

Formal and Informal Policies on Preventing Violent Discipline through Home Visitation

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INTRODUCTION

Home visiting programs build supportive, non-judgmental relationships between trained staff and at-risk parents of young children through frequent home visits in early childhood. Although home visitation emphasizes parental independence, programs are also evaluated on specific outcome measures such as whether parents have unrealistic expectations about their child or continue using violent discipline. Little is known about how home visiting program supervisors expect program staff to address parents receiving home visits who spank their children.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

In-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews 90-120 minutes in length were conducted with 19 administrators of Healthy Families America and Parents as Teachers home visiting programs in a large Midwestern state. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded thematically, and subjected to content analysis.

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RESULTS

Administrator perspectives on spanking were coded in four categories: 1) Strongly discourage or 2) discourage spanking; 3) neutrality in which information about spanking was presented with neither encouragement nor discouragement; and 4) non-engagement of non-abusive spanking.

1) STRONG DISCOURAGEMENT OF SPANKING

■ *“It’s no-spanking—no-spanking—no-spanking, we deliver that message, that’s the program model, that’s the message we deliver.”*

■ *“We advocate no spanking because...it is a no-spanking program. Families don’t always know, and you are right about home visitors who think it’s okay. I have a couple who do and I don’t like to hear that because our philosophy is: No one spans.”*

2) DISCOURAGEMENT OF SPANKING

■ *“We don’t approve of spanking. I know that it happens in homes, and we try to teach families how to discipline without that.”*

■ *“We talk about how a single episode of spanking can get elevated to abuse. We have that relationship and we are always addressing those things, because that is our whole mission, to prevent child abuse.”*

3) NEUTRALITY ON SPANKING

■ *“...Having that relationship where you go in and parents start to trust you, then they start to ask questions, then you can give them some solid, evidence-based materials based on spanking for instance, where you can say, “This is what the research says about spanking. How do you feel about spanking? Let’s have a discussion about*

spanking.” And then parents are given the opportunity to grow and choose what to do.”

■ *“We’re not going to tell anyone they can’t spank their children...I’m not going to ask you whether you spank your children or whether you have ever spanked your children, but this is what the [program] model says.”*

4) NON-ENGAGEMENT OF SPANKING

■ *“That’s probably also a personal parent educator/family issue... you need to decide what kind of discipline you are going to use.”*

■ *“It is not against the law to spank your child. It’s not against the law to—it’s just not. So it’s not something—you know, especially, you have people in the field with bleeding hearts, who want to protect everyone and save the world, and we have to make sure we’re not overstepping boundaries.”*

■ *“A lot of times spanking is carried out because of the parents’ emotions, not because of the behavior of the child. So if you work with infant mental health, work with the mom on anger management, and she might not stop it but hopefully it will decrease. You can’t get into that! That’s like talking politics and religion!”*

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

- Respondents that discouraged spanking emphasized program model, mission, and philosophy as their rationale for doing so.
- Respondents neutral on spanking also appealed to program models.
- Respondents that did not engage non-abusive spanking emphasized personal autonomy/privacy (of both parents and staff) as their rationale for not doing so.