

# TENTATIVE FINDINGS ON CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES TO ACCIDENTAL INCIDENTS OF NON-INTENTIONAL ACTS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on accidental incidents where there is no intention to misbehave/disobey. The children respond to projective material depicting children having accidents with no malice or forethought. The children's reactions are discussed in light of their developmental stages as outlined by Piaget and Inhelder (1968) and Kohlberg (1976). The acts depicted are accidental, and should not provoke punishment. The results indicating punishment will be carefully scrutinised; in view of the linkage that exists between child abuse acts; the lack of differentiation that exists between types of misbehaviour that are unlikely to convey the fundamentals, which are a prerequisite for the development of moral judgement.

## INTRODUCTION

The age group spanning pre-primary and primary school aged children displays the highest incidence of physical child abuse (Gil, 1971; Ackley 1977; Bishop & Moore, 1978; Day, 1979; Starr, 1979; Boss, 1980 and 1983). However, there is a paucity of research examining the perceptions of this 'at risk' population in regard to maltreatment. This oversight might in fact be due to the general lack of consensus in the area of child abuse as to definition; and range of inclusion criteria. As a consequence, this has further hampered accurate assessment of the incidence of child abuse; which in turn has had implications for planning training programmes for workers in the area of child abuse; treatment programmes for families and, above all, preventative programmes. On the inter- and intra-national scene, child rearing practices vary. Multicultural populations in countries like the United States, Canada, Israel and Australia, have an ethos of child rearing practices which are not homogenous, and customary as for example a country like Turkey.

## Aim of the Present Study

This study aims to report on a group of 4-11 year old children in relation to their perceptions and attitudes of what should happen to children depicted in visual scenarios (see scenarios 1-3 further on) involved in accidental non-intentional acts. These acts had not been previously forbidden in any way; they were purely accidental with no malice or forethought on part of the perpetrator. It was argued that

children would draw from their accumulated past experience of being treated in similar situations in the past. One would expect that punishment should not be meted out for accidental non-intentional acts even though the children (respondents) in reality might have been chastised by their parents for "accidents". It is hoped that our findings might shed light on the mechanism of "logic" prevailing at the time a decision is made to punish.

## Literature Review

Gelles (1980) in his national survey of the United States asked questions concerning "normal violence" associated with physical punishment and extreme violence associated with physical punishment, for example the use of a gun or a knife. His rationale for this line of questioning was based on the belief that "ordinary physical punishment" and "child abuse" are but two ends of a single continuum of violence towards children. Parental physical punitiveness shows a positive correlation with psychopathology, delinquency and aggressive acting out behaviour; whereas, educational measures that use punishment, depress academic performance and have adverse effects on the personality development of the pupils, (Feshbach 1980). Legislation passed in Sweden, July 1979, prohibits parents from beating or humiliating their children; this also includes all acts of physical or mental coercion (Feshbach, 1980). Sad to say only one country in the whole world protects the child. On the positive side, it is a beginning for a dawning of a new humanity in relation to their offspring. Internationally, countries are coming into line and steadily eliminating corporal punishment from the education process. Where there have been calls for the reintroduction of corporal punishment in schools, it is suggested inadequate training in alternative modes of pupil management, control and discipline had been provided to teachers. The transition is usually abrupt and teachers are left hopelessly bereft; without, having had a dry run in alternative modes of punishment before the due date of legislation.

According to Gelles (1980) 3 to 9 year olds are hit 82% of the time, with 10-14 year olds, 66% and 15-17 year olds 34% of the time. We are concerned with 4 to 11 year olds in our study and are interested in seeing whether children in Australia decided on punishment as frequently or in a similar pattern as the American parents that "hit out" at their children.

We shall examine the role perception in our sample of children as it pertains to punishments. Perceptions involve recognising or identifying interpreting and understanding phenomena (Evans, 1978). The role of perception will be elaborated on in a developmental perspective. The core developmental aspects to be considered for this research are cognitive and moral development. Developmental changes in moral thought are associated with cognitive development (Endler, 1976).

Differences across ages are expected due to the Piagetian sequence of developmental invariant stages (Serafino & Armstrong, 1980). Children between the ages of 2 to 6 years are in the preoperational stage. Their mental operations are limited thus explaining their preoccupation mainly with the consequences of the act. The progression into the next developmental stage of formal operations enables the child to perform mental operations, logical and sequential problems, therefore allowing him or her to consider many aspects of the situation before arriving at any decision (Serafino & Armstrong, 1980).

In Piagetian terms, the preoperational (18 months to 7 years) child's morality concepts differ from older children as a result of the child's ideas of intentionality, relativism and punishment. Behaviour is guided by intentions so it becomes imperative that a child must learn this concept. Piaget states that a young preschooler realises that intentions are important, but lacks a true understanding of what intentions are, or how they should be evaluated. A child between the age of 7 or 8 still judges behaviour in relation to consequences, rather than intentionality of the perpetrator. As the child progresses out of the ego-centric stage, the concept of intentionality becomes easier to understand and the child will be able to regard the intentional act as being 'worse' than an unintentional act, without only considering the extent of the damage.

The concept of relativism, in terms of good and evil, is also developed by school aged children. Behaviour is no longer judged in absolute terms but as a mixture of good and bad.

The final stage in the child's understanding of morality is that of comprehending the notion of punishment. Piaget states that the young child comes to realise that for punishment to be administered, bad behaviour must have occurred. It is not until the age of 7 years that a child can judge whether or not a punishment is justified.

It therefore appears that Piaget's theory of moral development of the child also reflects the cognitive functioning of the child.

**METHOD**

One hundred and twenty subjects comprised the test sample divided into four age groups, 4, 6, 9 and 11 year olds. Each age group represented by 15 boys and 15 girls. All children were assessed by their class teacher to be average to above average in intelligence. This sample of children was drawn from an upper middle class area in Melbourne. Permission to work with a more representative sample was difficult to obtain.

Each child was assessed by two assessors in the following manner:

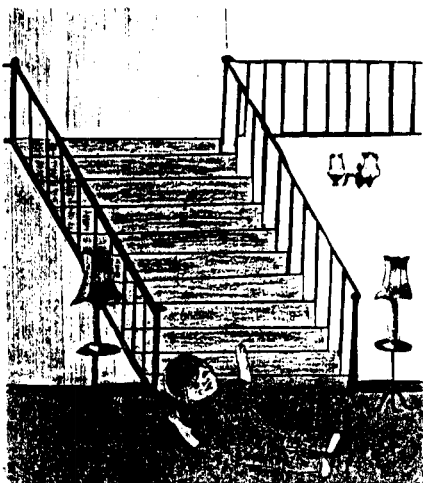
- Standardized instructions were drawn up and adhered to throughout the study. The child was seated opposite one of the testers at a standard child's school table and was shown the scenarios in a randomised order obtained from computer randomised numbers;
- One assessor presented the three pictorial scenarios measuring 90cm x 60cm depicting accidental, non-intentional acts, with the appropriate boy/girl paper doll insert;
- Three questions asked after each scenario were:
  1. Will he/she (the model) be punished?
  2. Who will punish him/her?
  3. What will the punishment be?
- The other assessor recorded the children's responses to the three questions posed after the presentation of each of the three scenarios;
- The testers altered tasks for the next child to avoid bias.

**FIGURE 1**

Treatment 3 – Acts of Child Abuse

**SCENARIO NO. 1**

Timmy (Sally) was quietly watching T.V. He (she) hadn't done anything wrong (naughty) when Mummy (Daddy) grabbed him (her) and threw him (her) down the stairs.



1. Do you think what Mummy (Daddy) did was right?
2. Was this a fair punishment?
3. Was it more than a punishment?

**FIGURE 2**

Treatment 3 – Acts of Child Abuse

**SCENARIO NO. 2**

Timmy (Sally) was quietly watching T.V. He (she) hadn't done anything wrong (naughty) when Mummy (Daddy) grabbed him (her) and threw him (her) against the wall.



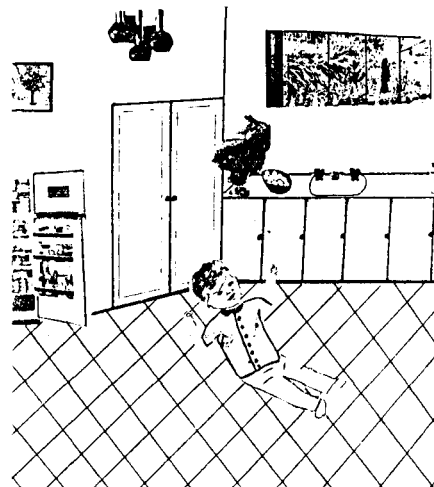
1. Do you think what Mummy (Daddy) did was right?
2. Was this a fair punishment?
3. Was it more than a punishment?

**FIGURE 3**

Treatment 3 – Acts of Child Abuse

**SCENARIO NO. 3**

Timmy (Sally) was just having a drink after he (she) had been playing cricket. He (she) hadn't done anything wrong when Mummy (Daddy) picked up the cricket bat and hit him (her).



1. Do you think what Mummy (Daddy) did was right?
2. Was this a fair punishment?
3. Was it more than a punishment?

A questionnaire containing eight accidental non-intentional acts, which required an appropriate response as to the accidental nature of the incident, was distributed to 50 parents and teachers. Three acts were selected which attracted 100% agreement from the replies to the questionnaire.

Parental consent forms were obtained for each child participating in the study. Approval, however, could not be obtained for the inclusion of socio-demographic data. Lower socio-economic class families and academic families were invited to participate in the study, unfortunately, they declined the invitation.

**Analysis**

The data obtained were not compatible with a chi squared analysis, hence, a qualitative analysis is presented.

**RESULTS**

Frequencies were recorded for the responses to Question 1 "Will he/she be punished?" Table 1 indicates the children's responses (broken down in sub categories for age and sex) to the three scenarios. Contrary to expectations some of our respondents 32% (n=115) indicated that the children in the scenarios should be punished for accidental non-intentional acts. The overall percentage for girls of all ages was 15% (n=56) and for boys of all ages was 16% (n=59).

In general this tendency to punish for these accidental non-intentional acts decreases from age 4 through to 11 years. Closer examination of Table 1 shows that 9 and 11 year old girls do not feel that the children in the scenarios should be punished, while the boys of a similar age in our sample felt that they should be punished.

Comparing these results with Shamley, Moseley & Douglas, (1984) reporting on Prewarned Intentional Acts, we observe that there are similar trends; a greater number of younger children opt for punishment, in the older age groups boys still punish and girls don't. Refer Table 1.

It is our contention that some of the 4 to 6 year olds might not be able to distinguish between intentional prewarned acts and accidental non-intentional acts; however,

this speculation would not apply to the developmentally older and 'maturer' 9 to 11 year olds. We suggest, a plausible explanation might be, that the older group are in fact able to distinguish, the implications of accidental and intentional acts, they might feel that the children in the scenarios should not be punished; however, their own personal experience (conditioning) may have proven different. In reality they had previously been punished in similar fashion for both types of transgressions; prewarned, intentional acts; and accidental non-intentional acts. They might thus be forced into a type of reasoning "If I have been punished for these misdemeanours in the past, why should the children in the scenarios not be punished? What is good enough for me should be good enough for them."

Our system of enquiry was not sufficiently developed to ascertain this point beyond mere speculation. Although, the above reasoning is not unlike what one has heard countless times in a clinical setting from parents. These parents often prove to have great difficulty in exploring other avenues of discipline due to their own immobilising hurt and deprivation. It takes a very skilled therapist to heal the hurt and succour the parents, to allow them (parents) to free themselves and move towards their child in a loving, caring firm way that is non-violent and devoid of physical abuse. There are, however, some parents who have intellectual limitations who are at serious risk. They do not have the mental facility to benefit, from the many subtleties of a therapeutic interaction.

There are also those parents, who have had similar harsh punitive backgrounds, who strive to prevent a generational repeat occurring. It is the first group of parents, that concerns us, for it is felt that their meeting out of punishment might border on abuse, through accidental concomitant circumstances, in operation at the time of inflicting the punishment.

From a clinical point of view, it would be valuable to question the 9 to 11 year olds as to their reasons for punishing the child in the scenarios. One would thus be in a position to state; whether, there were moral reasoning difficulties; or cognitive developmental lags; or simply a matter of generational disciplinary model exposure and conditioning.

It is suggested for future research, that these clarifications be obtained with the aim of establishing primary preventative programmes. For children with moral reasoning dysfunction, coaching in moral reasoning could take place, in the form of scenarios constructed from many different concrete examples from real life. Examples that they are likely to encounter in their daily operational environment in the present and the future.

For children with cognitive developmental lags (this categorization would exclude brain damaged and retarded children) the same type of coaching would take place, starting systematically with

**TABLE 1**  
Accidental Non Intentional Acts Responses to Scenarios 1-3;  
Question 1, "Will he/she be punished?"

Age	Yes				No			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	Responses (n = 45)		Responses (n = 45)		Responses (n = 45)		Responses (n = 45)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
4 year olds	39	87	38	84	6	13	7	16
6 year olds	17	38	11	24	28	62	34	76
9 year olds	0	0	8	18	45	100	37	82
11 year olds	0	0	2	4	45	100	43	96
Totals	56		59		124		121	
Overall	31		33		69		67	
Average %	31		33		69		67	

**TABLE 2**  
Accidental Non Intentional Acts Responses to Scenarios 1-3;  
Question 3, "What will the punishment be?"

Age	Responses Saying "Yes" to punishment		Responses Indicating Physical punishment	
	n	%	n	%
4 year old girls	39		36	92
4 year old boys	38		31	82
6 year old girls	17		3	18
6 year old boys	11		4	36
9 year old girls	0		0	0
9 year old boys	8		3	38
11 year old girls	0		0	0
11 year old boys	2		1	50
Totals	n = 115		78	
Overall Average %			63	

**TABLE 3**  
Accidental Non Intentional Acts Responses to Scenarios 1-3;  
Percentage Responses Indicating Non Physical punishments in  
Response to Question 3, "What will the punishment be?"

Age	"Yes" Responses to punishment		Verbal Reprimand		Sent to Room		Sent Out of House	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
4 year old girls	39		0	0	0	0	2	5
4 year old boys	38		2	5	4	11	0	0
6 year old girls	17		7	41	4	24	1	6
6 year old boys	11		4	36	0	0	2	5
9 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
9 year old boys	8		2	25	0	0	0	0
11 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
11 year old boys	2		0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	115		15		8		5	
Overall Average %			13		7		4	

simple issues building up to more complex judgements.

It is our belief, that children who punish, because, they have and are being punished for accidental non-intentional acts, are at greater risk as future parents, than those that punish for pre-warned intentional acts. There is a greater element of risk in our opinion due to the lack of perspective; strong elements of irrational thought; and

tenuous control, bordering on to loss of control. Add adverse environmental circumstances and deteriorating inter-personal interactions one might well be faced with a disastrous chain reaction that could be triggered with horrendous consequences.

For this type of child we recommend a strategy of intervention that might initially appear to be prohibitive in terms of dollars.

In the long run it would prove to be most cost effective in dollars and cents and human lives.

One would have to establish, whether this type of respondent is receiving physical and/or other forms of punishment for accidental non-intentional acts. Once this has been ascertained, several action programmes might be put into simultaneous operations.

**Step 1** would be a programme aimed at the parents. Instigated by the Parent Teachers' Association, hosting experts in the field of child management, who would provide models for the parents to emulate in resolving disciplinary problems in the home.

**Step 2** would be a programme aimed at the children. Instigated by the School Psychological Services; running therapeutic groups for the children to express their anger at being punished for accidents. To use their anger constructively; to learn through role play to negotiate with the parents in a de-escalative manner for alternative appropriate modes of punishment.

**Step 3** would be a programme aimed to expose them to multiple models of parent child interactions. On leaving school they would be aware and comfortable in using appropriate alternatives to punishment. It is hoped that they would know when to punish and when not to punish.

Finally, Gelles (1980, p. 88) showed that more of the Younger children in his sample got hit (3 to 9 year olds). Table 1 shows that younger children chose to punish more frequently than older children. Further, the younger children in our sample chose to punish at a higher rate than the given 82% of American children: aged between 3 to 9 years being hit.

Table 2 shows, that of those children saying "yes" to punishment, that smacking, as a physical punishment, decreases as the age of the children increases. These figures correspond with trends in Gelles' results as outlined above. Refer Table 2.

The similarity of those two divergent sources of data is rather alarming. Not only because, of the cultural dissimilarity between Australia and North America but also, because, children here are displaying disciplinary patterns that are no better than that of an older generation, albeit, from a more permissive society. Do these comparisons mean: that our sample of children when compared with the American parents will be more actively aggressive punishers than the American parents in the Gelles (1980) study (who were surveyed in the 1970s)? Are we experiencing a regressive generational type time lag? Will these children punish more severely when they are parents than the American parents were in the nineteen seventies?

Tables 3 and 4 show that of those children saying "yes" to punishment, that 6 year old girls and boys elect "verbal reprimand", "sent out of house" and "cleaning up", more frequently than physical punishment. Nine and 11 year old girls do

not elect to punish at all. This finding raises the following questions about this sample of children. Are the girls intellectually and/or morally more mature than the boys? Can they (girls) distinguish more frequently between prewarned intentional acts, versus, accidental non-intentional acts; or is it merely a consequence of sex stereotyping, where boys are more readily physically punished than girls, whether they set out to be naughty deliberately or accidentally? Refer Tables 3 & 4.

Table 5 shows that mother was projected as the agent of punishment in 17% (n=61) of the total responses, and father 12% (n=45) both parents as conjoint chastisers 2% (n=7). Refer Table 5.

Gelles (1980) reported a difference between mothers and fathers actually using punishment. He found that mothers were more inclined than fathers to use physical punishment. This may be attributable to the similarity of the role of the mother in American society and in our own. The mother has a greater daily "hour" contact on the whole with the child than the father.

A detailed inspection of the results shows that the girls chose father as the punisher half as often as the boys; girls chose mother as the punisher more frequently than the boys. These trends we observed in a previous paper (Shamley et al., 1984) recording responses to prewarned intentional acts.

It cannot be emphasised sufficiently, that mass media **must** be used to give parents clear guidelines: on norms for child development; and child rearing. Expectations need to be placed on parents to conform. To make it quite clear that discipline is necessary. To provide parent with examples on how to handle situations that are accidental, that cause them (parents) great inconvenience, frustration and additional work. It is usually, because of these factors that their anger seems to be triggered. Logic flies out of the window. The parent is unable to function intellectually at the formal operational stage, as designated by Piaget et al., (1968). To be punished for having an accident is indeed a

**TABLE 4**

Accidental Non Intentional Acts Responses to Scenarios 1-3; Percentage Responses Indicating Non Physical punishments in Response to Question 3, "What will the punishment be?"

Age	"Yes" Responses to punishment		Cleaning Up		Grounded		Not Given	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
4 year old girls	39		0	0	0	0	1	3
4 year old boys	38		0	0	0	0	1	3
6 year old girls	17		2	12	0	0	0	0
6 year old boys	11		0	0	1	9	0	0
9 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
9 year old boys	8		3	38	0	0	0	0
11 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
11 year old boys	2		0	0	1	50	0	0
Totals	115		5		2		2	
Overall Average %			13		2		2	

**TABLE 5**

Percentage Responses of Those Children who said "Yes" to Punishment and Responded to Question 2, "Who will punish him/her?"

Age	Responses Saying "Yes" to Punishment		Responses Indicating Father as the Punisher		Responses Indicating Mother as the Punisher		Responses Indicating Both Parents as the Punisher	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
4 year old girls	39		13	33	25	64	0	0
4 year old boys	38		21	52	13	34	3	8
6 year old girls	17		2	12	14	82	1	6
6 year old boys	11		2	18	6	55	3	27
9 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
9 year old boys	8		6	75	2	25	0	0
11 year old girls	0		0	0	0	0	0	0
11 year old boys	2		1	50	1	50	0	0
Totals	n = 115		45		61		7	
Overall Averages %			52		53		6	

sad state of affairs; here one remembers a therapy session recorded by Virginia Axline (1964) in the treatment of Dibs. Dibs' self blame in spilling "tea" is most revealing of the damage that can be caused to a child. Dibs' dialogue reveals the psychological interaction that he had previously been exposed to. How he had internalized the pain and dialogue. The disparity of his emotional maturity and his intellectual understanding were still dissonant.

We quote the dialogue between Dibs and Virginia Axline:

He picked up the pitcher of water and slowly moved around the table, neatly pouring a little water in each cup. 'There will be a little tea in each cup,' he said in a tight, precise voice. 'That is too much tea in cup three. I'll pour some of it out.' Dibs poured out some of the water. 'You may have a little sugar in each cup.' He busied himself about the table. A second pitcher was designated as the milk. A tiny spoonful of sand was added carefully for the sugar. 'Handle the spoonful of sugar with care.' Dibs' imitating voice continued. 'Cup six has too much tea. That must be corrected. Be careful of the sugar. Children should not have too much sugar. Take your elbows off the table. If there is any more fussing, you will go to your room. I will - lock you - in your room.' Dibs sat down at the table before one of the cups. He folded his hands carefully on the edge of the table. 'You must eat the toast carefully,' Dibs' voice went on. He reached across for the toast and upset one of the cups. He sprang up from the table, a frightened expression on his face. 'No more party,' he cried. 'The party is over. I spilled the tea!' Quickly he emptied the cups and returned them to the shelf. 'The party ended because you spilled the tea?' I asked.

'Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!' he cried. 'It was an accident,' I said.

'Stupid people make accidents!' he shouted. There were tears in his eyes. 'The party is over. The children are all gone! There is no more party.' His voice choked on the tears. This had been a very real experience to him. 'It was an accident,' he told me. 'But the party is over.'

'It frightened you and made you unhappy,' I said. 'The accident of spilling the tea ended the party. Did the boy who upset the tea get sent to his room?'

Dibs paced around the playroom, wringing his hands. 'He did. Yes. Yes. He should have been careful, it was very stupid of him to be so clumsy.' He kicked over a chair. He swept the cups from the shelf. 'I didn't want a party,' he shouted. 'I didn't want any other children around!'

'It makes you angry and unhappy when something like that happens,' I said. Dibs came over to me. Let's go down to your office. he said 'Let's get out of here. I am not stupid!'

'No. You are not stupid,' I said. 'And it upsets you when something like this happens.'

We went down the hall to my office. Dibs sat in the office chair for a long time in silence. Then he looked at me with a little smile on his face. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Sorry? Why are you sorry?' I asked. 'Because I spilled the tea,' he said, 'I was careless. I shouldn't have been.' 'You think you should have been more careful?' I asked.

'Yes,' Dibs said. 'I should have been more careful, but I am not stupid.' 'You were careless, perhaps, but not stupid?' 'That's right,' said Dibs. There was a smile on his face.

Dibs had successfully weathered this storm. He had discovered a strength within himself to cope with his hurt feelings (p.116-117) Axline 1964.

## Postscript

There are too many Dibs' around and surely there are not enough Axlines to put matters into perspective. Primary prevention is going to be more cost effective in terms of hard cash and emotions than a cure without adequate numbers of trained curative agents.

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