Group's work on parental skills, Professor Kevin Wright advises: "Notice what the child is doing, monitor it over long periods of time, model social skill behavior, clearly state house rules, consistently provide some punishments for transgressions, provide reinforcement for conformity, and negotiate disagreement so the conflicts and crises do not escalate. Monitoring children involves awareness of their companions, whereabouts, and free-time activities. It also includes appropriate communication, accountability of the child to the parents and the amount of time spent with parents."²⁾ A host of other studies confirm that good supervision is at least as powerful as parental emotional attachment to the child and other forms of indirect control.³⁾ Monitoring fills the child's need for parental attention, moral education, and correction.

1.1 Discipline by Single Teen Mothers

The children of single teenage mothers are more at risk for later criminal behavior. One reason is that teenage single mothers monitor their children less than older married mothers do.⁴⁾ They are more inclined to have an inconsistent, explosively angry approach to disciplining their children. In such homes family members, including children, generally use aggressive, coercive methods to make sure their needs are met by others in the family. The parent's inability to monitor a child's behavior compounds the hostility between parent and child and leads to the first of the two major stages in delinquency described by the Oregon Group:

[The first stage is a] breakdown in family management procedures, producing an increase in antisocial behavior and an impairment in social skills and application at school. [In] the second stage, during adolescence, these conditions continue and the disruptions in the parents' monitoring practices and the adolescent's own poor social skills place him further at risk for finding his community in a deviant peer group.

2. Excessively Harsh Punishment

While parental monitoring and supervision obviously are good for children, harsh or excessive discipline has just the opposite effect. The parents of delinquents are harsher than ordinary parents in punishing their children; and depressed, stressed, or hostile parents more likely will vent their anger on their more aggressive children. In the case of the single teenage mother, the absence of the father increases the risk of harshness from the mother. For these children, harsh punishment can mean parental rejection. "Punishment that is too strict, frequent or severe can lead to a greater probability of delinquency regardless of parental attachments. That is, a strong parent-child bond will not lessen the adverse impact of punishment that is too harsh."

¹⁾ James Q. Wilson, *Crime and Public Policy* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press, 1983), chapter 4, pp. 53-68.

²⁾ Kevin N. Wright and Karen E. Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature," prepared under interagency agreement between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1992. P. 21.

³⁾ L. Edward Wells and Joseph H. Rankin, "Direct Parental Controls and Delinquency," *Criminology*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1988), pp. 263-285; Joseph H. Rankin and L. Edwards Wells, "The Effect of Parental Attachments and Direct Controls on Delinquency," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1990), pp. 140-165; D.J. West and D.P. Farrington, *The Delinquent Way of Life: Third Report of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* (New York: Crane Russak, 1977). Kevin N. Wright and Karen E. Wright, "Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide to the Literature," prepared under interagency agreement between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Assistance of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1992. P. 2. provides further references supporting the critical importance of this parental skill.

⁴⁾ Merry Morash and Lila Rucker, "An Exploratory Study of the Connection of Mother's Age at Childbearing to Her Children's Delinquency in Four Data Sets," *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1989), pp. 45-93.

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Last update: **2015/06/16 08:05**

