

Subjective theories about parental discipline in parenting literature

Teorías subjetivas sobre disciplina parental en literatura para padres

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Received: 28-6-2018; Approved: 23-10-2018

Abstract

Introduction: Parental discipline is a topic frequently asked for advice by those who consult health professionals. It is related to parenting styles and has been scientifically studied regarding its effectiveness and impact on children. **Objective:** To describe the subjective theories about parental discipline present in recommendations made by doctors and psychologists in books for parents in Spanish. **Material and Method:** Thirteen books with advice for parents, written in Spanish by healthcare professionals published between 2000 and 2017 were analyzed. Data analysis was performed using Grounded Theory procedures adapted for the study of subjective theories, through open and axial coding. In addition, thematic codification was made to describe the cases, identifying subjective mottos and subjective theories for each case, which at the same time were grouped into superordinate subjective theories. **Results:** The data were grouped into three general subjective theories about parental discipline in the books analyzed. These subjective theories differ from one another in the importance attributed to authority, punishment, and the necessity of parental discipline. **Conclusion:** There are differences in parental discipline among the books. There is little scientific evidence on the subjective theories of the books. Results differ from historical analyses of these publications in other cultural and temporal contexts. The importance of developing practical guidelines on parental discipline based on evidence to guide parents by health professionals is highlighted.

Keywords:

Parenting;
Parents;
Publications;
Qualitative research;
Patient education;
parent-child
relationships

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How to cite this article: Rev Chil Pediatr 2019;90(1):52-59. DOI: 10.32641/rchped.v90i1.811

Introduction

Parental discipline (PD) is a frequent concern in the children and adolescents upbringing, where personal values, culture, experience and, increasingly important, scientific evidence converge. On various occasions, health professionals are consulted by parents on the subject and they advise them from the scientific and professional knowledge they have, but also from the so-called “subjective theories” (ST) that support and correspond to hypotheses or personal explanations that are not objective or scientific¹.

The ST and their relationship with practices constitute an area of study in health professionals showing that ST influence their professional practice^{2,3}. In other professionals, for example, in teachers, it is a long-studied approach to the relationship between their practices and scientific theories⁴.

In areas related to the personal life of the professional, for example, child upbringing, ST are likely to have an important influence, sometimes greater than that of scientific theories. The ST are not determined by a person's personal experiences, but it is unquestionable that in areas related to the socio-moral aspects, the influence can become important. This can lead to the delivery of different information depending on the professional to whom the parents go, listen or read, generating, for example, frustration in them⁵.

The PD is the set of acts and rules that parents use to promote values and behaviors in children, through different styles such as democratic, authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. It has a significant effect on the well-being of children because it guides moral, emotional, and physical development⁶.

Advice for parents given by health professionals through different media has been studied⁷. The most classic and studied medium are parenting books written for parents⁸. Studies show that the content of recommendations is influenced not only by knowledge in the professional area, but also by cultural context, personal beliefs, and fashion trends^{9,10,11}.

The scientific evidence about PD points out that: (a) a combination of authority in parenting, love, and defined limits would influence improved self-control, self-sufficiency, initiative, and cognitive development;¹² (b) the association of verbal strategy, time out, and non-abusive physical strategies reduce the child's uncooperative and aggressive behavior¹³; and (c) the use of excessively punitive or overly permissive discipline would lead to a deterioration in the child's health and behavioral problems¹⁴.

In this regard, there are conceptions that focus this discipline on the harsh treatment. There is evidence available on physical punishment about its negative consequences for the child development^{15,16} as well as

psychological punishment¹⁷.

However, despite the relevance of this issue to child development, Spanish America and Spain lack conclusive studies that offer a perspective on how parents are being supported in this task. One way to contribute to the above is to approach the ST present in the advice given by health professionals, through books for parents.

According to the above, the following generative questions¹⁸ guide this research:

1. Will there be a general shared ST on PD in the studied books?
2. In the books analyzed, are there tendencies similar to those found in studies of this type of books, in contexts different from Latin America?
3. Will there be scientific evidence for ST on PD in the analyzed books?

The general objective of this study is to understand the ST present in books for parents, in Spanish and by health professional authors, about PD. Specifically 1) to describe and interpret the ST present in the books, 2) to compare between the cases the reconstructed ST, and 3) to evaluate the presence of scientific evidence that supports the ST contained in the recommendations given in the books.

Material and Method

Cross-sectional and descriptive study. The research is part of the qualitative approach, therefore, it is not appropriate to include hypotheses prior to data collection. However, we previously enunciated generative questions instead.

For the information collection, the review of 35 books for parents, written in Spanish since 1994, was used in the context of a previous work carried out previously by the first author of this study¹⁹. In this study, it was found that 66% of them ($n = 23$) included family discipline as a topic, and for this, the following search terms were used: “discipline”, “limits and punishment(s)” between March and December 2016.

The 23 books identified in the previous study that included the subject of discipline were considered as sample starting for this study. From them, those that met the following inclusion criteria were selected for the analysis of this work: that the edition of the analyzed book had been published from the year 2000 onwards, that the authors were health professionals, and that there were not more than one book per author among the 23 books. Following these criteria, ten books were excluded. Two books by authors who had more than one book published in the period were excluded in order not to generate an “over-representa-

tion” of their ST in the analysis. Eight books published prior to 2000 were also excluded. After this, one of the 13 books included was replaced by the latest edition available for sale (2017).

The sample consisted of 13 books all available for purchase in or from Chile (online) in the search period. These are listed in Table 1.

The data analysis was based on Grounded Theory²⁰

Table 1. Books included (n: 13)

Case identifier (books)	Title	Author	Profession/specialization*	Year of the edition consulted	Country of the edition consulted
A	Niños con pataleta, adolescentes desafiantes (Children Who Throw Tantrums, Rebellious Adolescents)	Amanda Céspedes	Child-adolescent psychiatrist	2017	Chile
B	Hijos con personalidad... raíces y alas (Children with a Personality... Roots and Wings)	Alexander Lyford-Pike, Marianella Ciompi* and M ^a José Soler*	Psychiatrist and psychologists*	2010	Chile
C	Creciendo juntos... (Growing Up Together...)	Carlos González	Pediatrician	2013	Spain
D	Hijo único: consejos para la crianza (Only Children: Advice for Raising Them)	María Elena López and María Teresa Arango	Clinical psychologists	2011	Chile
E	A ser feliz también se aprende. Guía para la educación del niño de 2 a 6 años (You can also Learn to Be Happy: A Guide for Educating Children from 2 to 6 Years of Age)	Neva Milicic	Educational psychologist	2001	Chile
F	Hijos tiranos o débiles dependientes (Tyrannous Children or Dependent Weaklings)	Marta Alicia Chávez	Psychotherapist	2012	Mexico
G	Padres que aman demasiado (Parents Who Love Too Much)	Annie de Acevedo ^a , Jane Nelsen ^b and Cheryl Erwin ^c	a. Child psychologist b. Family and couples counselor c. Marriage and family therapist	2011	Chile
H	Los hijos en el medio. Cuidando su espacio durante el divorcio (Children in the Middle: Taking Care of Their Space During Divorce)	Ana Tempelsman ^a and Silvia Salinas ^b	a. Somatic psychologist b. Clinical psychologist	2011	Argentina
I	Disciplina sin lágrimas (Discipline with no Tears)	Daniel J. Siegel* and Tina Bryson**	Pediatrician and psychiatrist* Psychotherapist**	2015	Spain
J	Psicología del desarrollo (The Psychology of Development)	Felipe Valdemar Olórtégui Miranda	Psychologist	2008 (2 ^a ed.)	Peru
K	Sin dañar a terceros. El niño ante los conflictos entre papá y mamá (Without Hurting Others: The Child in Conflicts between Mom and Dad)	Julia Borbolla de Niño de Rivera	Clinical psychologist	2016	Mexico
L	No quiero crecer. Viva la diferencia para padres con hijos adolescentes (I Don't Want to Grow Up: <i>Long Live Difference</i> for Parents with Adolescent Sons and Daughters)	Pilar Sordo	Psychologist	2010	Chile
M	Ni rabietas ni conflictos (No Tantrums, no Conflicts)	Rosa Jové	Child and adolescent clinical psychologist and psychopediatrist	2011	Spain

* Information about the authors' professions and specializations was retrieved from their books or official websites.

procedures and the brief case description procedure of the thematic coding²¹. The analysis stages were two: intra-case analysis and inter-case analysis.

In the first stage of intra-case analysis, the researchers performed the open coding, a process in which both researchers separately coded part of the books, reconstructing explicit or implicit ST in the books. This implied expressing the concepts of this coding (for the purposes of this ST study) in a hypothesis or theory structure, identifying an antecedent and a consequent, in most cases using the form *if... then*¹. In this way, phrases or textual paragraphs of each book were identified that generated codes expressed by the researchers in the form of ST, the same ST was sometimes used to represent different quotes from a book. Each book was also characterized by a representative expression of the ST present in it, generating case mottos, which is the procedure proposed by Flick²¹ in the brief case descriptions made in the thematic coding. In a second stage, the researchers altogether grouped the cases with the objective of carrying out an inter-case analysis based on the results of the previous stage (ST and case mottos). The purpose of this data coding (axial coding) was the identification of superordinate ST (ST that subordinate others) that grouped into categories the subordinate ST recognized in textual quotations of the books in the first stage and the mottos of each book considering the possibility that more than one book and with different authors shared the same general explanation about the PD.

With respect to the safeguarding of the scientific rigor criteria, transparency was sought by giving the reader the possibility of understanding how the results were arrived at. Credibility was also sought through triangulation of the researcher in the analyses, with the authors analyzing the data separately and methodological triangulation between methods using different data coding procedures²¹.

This study was based on public data (books), thus it was not necessary to submit this research to an Ethics Committee.

Results

1). Subjective theories on family discipline supported by books (intra-case analysis).

Due to space reasons, the results of this stage will be described in a table. Thus, table 2 presents the results of the intra-case analysis stage, for each book is described: a) a statement considered typical in it or case motto, about the PD, and b) the central ST of each book, ST acting as a central category grouped the other ST of the book (the codes).

2). Superordinate subjective theories on family disci-

pline present in the books (inter-case analysis).

We did not find an ST common to all the books analyzed, but we reconstructed three superordinate ST¹ on PD in which each book was classified, from our interpretation based on the previous results of the intra-case analysis and from a more permissive pole to a more authority-centered one. These results are similar to those found in studies of books for parents from contexts other than Latin America and very generally these ST include scientific evidence on PD.

The first ST stresses the importance of parents disciplining by ensuring “emotional development” and avoiding authority-based practices. The second one suggests a mixture of authority with affection and avoidance, as far as possible, of punishment. The third one highlights the need for firm and “authoritative” discipline (table 3).

Discussion

The first generative question in this study is whether there would be a shared base ST on the concept of family discipline in the studied books. Coinciding with other previous research carried out also with publications of help for parents written by Latin American authors¹⁰, it was found in this research that there is a coexistence of opposing visions on the PD possible to express in different superordinate ST.

In general, it is observed that ST can be located from a pole that defends the importance of parents watching over the “emotional development” and the avoidance of authoritarian practices, to another where firm and authoritative discipline is seen as a facilitator of family education. This seems to be based on two opposing visions of the child and his or her needs: (a) a respectful pole that conceives the child as a person with rights and freedoms that should not be restricted; (b) another pole where the child seems to be seen as a future adult, who from his or her early years must learn virtues and values such as respect for rules and good social adaptation, extreme that defends the firmness importance in upbringing. The results on the ST of the books show a general correspondence with the styles of upbringing that have been studied in different contexts, representing here beliefs close to the permissive or democratic style and others to the authoritative one¹².

The role of punishment is a clearly differentiating element among the three ST, from the non-recommendation of punishments, the privilege of emotional support and moral explanation towards the children (ST1)⁶, going as far as possible through the punishment avoidance (ST2), to a general ST where disciplinary techniques include punishment, following principles of behavioral origin such as letting the child

Table 2. Mottoes and subjective theories representative of each book

Books (cases)	Motto	ST
A	It is possible to deal with a child's rebelliousness if we identify its causes, setting "clear, constant, and flexible limits" in order to educate him/her emotionally	It is necessary to "find the root" of rebellious behavior to understand its origin and <address it>
B	Educating children firmly, but in an environment of trust and affection builds character and human virtues	If PD is exerted with firmness, based on facts and authority, it is possible to educate mature and happy children
C	Children should be disciplined with love, respect, and patients, because they are willing to obey; authority is not necessary	The characteristics of today's society (cultural diversity) generate doubts regarding PD among parents, which leads to feelings of guilt, insecurity, and stress. This causes them to implement a largely authoritarian disciplinary style that results in difficulties in child development. To remedy this issue, parents must learn to be indulgent, teaching children upon the basis of dialog and tolerance
D	Parents' guilt due to having only one child sometimes is projected onto children, causing them to yield to their desires. This generates manipulating and demanding children	If children are educated permissively, they will not learn to be responsible and will not develop self-control
E	If norms and discipline have been well established, it is not necessary to impose authority	If children understand the consequences of their behaviors and what is expected of them, it is not necessary to punish them
F	A lack of authority generates overprotected children, thanks to weak parents who are afraid of inconveniencing them	If there is discipline without overprotection, it is possible to raise autonomous and responsible children while also avoiding family conflicts
H	Limits are necessary, but must be set with love and presence	If "limits", punishments, norms, or rules are combined with "love", they will fulfill their goal: to contribute to children's "care" and personal growth (they are established out of love for them)
I	"Discipline with empathy and love to encourage children's comprehensive development"	Children display indiscipline due to their cerebral immaturity, the tension affecting them, their context, or their secure attachment with their parents. Thus, to discipline them, we must keep our emotions in check, empathize with them, and express love; when we achieve this, we will be able to promote children's immediate collaboration and brain development
J	Physical and psychological "punishments" (or "sanctions") generate wounds that never heal	If parents yell at their children, they are marked for life and develop personality disorders or violent behaviors
K	"Clear norms define clear spaces. In them, it is easier to play and learn to live" (p. 135)	Limits provide children with safety. This shows them what they can do and what they cannot, which causes them to learn to take responsibility for their actions and their consequences
L	"Authority is necessary because it generates cleanliness, consistency, and the feeling of living in a safe world" (p. 28)	If we do not establish "authority", "limits", and order, we are not giving children what they need
M	Limits and punishments are unnecessary if parents know how to "use other techniques" to "educate their children or change their behavior"	If we make children obey through punishments (while they remain ignorant of the reason), we will be raising submissive adults. If this happens, their education will have been a failure

ST: subjective theory; DP: parental discipline; " ": verbatim quotations from each book.

cry, which is described as manipulation on the part of the child (ST3). This coincides with the study of the different disciplinary techniques preferred by parents, which we know depend on factors such as their schooling, gender¹³ or age²². The studied books coincide, with one exception, in the non-recommendation of all types of physical punishment, in line with current research²³,

which shows an agreement that even mild physical punishment (slapping, spanking) is associated with different problems in the future life of children¹⁹. This result coincides with the finding of Cain⁸, who found that publications supporting mild physical punishment are a minority.

In broader terms, this result could support the Ger-

Table 3. Characteristics of three general subjective theories about parental discipline and the books that represent them

ST		
1	2	3
PD based on love, respect, and empathy does not require authority or punishments	PD must be firm and affectionate. Firmness may require setting some limits and punishments, but affect is very important, because together they achieve an educational goal	Adequate education requires limits, control, and authority, as well as punishments (only when necessary) and parents who do not feel guilty. Without all this, respect is lost and/or overprotection emerges
Characteristics of each ST		
1. Understanding, loving, respectful, and empathetic (disciplinary) style, in which the concept of authority is not essential. Rejection of punishments and encouragement of dialog as a way to help children learn about the consequences of their actions through reflection. Fewer limits are set and more freedom is provided. This style is expected to facilitate communication and lead to the development of healthy and mature children	2. (Non-overwhelming) limits and sanctions are necessary. PD must be a mixture of "authority", affection, and love. Parents must set some limits and "norms" and, only if necessary, use some punishments and techniques such as "time outs". "Firm" but "flexible" parents are valued	3. "Firm" style (appreciation of respect, rules, "authority", punishing children out of love, including physical punishment for some authors). Positive PD, no excesses, but with control and limits. Parents are blamed for overprotection. The aim of PD is to educate children
Books that support each ST		
C, I, M	E, J	A, B, D, F, G, K, L, H

1. TS: subjective theory; 2. DP: parental discipline; 3. " ": verbatim quotations from books supporting each ST.

gen's²⁴ hypothesis on the simultaneous presence in society of an ideal of subject proper to modernity (pole of firmness for the proper insertion into society), along with a vision of the subject as a free being, where what is important is his/her integral (individual) development, in a cultural context with a tendency to "erosion of authority" ("postmodern consciousness"), children development that would be affected in an important way by the upbringing exercised by parents¹¹. Finally, it is possible to hypothesize that these opposing beliefs are also related, at one extreme, to a less conservative view of the education of children and to a tendency towards child-centrism in upbringing (ST1)²⁵, opposed to a perspective centered on the development and maintenance of the family as an institution, where indiscipline or a "crisis of authority" could lead to conflicts that weaken it.

Regarding the tendency towards "firmness" in the upbringing of children to avoid "bad discipline", it is interesting to point out that there are records in Argentina of their disclosure through publications for parents, written by health professionals in the thirties¹¹. This shows how this approach to parent counseling is longstanding in Latin America and, according to the results of this study, is still present.

In the second place, we wonder in this work if there are observed in the analyzed books tendencies similar to other revisions of this type of books in contexts different from the Latin American one. We did not find changes in the predominant positions by period throughout the history of child upbringing,

as described by Hardyment⁷. In our study, there is a disagreement regarding the PD, with arguments that make little reference to the scientific knowledge generated by the disciplines to which the authors belong, but to the professional knowledge implicitly associated with values, coinciding with other studies carried out in different contexts⁹.

Finally, the third generative question of this work is whether the incorporation of PD research would be observed in the ST. It was found that only very general empirical studies are implicit or explicit in some of the ST. What characterizes these books is the argumentation based on professional experience and implicitly on some psychological currents. For the most part, there is no dissemination of contemporary scientific knowledge concerning parental discipline, for example, the effects of different disciplinary techniques, their effectiveness, the associated contextual factors or factors that act as mediators between their use and their effects on the development of children and adolescents²⁶, or contextual considerations related to the socioeconomic level or gender differences of children, which scientific studies show¹⁵. According to scientific evidence, it has been significantly demonstrated that extremes of discipline, whether excessively permissive or excessively punitive, lead to harmful consequences for children¹².

Research on ST or beliefs, carried out with professionals (doctors, nurses, psychologists, and educators, among others), shows results similar to those of this study, this is to say, that among professionals subjective theories coexist²⁷ (sometimes predominate), based on

their individual experience (personal or professional)² along with scientific theories^{28,29} or based on learning from training, when making decisions or describing some aspects of their work³⁰. As Durán³¹ states, highlighting the idea of Schön³², applied in professional work, problems resist technical solutions or based on theory³¹. It is possible to hypothesize that in those areas closer to the personal life of the professional, in this case how he or she was raised or how he or she raises, these ST have greater force than the scientific evidence that supports his or her degree or specialty.

Finally, we want to extend these results cautiously to the parents counseling by professionals. If the same trend present in this study is observed, we could suppose the effects of confusion or even possible judgments from professionals to parents, based on personal preferences regarding disciplinary practices. On this hypothesis, there are studies on the undesirable effects of professional parenting advice⁵.

This study has limitations such as the absence of more triangulation procedures in the analysis, incorporating other ST analysis techniques could be a contribution and a sampling carried out from different Spanish-speaking countries would allow the reconstruction improvement of the study object.

A strength of this research is that it is the first in Latin America and Spain to analyze this type of books, coming from different countries and focusing on those written by health professionals and on the subject of PD.

The results of this work warn of the need to continue studying professional advice on discipline, in order to better understand the nature of this type of knowledge, its impact on the child's development and on the parental role. It is important that professional associations in Latin America and Spain work to build evidence-based consensus on this and other parenting issues.

Conclusions

In conclusion, three superordinate subjective theories¹ have been identified, with which it is possible to differentiate the books for parents with advice on PD reviewed in this study. In relation to the used information in the reviewed books, the results show that only

in a very general way is the current scientific evidence on the subject implicitly or explicitly used. Finally, the books contain advice based mainly on ST based on professional experience and on particular visions of society and the role of the family, and implicitly and in a non-preponderant way on the knowledge linked to some medical or psychological currents.

Achieving standardization of the recommendations for parents and/or caregivers on PD provided by the health team and the development of practical guidelines in this regard could contribute to generating healthy bonds and relationships between parents and children. The above to help children achieve a healthy intellectual and emotional development through the use of respectful disciplinary practices that also extends to the next generations.

* Information about the authors' professions and specializations was retrieved from their books or official websites.

Ethical Responsibilities

Human Beings and animals protection: Disclosure the authors state that the procedures were followed according to the Declaration of Helsinki and the World Medical Association regarding human experimentation developed for the medical community.

Data confidentiality: The authors state that they have followed the protocols of their Center and Local regulations on the publication of patient data.

Rights to privacy and informed consent: The authors state that the information has been obtained anonymously from previous data, therefore, Research Ethics Committee, in its discretion, has exempted from obtaining an informed consent, which is recorded in the respective form

Financial Disclosure

Authors state that no economic support has been associated with the present study.

Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the present study.

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