

Parents' Response to Children's Behavior in Restaurants

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ABSTRACT: Parents are not aware of how effectively or ineffectively they are controlling their children's behavior in restaurants. At a local restaurant, 28 boys and 23 girls were randomly observed while dining with their parents. Children's responses to parents' management skills were rated as full compliance, some compliance, and non-compliance. A cross-tabulation of the presence of toys was made to demonstrate how they might aid in managing children. Parents' child-management methods were coded as: Talking, Coercing, Saying no, Rewarding, and Employing or Needing no discipline. The results show that 27% of parents observed either did not manage, or only somewhat effectively managed their children.

Researchers have long recognized the importance of developing techniques for teaching behavioral procedures to parents. Through "how to" parent training manuals and seminars, parents recognize the importance of learning and understanding the behavior of their children (Bauman, Reiss, Rogers, & Bally, 1983). From advice manuals, parents are taught a variety of skills, including toilet training, improving children's behavior on shopping trips, and encouraging children to finish their meals as well as snack control (Bauman et al., 1983).

However, advice manuals have not taught enough about mealtime behavior (Bauman et al., 1983). Although mealtime behavior procedures have been developed for teaching mentally retarded adults appropriate behaviors and the skills needed to order food from restaurants (Alvey & Stanley, 1990), what about children who do not have mental retardation? These children can be just as disruptive as mentally retarded children are in public. Special needs children often have help, but through what media can parents of other children learn the best way to respond to misbehavior in public if research is not focusing on the problem?

Research conducted by Speller and Millan (1975) reported the applications of a token economy in a nursery school dining room. The exchange of tokens earned by good behavior did decrease the frequencies of fighting, standing up, and playing in the dining room. In addition, the proper use of silverware increased (1975). This research could demonstrate a very important parental tool for the promotion of good behavior in public places. However, most parents don't use token economies. Instead they try to reason with their children or simply tell the child "no," perhaps even spanking the child. Current research suggests that reasoning is more effective than spanking in many situations, but maintaining parental control while eating in public remains a dilemma.

Thankfully, observational instruments have indeed been designed to measure children's mealtime behaviors and parental influences on child eating (Klesges, Malott,

Boschec, & Weber, 1986). However, an important aspect of mealtime behavior that has not been thoroughly researched is the management of normal children's behavior in restaurants. This is particularly relevant because, due to the set up of today's society, an increasing number of families dine out daily. Yet, these restaurants tend to be designed primarily with adults in mind. Frequently, a family is forced to wait twenty or more minutes from the time they sit down to the time they receive their food. During this lengthy layover, the children are expected to sit quietly and do nothing while the adults talk among themselves. It is not surprising that children who are normally well behaved are disruptive in these situations (Bauman et al., 1983). Thus, the question remains. How indeed, do parents get children to behave in restaurants? Do the parents' methods work? And which methods are most effective?

METHODS

Participants

Twenty toddlers and thirty-one adolescents were observed while dining publicly with their parents. Of the 51 children, 28 were boys and 23 were girls.

Design and Procedure

The observations were conducted for twelve hours at the Colonial Pancake House. During pre-observation, children were noted for the following types of misbehavior: fighting with siblings, yelling at the family, standing on chairs, playing away from the table, throwing food, spitting at siblings, and interrupting conversations.

The main point of the research was to discern what methods of rewards or punishment, if any, the parents employed in order to control the children's behavior during pre-meal. A coding scheme of how parents responded to or prevented the misbehavior is in Table 1.

The effectiveness of the individual parent's prevention or elimination of the child's misbehavior was rated as full compliance, some compliance, or non-compliance. Five categories were used to describe the type of management skill used by the parents: Talking, Coercion, Saying "No," Rewarding, and No Correction Employed. The No Correction category was accounted for and rated in order to show that children do in fact behave in restaurants without their parents' management. It was assumed that prior management had taken place and was effective for these well-behaved children. Toys were accounted for as a cross-tabulation to show how they could aid parents in a social environment.

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Table 1. CODING SCHEME

CODE	NAME	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
M,F	Gender	The sex of the child observed.	Male, Female
T,A	Age	The age group of the child observed.	Toddler, Adolescent
R	Reward	Giving the child money or tokens in order to prevent or control misbehavior.	If you are good, I will give you \$\$.
C	Coercion	The use of aggression to discipline child.	Yelling, Spanking
N	No! No!	Telling the child "No" to stop his or her actions.	I said No!
T	Toys	Giving the child a toy to play with.	Crayons and paper
A	Talking	Exchanging thoughts with and praising the child.	What would you like to do today?
O	None	No form of correction or prevention was employed.	Behaving well

Note. Coding scheme was determined by a pilot, pre-observation study.

The only manipulation of the observation occurred in requesting that the waitress seat (only) families in three designated tables. An additional table next to the three tables was designated for myself. This manipulation was used in order to divert attention away from the observation; I was able to sit in one place instead of moving around disruptively. Since the families came and left as they pleased, three tables were used to ensure continuous observation. A time sampling observation took place 5 minutes after the family sat down and ended when their meal arrived; total observation time per family was 10-15 minutes. At five-minute intervals, observation was discontinued for one minute, and parent responses were recorded.

RESULTS

Ratings for children's responses to parents' management skills in restaurants are shown in Table 2. The percentages of parents' management skills were: talking or praising (37%); coercion (10%); telling the child "No" (20%); rewarding and tokens (6%); and no parental managing (27%). The results display a significant difference in compliance between parents who talked to and/or rewarded their children, and those who were coercive and/or said "No." A Chi Square was used on parental technique and child behavior, in which a significant effect was found, $\chi^2(8)=61.87$, $P<.001$.

The results show that only 50% of non-compliant children had a toy. The results also show that toddlers and boys received the greatest degree of coercive discipline. More adolescents than toddlers complied with their parents. No difference was found in terms of gender compliance. Results showed little difference in both gender and age for some compliance. A Chi Square was used on the categories of age, gender, and having a toy, in which a non-significant effect was found.

DISCUSSION

The above research responds to the questions regarding ways in which parents get children to behave in restaurants, as well as the effectiveness of their methods in correcting inappropri-

ate behavior. As seen in Table 2, 45% of the children complied with their parent's management. Twenty-seven percent of the children did not comply or only somewhat complied with their parent's management. Twenty-seven percent of the children neither had nor needed parental management.

The results clearly indicate that neither coercive management nor telling a child "No" works at all with children, even to a slight degree. Further research could still be done in order to determine whether parents who were reported as being coercive habitually use this skill as the primary management of their children, or whether they were simply "having a bad day."

This research could be correlated with other research centered on disciplining skills. For example, Murray Straus (1994) reported that corporal punishment such as spanking

Table 2

Rating for Children's Responses to Parent's Management Skills

Parent's Management Skills	Children's Responses		
	No Compliance	Some Compliance	Full Compliance
Talk			19
Coerce	4	1	
No!No!	2	7	1
Reward			3
No Correction Employed			14
Total	6	8	37

Note: Chi Square results based on child responses to parental management.

Parents' Response

and/or slapping a child are within both the legal and publicly accepted levels of punishment. However, these methods can be used so frequently as to be considered abusive by most Americans' standards. While Straus's findings illustrate that boys receive more coercive discipline than girls do, the findings also show no significant difference in gender before the children enter school. With a larger sample size this current study would be more consistent with Straus's finding on gender differences with coercive discipline.

This current study seems to complement the research of Kenneth Bauman and his assistants (1983), who researched the ways in which children respond to new parental techniques while dining in restaurants. Bauman designed a novel advice package that offered simple steps to help parents restructure many of the opportunities for inappropriate behavior. In addition the advice package provided children with the opportunity to engage in appropriate behavior. The package contains some of the following suggestions for parents: (a) specifying the appropriate behavior that the children should engage in at the restaurant; (b) providing small toys to occupy their time; (c) periodically praising the children for appropriate behavior in order to positively reinforce the good behavior. These methods have all been proven very effective in terms of decreasing the high percentage of non-compliance to parental management in a social environment. Research conducted by George Holden (1983) concluded that a parent's choice of management may be more than simply a reaction to the child's behavior in that it is influenced by a variety of factors, such as future character goals for the child or the parent's current state of mind.

This current study indicates some of the most productive ways to gain social control over a child. For example, rewarding a child for good behavior and including rather than excluding a child from conversation were proven to be

highly effective. In addition, praising the child for good behavior while providing toys and novel stimulation usually results in the child's compliance.

This research demonstrates the need for parents to learn new techniques to help their children and themselves through the difficult pre-meal waiting period. Children can learn to feel good about themselves when prevention and discipline are used consistently and effectively. Most importantly, correcting a child's behavior should focus on what is best for the child, not what is most effective for the parent.

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