

Parenting and Fatherhood: Causal Attributions and Disciplinary Responses for Child Misbehaviour

Kayla Mackie & Professor Ian M. Evans

kaylamackie@windowslive.com, I.M.Evans@massey.ac.nz

School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Abstract

Changing gender roles and a different emphasis on what it means to be a father in New Zealand have contributed to fathers being required to play a new, more involved role in their children's lives. For many fathers today, contributing to decisions and application of discipline for bad behaviour is an important part of their parenting role. Research suggests that children benefit from consistent disciplinary routines. However, the attitude in New Zealand is that harsh discipline, particularly of a physical nature, is undesirable and needs to be discouraged. An important area for investigation is ways parenting decisions can be influenced in a positive direction, using simple psychological techniques that are easy to apply in the real world. Positive affective priming involves exposing people to stimuli, or primes, in order to influence their thoughts, emotions and behaviours in a specified direction. A potential practical application of positive affective priming may be in clinical use with fathers to influence their disciplinary choices in response to a child's bad behaviour, in a positive (less harsh) direction. This paper considers the literature relevant to the use of positive affective priming for this purpose.

Keywords: Positive affective priming, Fathers, Disciplinary choices, Discipline, Fathering, Parenting

Introduction

The role our parents play in our lives while we are young has a significant influence on the people we grow up to be. Few other people have such an impact on a young child's life. Therefore, parenting skills are extremely important processes for professionals to understand, particularly in their local context. With rates of abuse in New Zealand and many other Western nations at a steady high level and widespread disagreement over the use of specific parenting strategies (UNICEF, 2003), professional understanding and guidance in this area continues to be essential to ensure optimal outcomes for children.

The impact of the mother-child bond has been extensively researched and its importance almost universally acknowledged; we know that mothers bond more quickly and closely with their newborn infants than anyone else in that child's life, and in many cases remain the primary caregiver for many years (Feldman, Gordon, Schneiderman, Weisman & Zagorry-Shannon, 2010; Gray & Anderson, 2010). However, more recently, the father-child relationship has been acknowledged as distinct, different, yet no less important in contributing to a child's wellbeing and behavioural outcomes (Feldman et al., 2010). The research around fathering and fatherhood, though not as comprehensive as the research on mothers, is beginning to understand more clearly the unique roles that fathers can play in their children's lives (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth & Lamb, 2000; Callister, 1999; Feldman et al., 2010; Gray & Anderson, 2010). Furthermore the literature has begun to outline the specific challenges and difficulties faced by fathers as they fill these roles, and from the understanding of the realities of fatherhood this work promotes, we can begin to figure out how best to support, educate, guide and empower present and future fathers in this country.

Professional support programs or practices aiming to help fathers to maximise their parenting skills within their own personal family systems need to meet several criteria. They must be specifically tailored to fathers in an effort to acknowledge the unique roles, expectations, and pressures fathers experience; they must be simple and cost-effective to implement; and they must be effective in supporting the increase of positive parenting practices – namely constructive rather than harsh disciplinary choices – to encourage improved health and wellbeing outcomes for children in New Zealand. In aiming to support fathers to maximise their parenting skills even outside of a clinical context, simple techniques such as positive affective priming may prove

cost-effective and efficient ways to enhance parenting outcomes when used with reference to and understanding of the evolutionary and social history of fatherhood.

The Role of the Father

Fatherhood is a social and historical construct that has changed – and will continue to change – over time (Cabrera et al., 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010). Parenting, like any other human behaviour, has been and will continue to be shaped by a variety of external pressures: societal norms, historical consequences and, at least to some extent, evolutionary pressures in early human history (Cabrera et al., 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010).

Evolutionary Pressures and Paternal Care

Evolutionary pressures during the early development of modern humans (e.g., predation and meeting nutritional requirements) have almost certainly impacted on how fathers became involved in parenting and what roles they played (Gray & Anderson, 2010). Both in the past and today these pressures interact with social and cultural norms to shape human behaviour around parenting (Gray & Anderson, 2010). The exact circumstances leading to human paternal care are still being debated, however it is known that human fathers are unusual. In only 5% of mammal species do fathers provide paternal care (Geary, 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010). Additionally, most of our closest relatives – the various species of great apes – differ from us in terms of paternal involvement, with many providing either very limited or no paternal care (Gray & Anderson, 2010). This suggests that at some point in our evolutionary history humans have been exposed to different pressures relating to the provision of parenting (or lack thereof) in some way than many mammal species, or have responded differently to these pressures with paternal care as an effective strategy (Geary, 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010).

Human paternal care likely started with the role of fathers as providers; in all human societies men typically spend less of their time in direct childcare than women do – a pattern that is still dominant even today in societies heavily influenced by gender equality movements (Callister, 1999; Gray & Anderson, 2010). In early human evolution it is likely that this arrangement provided human societies with the best possible chance of raising

offspring to adulthood and consequentially ensuring one's own genes were passed on to later generations, through dividing childcare roles between two parents to ensure all major needs of offspring were met (Geary, 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010). Among non-human mammals in which paternal care is provided (e.g., wolves and other social carnivores) males typically play a provider of food and protector role for their offspring (Gray & Anderson, 2010). It is likely that in the evolution of modern humans, environmental pressures were responded to with paternal care as a strategy for the same reasons; paternal provision of resources and protection enhanced offspring survival and therefore reproductive success for both mothers and fathers (Geary, 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010).

Societal Norms and Paternal Care

In the Western world, at least, research suggests that the most overwhelmingly common role of the traditional father in the 20th Century was still that of the breadwinner, or provider (Cabrera et al., 2000; Callister, 1999). The historical role of the father as breadwinner or provider, while probably influenced by pressures on human populations in our evolutionary history, also made sense in the 19th and 20th Century from a practical societal perspective. Before the trend that saw a steadily increasing proportion of women in the workforce it was men who worked during the day; at the time of the industrial revolution this tended to mean men were away from home for most of the day (Cabrera et al., 2000). This naturally left mothers, the only parent at home for the majority of the time, in charge of coordinating and carrying out the majority of the nurturing, daily care, and disciplinary strategies (Cabrera et al., 2000; Feldman et al., 2010).

Historically, fathers had more choice in how they defined their parental roles and responsibilities than mothers, and, for this reason, motivation for paternal involvement is an interesting and important topic to consider (Cabrera et al., 2000). Cultural and societal diversity means that there is, and never has been, one universally accepted fathering role that we can analyse in isolation – and, if anything, diversity in the meanings of fatherhood continues to increase (Cabrera et al., 2000). Moving into the 21st Century we are seeing some changes in the roles that fathers play (Cabrera et al., 2000; Callister, 1999). Where the 20th Century father was the breadwinner, or

provider, the typical role of 21st Century father is the involved co-parent (Cabrera et al., 2000; Callister, 1999). Accompanying this shift in role are several major societal trends: an increase in the number of women in the labour force; an increasing proportion of absent fathers; for those fathers present in their children's lives, increased involvement with their children; and increased cultural diversity in Western families leading to a greater diversity of family structures and culturally sanctioned fatherhood roles (Cabrera et al., 2000).

These four factors are all important in considering the impact they may have on children. The increase in absent fathers seems to reflect the continually increasing acceptability of divorce and separation, alongside an increasing incidence of mixed families (Cabrera et al., 2000). On the other hand, for those fathers who remain within or in touch with the family unit, increased involvement with their children seems to be the trend (Cabrera et al., 2000). Therefore, the father in the role of the involved co-parent may play an equal part in deciding on how to discipline children and in applying disciplinary strategies (Cabrera et al., 2000; Gray & Anderson, 2010).

The presence or absence of a father figure in a child's life can have a significant impact on behavioural outcomes and wellbeing of that child. Father absence or lack of attachment seems to particularly affect boys; research shows that sons growing up without a positive father relationship are at increased risk of problems with sex-role and gender-identity development, poor school performance, and issues in psychosocial adjustment and self-control (Cabrera et al., 2000; Lamb, 2004). Girls may also be negatively impacted by a poor relationship with their fathers, although effects on daughters seem to be less dramatic and consistent (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Furthermore, it is not simply the presence of a father figure that impacts child outcomes; the quality of the relationship between a child and their father is important (Cabrera et al., 2000). Father attachment has been shown to positively impact a child's wellbeing, social competence, and cognitive development, even when confounding factors such as socioeconomic status are controlled for (Cabrera et al., 2000; Lamb, 2004). Again, the impact of having a present, actively involved father seems to be particularly salient for boys, although some effects are seen for daughters too (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Parenting and Discipline in a New Zealand Context

In New Zealand, in 2007, the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act was introduced into legislation (Crimes Act, 1961). This law removed the defence of reasonable force if a parent was charged with physically disciplining their child in a manner deemed to be unreasonable by law enforcement responders (Crimes Act, 1961). Before the introduction of this law, parents had the option of arguing that reasonable force had been used in the discipline of the child by selecting a physical method (Crimes Act, 1961). The effect of this law has essentially been to define physical disciplinary methods as unacceptable in the eyes of Government and professionals, and thereby to send a message to parents to preferentially select non-physical methods of discipline when responding to a child's misbehaviour.

Parenting practices related to discipline can generally be understood on a continuum ranging from harsh to constructive. Harsh discipline may be verbal, including practices such as yelling, threatening or name-calling. Harsh discipline may also be physical in nature, for example smacking or hitting (McKee et al., 2007). Both types of harsh discipline have been reliably associated with an increased likelihood of childhood externalising disorders and harsh verbal discipline has been associated with increased incidence of childhood internalising disorders (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; McKee et al., 2007; Weiss, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1992).

Highly emotive and mixed responses to the introduction of the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act suggest that, in New Zealand, many parents may still consider that smacking as a form of discipline is useful and effective. New Zealand also has an unacceptably high rate of child abuse, with 1 in 4 children living in households defined by the Ministry of Social Development as at medium to high risk of perpetrating abuse (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). While smacking as a disciplinary tool and child abuse are separate, with few families who endorse smacking meeting the criteria for abuse, harsh discipline can nevertheless have negative outcomes for children subjected to it (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; McKee et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 1992).

Boys are more likely to be subjected to both verbal and physical harsh discipline than girls

(McKee et al., 2007). Harsh discipline by fathers seems particularly likely to have a negative effect on sons' externalising behaviour, and has been linked to increased aggression towards others in boys (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; McKee et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 1992). The likelihood of experiencing harsh discipline decreases with age, and while this is certainly positive it underlines a worrying fact that young children, at a more vulnerable age, are at the highest risk of experiencing harsh discipline (McKee et al., 2007).

The negative effects of harsh discipline can be reduced by positive parenting – that is, warmth, respect and trust in the parent-child relationship. The negative outcomes are not mitigated entirely however, so parenting interventions cannot simply focus on increasing positive parenting; they must aim to eliminate or at least reduce the use of harsh discipline (McKee et al., 2007).

Positive Affective Priming

Affective priming investigates whether the presentation and subsequent evaluation of a stimulus, the prime, affects the processing of subsequent stimuli (Evans, 2010; Klauer, 1997). The assumption underlying this is that the stimulus is evaluated automatically and this evaluative processing precedes any kind of cognitive analysis of the stimuli (Klauer, 1997). It is believed that an affective response can be elicited with minimal stimulus input and virtually no cognitive processing (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993). Generally, evaluations of priming stimuli fall on a number of classic dimensions; this stimulus is good or bad, safe or dangerous, liked or disliked, and the theory of affective priming suggests exposure to this stimulus and our consequent automatic evaluation of that stimulus influences how we process information that is presented to us afterwards (Klauer, 1997). Affective priming is the effect that we observe when the evaluative mechanism comes into play and this evaluation is unconscious, automatic, fast-acting, and short-lived (Evans, 2010; Klauer, 1997; Murphy & Zajonc, 1993).

Positive affective priming is a type of priming process aimed particularly at influencing a person's emotions through their automatic evaluation of positive stimuli, and in doing so affects how they react to later activities and situations (Klauer, 1997; Murphy & Zajonc, 1993). Research shows

that people evaluate stimuli as positive or negative early in the elicitation of emotion; gross affective judgments seem to be made virtually without cognitive awareness (Klauer, 1997; Murphy & Zajonc, 1993). Furthermore, the effect can be obtained even if the person is not aware of being exposed to the priming stimulus. This is known as subliminal priming (Klauer, 1997).

Positive Affective Priming in the Context of Parenting

Given that a father's relationship with their child is important in determining outcomes for that child, the practical use of strategies such as positive affective priming could be important in improving the wellbeing of children in New Zealand. A parent who has had many negative interactions with their child in the past, or who has a history of negative interactions with children in general – for example, if they were in a situation dealing with children who had challenging and stressful behavioural issues – may have a range of unconscious negative beliefs about a child or children in general (Evans, 2010). Positive affective priming has been proposed as a technique to counter these negative feelings and in doing so produce some measurable change in the quality of the parent-child relationship, or in the daily interactions between a parent and child (Evans, 2010).

Positive affective priming has been considered as a possible strategy to influence how fathers conceptualise their child's bad behaviour and how they subsequently choose to deal with it (Evans, 2010). In practice this involves exposing fathers to positive images of fathers interacting with children and measuring whether this has an impact on how they understand child misbehaviour and which disciplinary strategies they go on to utilise in response.

Whether true positive affective priming can be used in the context of a parenting change strategy is an issue to be considered. The affective priming effect has been robustly demonstrated in the literature (Klauer, 1997), so it follows that fathers as a group are no more or less likely to show the priming effect than any other group of people. What will need to be considered is whether the mechanism of priming is the most promising for effecting an ultimate change in behaviour around father's conceptualisations of child misbehaviour and consequent disciplinary choices. In a clinical

context two features of affective priming are of the greatest importance for producing a clinically relevant positive priming or priming-like effect: the priming phenomenon itself is an automatic process, and the individual is unaware of the explicit purpose of the procedure in order to maximise reactance (Evans, 2010).

Regardless of the ultimate decisions in research design the aim is to work with fathers to improve parenting strategies and skills, and experimental psychology methods such as affective priming and evaluation-influencing may prove useful for this task. Positive affective priming is not in itself a treatment for clinically concerning parenting; however it may be useful in enhancing treatment outcomes or even producing measurable improvements in parenting decisions among a large variety of parents (Evans, 2010).

The majority of research and understanding of affective priming comes from highly controlled, simple experiments designed to manipulate factors such as the length of time between onset of prime stimulus and onset of target stimulus, and the type of basic priming stimuli that can be used to achieve different influences on attitude and emotions (Klauer, 1997). These experiments have been invaluable in demonstrating the mechanisms involved in affective priming and the characteristics of the priming affect under different conditions, however the challenge now is in translating positive affective priming into a clinical or real-world context (Evans, 2010; Klauer, 1997). While most priming experiments have used words as the priming stimuli, in a parenting context it makes more sense to have parents collect positive images of the child and for them to be exposed to these images prior to entering disciplinary interactions (Evans, 2010). In order to meet the priming conditions the parents need to be unaware of the purpose of gathering these photographs; explicitly explaining that this should persuade them their child is good and loving will not achieve a priming effect (Evans, 2010). The outcome is hopefully the father experiencing increased empathy, understanding and positive feelings about the child, resulting in the selection of more constructive and less harsh disciplinary methods (Evans, 2010). The primes are purely affective and designed simply to arouse positive feelings before child-father interactions (Evans, 2010).

Positive affective priming is not in itself a treatment technique so the effect size is likely to be minimal. However, it may facilitate healthier behaviour patterns in parenting and in doing so improve outcomes for both children and their fathers (Evans, 2010). Affective priming could very well be a worthwhile procedure for improving the quality of father-child interactions and may contribute subtly to, over time, improving or facilitating positive attitudes towards children.

Conclusion

The role of the father is entering a new phase in New Zealand society; we are living during a time where the shift from breadwinner or provider to involved co-parent is still significant, new and not understood as well as it could be. Parenting change strategies are hugely varied and obtain varying degrees of success. There is the need to develop and offer strategies to fathers that are efficient, effective, easy to implement, and specifically tailored to their needs.

Positive affective priming may be a promising strategy to add to other parenting training or support efforts, working to enhance the success of these efforts by subtly but effectively altering a father's subconscious beliefs and feelings about their child in the present moment. The advantages of positive affective priming lie in its simplicity and cost-effectiveness; it does not need to be administered by a registered clinician and, because the influence it exerts is relatively subtle and short-term, the likelihood of negative outcomes is minimal.

Fathers are now, more than ever before in human history, spending more time with and becoming more involved with their children. For many this is a learning curve, just as it is for professionals working in the area of parenting, and given the important impact a father can have on his children's lives, deserves the close attention and support of people working in the field.

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Kayla Mackie is a second year student in Massey University's Doctor of Clinical Psychology programme. Her research is focused on the use of positive affective priming to reduce the likelihood of fathers having negative causal attributions towards, and choosing harsh disciplinary responses to, the misbehaviour of their children. Kayla is interested in child and family psychology, neuropsychology, trauma processing and educational psychology.

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