

Psychological Aggression by American Parents: National Data on Prevalence, Chronicity, and Severity

This article describes the prevalence of psychological aggression in a nationally representative sample of 991 parents. By child-age 2, 90% reported using one or more forms of psychological aggression during the previous 12 months and 98% by age 5. From ages 6 to 17, the rates continued in the 90% range. The rate of severe psychological aggression was lower: 10%–20% for toddlers and about 50% for teenagers. Prevalence rates greater than 90% and the absence of differences according to child or family characteristics suggests that psychological aggression is a near universal disciplinary tactic of American parents. Finally, this article discusses the implications of the findings for the conceptualization of psychological “abuse,” and for understanding the origins of the high level of psychological aggression between intimate partners.

Acts of psychological aggression by parents, such as angry shouting and cursing and calling a child a dummy or a slob, are a perennial focus of novelists. But in contrast to the prevalence of psychological aggression in the daily lives of fictional families, social scientists treat psychological aggression as something that occurs in pathological

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families rather than in an everyday part of interaction in typical families. The failure to perceive and attend to psychological aggression in nonclinical general population families is similar to the previous failure to attend to physical aggression in nonclinical families. Both physical and psychological aggression is common in typical families (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Physical aggression by parents toward children under the euphemism of spanking is normative, is expected “when necessary,” and is experienced by over 94% of American toddlers; it occurs an average of three times a week (Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995; Straus & Stewart, 1999).

Psychological aggression by parents as a mode of discipline does not have the same culturally approved and expected status as does physical aggression in the form of corporal punishment, but neither is it beyond the pale of acceptability unless it is chronic and severe. Previous research (Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991) suggests that verbal attacks on children, like physical attacks, are so prevalent as to be just about universal. Despite this near universality, psychological aggression by parents has not been conceptualized and investigated as a standard part of the family system. Rather, it is the focus of attention only if it is chronic and severe enough to be conceptualized as a form of deviance and investigated by scholars concerned with “child abuse” rather than by those concerned with normal families.

We suggest that the relegation of this almost

universal experience of childhood to the domain of "child abuse" occurs largely because there are implicit cultural norms that direct us to ignore psychological aggression unless it passes a certain threshold of chronicity and severity. These norms spill over from the personal lives of scholars to influence the focus of their theoretical and empirical research. One reason these cultural beliefs can prevail is the lack of scientific information on the actual prevalence and chronicity of psychological aggression by parents. The purpose of this article is to provide that information.

Regardless of whether tolerating a certain level of psychological aggression by parents is part of the cultural norms of American society, an understanding of the families and of childhood can benefit from information about the extent to which parents use this mode of discipline with children of different ages. This study provides information on the epidemiology of psychological aggression by a nationally representative sample of American parents. We present data on the prevalence of psychological aggression for each year of life from birth to age 17 and also for age categories related to children's cognitive and social development. We also provide information on the prevalence of five specific acts of psychological aggression that vary in severity and on the chronicity of psychological aggression (how often psychological aggression was used). We also examined the extent to which psychological aggression varies by characteristics of children and families such as socioeconomic status (SES), race, and region of residence. These characteristics are known to be associated with use of other types of discipline such as corporal punishment and therefore might also be associated with psychological aggression.

The demographic correlates associated with psychological aggression can help improve understanding of the social structural determinants of psychological aggression. This also has practical value, because psychological aggression has adverse effects on children (Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1987; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing et al., 1991). Interventions designed to reduce the risk of psychological aggression are more likely to be effective if they are guided by empirical data. For example, if there are class, ethnic, gender, or regional differences in prevalence or severity of psychological aggression, steps to reduce psychological aggression could be structured to reflect the life circumstances and culture of these groups. Sedlak, Broadhurst, and Thomas (1997), for example, found that older children were at a

higher risk for emotional maltreatment than were younger children, and that other minorities were at a higher risk than were Whites, African Americans, or Hispanics. Children from families with incomes of less than \$15,000 had a 13 times greater risk of emotional maltreatment than did children from families with incomes of \$30,000 or more. The data from Sedlak et al. are from the Second National Incidence Study of child abuse and neglect (NIS-2), which is based on interviews with service providers and therefore reveals information only about emotional maltreatment known to service providers. This article provides information on the relation between psychological aggression and demographic variables that is not restricted to cases known to service providers.

Our results also raise difficult questions regarding the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior by parents, the definition of psychological "abuse," and how best to identify, develop, and implement policies and programs to limit psychological aggression. These important issues are explored in the discussion section.

DEFINITION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION

Child abuse statutes and many scholars define psychological aggression as behavior by parents such as rejection and depreciation *that results in injury to a child*. For example, "Psychological abuse is 'inappropriate behavior,' which damages, or substantially reduces the mental facilities and mental process of a child" (O'Hagan, 1993). Defining psychological aggression on the basis of injury to a child may be necessary for purposes of deciding when to intervene. It poses a serious problem for research, however, because children may suffer immediate psychological pain from verbal attacks by parents but not display any lasting social or psychological problems. In addition, the presence of psychological problems does not necessarily indicate that the parents were psychologically aggressive to the child. The extent to which psychological aggression results in lasting psychological injury to the child is an issue to be investigated. If injury is used as a criterion of psychological aggression, an empirical test of whether psychological aggression results in injury cannot be conducted because operationalization of such as definition results in no cases without injury. For many research purposes it is important to base the definition and measurement of psychological aggression on acts of psychological aggression by parents, not on the outcome behavior

of the child. That approach is reflected in the definition of psychological aggression used for this research: "Psychological aggression is a communication intended to cause the child to experience psychological pain. The communicative act may be active or passive or verbal or nonverbal" (Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing et al., 1991).

Iwaniec (1995) notes that the definition of what she refers to as "emotional abuse" varies only slightly among researchers. Labels used include emotional abuse, emotional maltreatment, psychological abuse, and psychological maltreatment, but the definitions all include descriptions of virtually the same behavior by parents. In any case, researchers and clinicians tend to agree that psychological aggression generally involves a psychological or emotional rejection of the child by verbal or symbolic forms of aggressive behavior or both.

An important issue is whether and how to take into account the severity of psychological aggression. Although it can be surmised that some acts of psychological aggression cause more psychological pain and have more adverse effects on the child than others, the one study we located in which empirical data tested this supposition (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993) found that mild forms of emotional maltreatment were as highly related to adjustment problems as the acts in their severe scale and argued against focusing only on the extreme ends of the continuum. Because of the potential importance of comparing minor and severe psychological aggression, the research to be reported provides data on two aspects of severity: the severity and the frequency of the acts of psychological aggression carried out by parents.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF THE PREVALENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY PARENTS

Prevalence Rates

To locate previous empirical research on the prevalence of psychological aggression by parents, Psychological Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts were searched for the years 1985–1999. The following search categories were used: psychological aggression, psychological abuse, psychological maltreatment, emotional aggression, emotional abuse, emotional maltreatment, verbal aggression, verbal abuse, and verbal maltreatment. This search identified 30 empirical articles, but only 8 provided data on the percentage of children

who experience psychological aggression. Table 1 gives the rates found by these eight studies.

The studies in Part A of Table 1 used community samples (i.e., nonclinical samples), which found rates from 25% to 94%. This large variation probably results from differences in the methods used to measure psychological aggression. For example, the lowest rate (25%) is based on parents who *frequently* used psychological aggression. Thus, swearing at a child would not be considered psychological aggression unless it was done frequently. If any use of psychological aggression is the criterion, as in Briere and Runtz (1988), the rates are much higher: 95% of the sample reported being yelled at and 78% reported being ridiculed or humiliated.

Turning to the studies based on clinical samples in Part B, one study found a rate of 41% and two others of 92%. The 92% rates reflect the fact that these cases were selected because of known or suspected psychological maltreatment. The 41% rate occurred because that study reported only the percentage of parents who used *extreme* psychological aggression.

One of the contributions of this article is to provide information on a range of severity and chronicity of psychological aggression, as compared with much of the previous research that, as noted above, reported only the prevalence of extreme or frequent psychological aggression. This article also describes the current behavior of parents rather than long-term recall data (all but two of the studies in Table 1 used recall data). Finally, there is a need for standardized instruments to measure psychological aggression, and this article contributes data that will help researchers evaluate the adequacy of the instrument used—the Parent-Child version of the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus & Hamby, 1997; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998).

Relationship to Child and Family Characteristics

Relatively few studies investigated the relationship between family or child characteristics or the child and the occurrence of psychological aggression. The most frequently investigated characteristic was SES as measured by income or education. Most of the studies found that psychological aggression was higher among low-income and low-education parents, although the differences were not large (Clausen & Crittenden, 1991; Downs, Miller, Testa, & Panek, 1992; Gracia, 1995; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Rupert, Egolf, &

TABLE 1. EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION AGAINST CHILDREN

Study	N and Source	Measure of Psychological Aggression	Prevalence Rate (%)
Community Sample			
Bagley (1996)	750 women in Calgary, randomly selected	Memories of Childhood Rearing Scale	25
Briere and Runtz (1988)	251 female undergraduate students in psychology class	Psychological Maltreatment Scales	Seven items; prevalence ranged from 33 to 94
Friedrich, Talley, Panser, Fett, and Zinsmeister (1997)	920 adults in Minnesota, randomly selected	Questionnaire written by paper's authors	Men 70.7; Women 67.1
Gross and Keller (1992)	260 18- to 22-year-olds from introductory psychology courses	Child Abuse Questionnaire Psychological Aggression	Experienced "frequently," 28
Tang (1996)	239 female and 136 male Hong Kong college-student volunteers	Conflict Tactics Scales	62.5
Vissing et al. (1991)	Random sample of parents of 3,346 children	Conflict Tactics Scales	63.4
Clinical Sample			
Brassard, Hart, and Hardy (1993)	25 children from Child Protective Services	Psychological Maltreatment Ratings Scale	Maltreated, 92; control, 29.2
McGee, Wolfe, and Wilson (1997)	160 adolescents from case load of child protection agency; control group of 24	Ratings of Past Life Events Scale	92
Powers, Eckenrode, and Jaklitsch (1990)	223 runaway adolescents	STAR Maltreatment Questionnaire	41
Rorty, Yager, and Rossotto (1994)	80 women with bulimia nervosa and 40 women with no eating disorder	Psychological Maltreatment Scale	Bulimia, 43.8; control, 30.0
Sedlak et al. (1997)	931,000 children known to social service agencies	National Incidence Study 2	3

Lutz, 1995; Loos & Alexander, 1997), but a study of Hong Kong Chinese families found more psychological aggression among higher income families (Tang, 1996). In the U.S.A., Euro-American parents and parents in two-parent households were found to use less psychological aggression than were minority-group parents and single parents (Clausen & Crittenden; Downs et al.; Herrenkohl et al.). Gracia found that older parents were less likely to use psychological aggression than were younger parents. Two studies compared psychological aggression rates for boys and girls. One study found that boys experienced more psychological aggression (Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing et al., 1991), and the other study found more psychological aggression against girls (Tang). Surprisingly, we did not find any studies that compared mothers and fathers in respect to psychological aggression. The relatively small number of studies and the sometimes-contradictory findings indicate a need for additional information on the relation between characteristics of families and children to psychological aggression.

METHOD

Sample

The data were collected from a national telephone survey conducted by the Gallup Organization (Gallup Organization, 1995) in August and September 1995 for purposes of estimating the prevalence of child abuse in the U.S.A. The telephone numbers were selected by a random-digit stratified probability design. A random procedure was used to provide representation of both listed and unlisted numbers. These methods are designed to produce, with proper weighting, an unbiased probability sample of telephone households in the continental U.S.A., which includes 94% of all households. Among households that met the eligibility criterion (one or more children under 18 living at home), the participation rate was 81%, with a total of 991 interviews completed. In two-parent households, one parent was randomly selected for the interview. In multichild households, one child was randomly identified and a parent of that child was

interviewed, and all data reported pertain to the selected child. See Gallup Organization (Gallup Organization) for more detailed sampling information. A telephone sample limit of the methodology is that households without telephones are eliminated. This may lead to a biased sample. Face-to-face interview surveys have also been shown to have difficulty locating and enlisting the participation of persons of low SES. There is considerable evidence that properly conducted telephone surveys obtain a higher rate of participation and are usually more representative than are face-to-face surveys (Bermack, 1989; Wells, Burnam, Leake, & Robbins, 1988).

Sample characteristics and weighting. More mothers than fathers were interviewed (66% of the sample), partly because the sample included single parents who are predominantly mothers. Fifty-two percent of the parents were married, 15% were remarried, 20% were divorced, 8% were never married, and 4% were cohabiting. Households with college-educated parents were overrepresented (34% vs. 23% in the Census), and parents with less than a high school education were underrepresented (8% vs. 14% in the Census). The mean age of the parents interviewed was 36.8 years (range 18–72, *SD* 8.3). The division between boys and girls in this sample was almost equal (49% girls). The ethnic composition was 81% Euro-American, 12% African American, and 7% other ethnic groups (Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans). The referent children ranged in age from infants to age 17, with a mean age of 8.4 years. In all analyses, data were weighted to reflect 1990 U.S. Census statistics regarding the gender of the respondent, child's age, ethnic group, region of the country, and parent's education. This involved an unproven assumption that the replies of nonsurveyed members of underrepresented groups would be similar to those who were surveyed.

Measure of Psychological Aggression

The Psychological Aggression scale of the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTSPC; Straus et al., 1998) was used for this research. This scale was designed to be consistent with the definition given earlier, but it includes only verbal acts and focuses on use of psychological aggression as a means of correcting or controlling the behavior of the child. The Psychological Aggression scale measures verbal and symbolic acts by the parent

intended to cause psychological pain or fear on the part of the child. The Psychological Aggression scale is one of the three core scales of the CTSPC (the other two are Nonviolent Discipline and Physical Assault). The CTSPC begins with the following introduction:

Children often do things that are wrong, disobey, or make their parents angry. We would like to know what you have done when your (SAY age of referent child) year old child did something wrong or made you upset or angry. I am going to read a list of things you might have done in the past year and I would like you to tell me whether you have: done it once in the past year, done it twice in the past year, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, or more than 20 times in the past year. If you haven't done it in the past year but have done it before that, I would like to know this, too.

The five items in the Psychological Aggression scale are (a) shouted, yelled, or screamed at him or her; (b) threatened to spank or hit him or her but did not actually do it; (c) swore or cursed at him or her; (d) said you would send him or her away or kick him or her out of the house; and (e) called him or her dumb or lazy or some other name like that. For the reasons explained in the introduction, the authors of this instrument (Straus et al., 1998) classified items c, d, and e as more severe. We followed their recommendation of using those items to create a severe psychological aggression subscale.

Prevalence and Chronicity

Two methods of scoring were used to create two scores for each item and for the Overall and Severe Psychological Aggression scales as follows:

Prevalence. Dichotomous variables were created to measure prevalence. For the items, this is scored 1 if the parent used the item one or more times in the previous 12 months. For the scales, a score of 1 indicates that the parent used one or more of the items in the scale in the previous 12 months.

Chronicity. It is also important to know how often parents engage in psychological aggression. The mean of the frequency distribution does not provide a satisfactory estimate because the distribution is extremely skewed. The percent with a score of zero ranges from 25% to 94%. Consequently, estimates of how often psychological aggression

occurs based on the mean of the usual frequency distribution would be misleading. What is needed is a measure of how often psychological aggression occurs *among the subset of parents who did it at least once in the past year*. This is provided by creating a variable called the *chronicity* of psychological aggression. We define chronicity as the number of times psychological aggression was used by parents who used psychological aggression one or more times in the previous 12 months. This concept is further described in the article describing the CTSPC (Straus et al., 1998).

Reliability And Validity

For this sample of parents, the alpha coefficient of reliability for the five-item Overall Psychological Aggression scale was .60 and .45 for the three-item Severe Psychological Aggression subscale. The low reliability reflects the small number of items and the highly skewed distribution of the severe psychological aggression items (see Straus et al., 1998, for further information on reliability). Information on the validity of the Psychological Aggression scale of the CTSPC is presented in Haj-Yahia, Musleh, and Haj-Yahia (2002); Straus and Hamby (1997); and Straus et al. (1998).

Independent Variables

Age of child. One-year age intervals were used for the most detailed examination of the distribution and intensity of psychological aggression. Even with a sample of 991, however, there were insufficient cases for each year to test for interaction of the child's age with the other independent variables. Consequently, five age categories were defined as follows: infants up to age 1 (because of their limited cognitive development), toddlers ages 2–4 (because discipline problems are frequent at these ages), ages 6–8 (because these mark kindergarten and early primary school), ages 9–12 (primary school), and ages 13–17 (teen-agers).

Age of parent. Three age categories were used: 18–29, 30–39, and 40 and over. These categories represent approximately the youngest and oldest quarter and the middle half of the sample.

Single parent. Children living with only one parent were scored as 1; all other living arrangements were scored as 0.

SES. SES was measured by a factor score obtained

by a principal components analysis of the respondent's education and income. The factor score was coded into quintiles to have enough cases per cell for the ANOVA analysis described below. These were coded from 1 for the lowest scoring fifth to 5 for the highest fifth.

Race and ethnicity. Three categories were used: (a) *Euro-Americans* (b) *African Americans* and (c) *all other groups*.

Gender of parent and child. Girls were coded as 1 and boys as 0. Mothers were coded as 1 and fathers as 0.

Region. The *Northeast* was coded 1, the *Midwest* 2, the *South* 3, and the *West* 4.

Data Analysis

ANOVA was used to examine the relationship of child and family characteristics to psychological aggression because it provides the observed mean number of acts of psychological aggression for children of each age, each gender, and each category of the other independent variables and for the interactions of these variables. Because of sample-size limitations, the analysis was limited to two-way interactions. The ANOVAs were computed by the regression approach option in SPSS/PC with all effects assessed simultaneously and each effect adjusted for all other effects in the model (Norusis, 1992). Thus, the test for each independent variable controlled for the other independent variables, and the means were adjusted to control for the other independent variables.

RESULTS

Table 2 gives the results on the use of psychological aggression during the previous year for the entire sample, which includes parents of children from birth through age 17.

Scale Scores

Prevalence. The column headed Prevalence shows that almost all parents reported at least one instance of psychological aggression in the past year, and one third reported one or more instances of the acts classified as severe psychological aggression. There are at least four reasons for regarding this as the minimum prevalence rate: (a) not every parent who was interviewed made a full

TABLE 2. PREVALENCE AND CHRONICITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION

Measure of Psychological Aggression	Prevalence (% Last Year)	Chronicity		
		Mean (SD)	Median	75th Percentile ^a
Scales				
Overall	88.6	21.7 (8.9)	16	33
Severe	33.4	8.2 (9.9)	4	10
Items				
Shouted, yelled, screamed	74.7	12.8 (8.9)	8	25
Threatened to spank	53.6	10.6 (8.9)	8	15
Swore or cursed	24.3	6.5 (7.3)	4	8
Called name	17.5	5.7 (5.7)	4	8
Threatened to kick out of house	6.0	3.9 (5.9)	2	4

^aThe numbers in this column are the number of acts of psychological aggression by parents at the 75th percentile of the distribution for parents who reported one or more acts of psychological aggression.

disclosure, (b) the sample included infants for whom the rate is presumably low, (c) we interviewed only one parent in each family, and (d) the five items in the scale are only a sample of the many ways of expressing psychological aggression.

Chronicity. The column headed Chronicity in Table 2 presents the mean number of times that parents who used psychological aggression in the past year engaged in the behavior. For the Overall Psychological Aggression scale, the mean was 21.7, with a median of 16. One quarter of all parents reported 33 or more acts of psychological aggression in the previous year. The row for the Severe Psychological Aggression scale in Table 2 shows that parents who engaged in severe psychological aggression reported an average of eight instances during the previous 12 months, with a range of 0–65.

The average number of times is almost certain to be greater than is shown in Table 2 because most acts of psychological aggression are so ordinary and taken for granted that they do not stand out in memory. A more complete accounting would require also asking about a shorter time interval, such as the past week. The drastic increase in the estimates of chronicity using a shorter recall period is suggested by the results of research on the related behavior of spanking. When parents are asked how often they found it necessary to spank in the past year, mean results are 14 to 22 times for toddlers and early school-age children. But when parents are asked how often they found it necessary to spank in the past week, the mean for 2- and 3-year-old children is about three times

a week (Giles-Sims et al., 1995), which is about 150 times per year (Straus & Stewart, 1999).

Specific Acts

Part B of Table 2 provides information on each of the five items in the Psychological Aggression scale, starting with the two less severe modes of psychological aggression.

Shouted, yelled, screamed. By far the most frequent mode of psychological aggression was shouting, yelling, or screaming at a child. Seventy-four percent of the parents interviewed reported yelling or screaming. The chronicity columns show that parents who yelled or screamed one or more times reported a mean of 13 instances in the past year. The 75th percentile was 25 times during the previous 12 months. This can also be interpreted as indicating that the top quartile of parents who yelled or screamed did so 25 or more times.

Threatened to spank. Just over half the parents used this strategy. The Chronicity columns show that parents who threatened to spank reported doing so a mean of 11 times in the previous 12 months. The 75th percentile was 15 instances.

Swore or cursed. About one of four parents in this national sample indicated they had cursed or sworn at the referent child in the past year. On average, the parents cursed or swore at the child seven times in the previous year, and the top quarter did so eight or more times.

Called name. A somewhat smaller portion

(17.5%) of the parents indicated having called their child a name than those who cursed or swore at their child. On average, these parents did so six times in the previous year, and the top quarter did so eight or more times.

Threatened to kick out of house. Perhaps the most severe of the psychological aggression items in the scale is threatening to kick the child out of the house. It was also the least prevalent (6%). As with the other acts of psychological aggression, however, parents who used this strategy to control or correct misbehavior tended to do so frequently, which in this case, on average, was about four times in the previous year. As will be seen in the analysis by age, the estimates are much higher for older children.

Age Trends in Prevalence of Psychological Aggression

The data presented up to this point have not taken into account the age of the child. If psychological aggression is similar to corporal punishment as a means of controlling or correcting the misbehavior, there should be large differences according to the age of the child. Specifically, we would expect it to be very low for infants, reach a peak for the "terrible twos" and other toddlers, and decline rapidly each year after age 5 (Straus & Stewart, 1999).

Overall psychological aggression. Figure 1a shows that 43% of parents reported psychological aggression with an infant. The percentage then rises rapidly, reaching a peak of 98% at age 7. From then on, psychological aggression declines only slightly and at age 17 (90%). The rates for psychological aggression are similar to those for corporal punishment for infants and toddlers. After that, however, psychological aggression and corporal punishment differ because corporal punishment declines steadily with age, so that by age 17 "only" 12% of the parents in this sample are still using corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999), whereas about 90% of parents reported using psychological aggression with 17-year-old children.

Severe psychological aggression. Figure 1b shows that the age trend for the prevalence of severe psychological aggression is quite different from that of either corporal punishment or overall psychological aggression. Severe psychological aggression

includes swearing at or cursing the child; calling the child dumb, lazy, or some other name; and threatening to send the child away or kick the child out of the house. Scores on the Severe Psychological Aggression scale are very low for the younger age group. There are fluctuations in the trend line in Figure 2 that are probably due to random error associated with the relatively small numbers of children of each specific age. Despite these fluctuations, Figure 2 reveals an almost monotonic increase with each age, reaching a peak of over half for children age 17.

Age Trends in Chronicity of Psychological Aggression

Figure 1c gives the mean number of times the parents of children of each age used any of the five forms of psychological aggression in the Psychological Aggression scale. It shows a pattern similar to Figure 1, that is, an increase from infancy to age 5, where it peaks at about 29 times. The mean number of instances of psychological aggression then decreases slightly with age but remains high even at age 17. The chronicity of severe psychological aggression (Figure 1) also shows a similar increase with age of the child found for the prevalence of severe psychological aggression, but there are large fluctuations around the regression line.

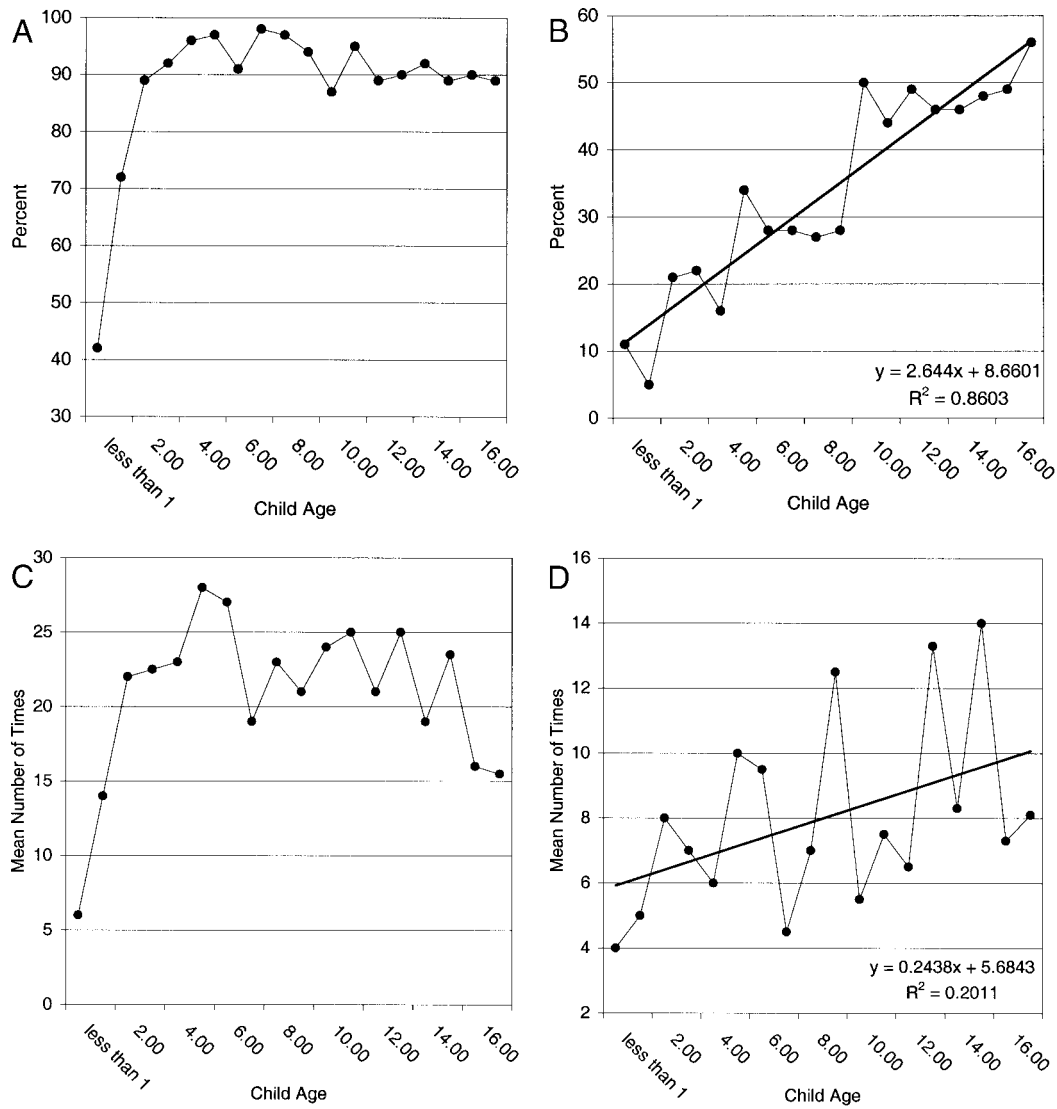
Age Group Differences for Specific Types of Psychological Aggression

The data on age trends in Figure 1a through d are for the Overall and Severe Psychological Aggression scales. It is also important to examine each of the specific acts of psychological aggression in these scales. For economy of presentation, however, rather than graph these year by year, Table 3 uses five age categories to do this.

The first row of Table 3 shows that half the parents shouted, yelled, or screamed at infants and 1-year-old children. The percentage jumps to 90% of children ages 2–4 and stays at about that level to age 17. Therefore, screaming and yelling in anger seems to be a standard part of parent-child relationships in American families, especially if one keeps in mind the fact that these are minimum estimates.

Threatening to spank or hit increases with age and then decreases for children ages 9–12 and 13–17. But even at ages 13–17, about one third of the

FIGURE 1. (A) PREVALENCE OF OVERALL PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY AGE OF CHILD (N = 990). (B) PREVALENCE OF SEVERE PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY AGE OF CHILD (N = 993). (C) CHRONICITY OF OVERALL PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY AGE OF CHILD (N = 877). (D) CHRONICITY OF SEVERE PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY AGE OF CHILD (N = 322).



parents in this sample reported threatening to hit the child in the previous year.

The developmental pattern for the more severe acts of psychological aggression (Part B of Table 3) reveals a steady increase with age. Particularly noteworthy is the finding that almost one third of parents of teens swore at them or called them names such as dumb or lazy, and that almost one of five parents of teenagers threatened to kick the

child out of the house during the year of this study.

Other Child and Parent Characteristics Associated with Psychological Aggression

The analyses in this section are based on ANOVAs with the annual frequency scores for the five-item Psychological Aggression scale as the de-

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS USING SPECIFIC ACTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AGGRESSION BY AGE OF CHILD

Type of Psychological Aggression	Age of Child (Years)					ANOVA	
	0-1	2-4	5-8	9-12	13-17	<i>F</i>	<i>f</i>
Ordinary							
Shouted, yelled, screamed	50.0	90.3 ^a	91.4 ^a	89.0 ^a	85.5 ^b	1426.2	.01
Threatened to spank	26.1	67.0 ^a	69.9 ^a	55.3	33.5 ^a	292.1	.01
Severe							
Swore or cursed	7.6	18.8 ^b	21.5 ^b	29.0 ^a	33.5 ^a	78.9	.01
Called name	0.0	3.0	12.1 ^a	24.4 ^a	30.0 ^a	68.0	.01
Threatened to kick out of house	0.0	1.5	4.3	1.2	17.7 ^a	34.8	.01

^aRate significantly different from preceding rate at the .01 level. ^bRate significantly different from preceding rate at the .05 level.

pendent variable and eight independent variables (age of parent, age of child, gender of child, gender of parent, single parent, ethnic group, region, and SES, as described in the Method section). The tests of significance for each independent variable controlled for the level of the other seven independent variables and the means adjusted for the other variables. The age of the child was previously examined in detail (see Figure 1a through d and Table 3). It was included in the ANOVA only to control for possible confounding of the other variables with the child's age and will therefore not be discussed again in this section. The table of *F* tests is not included because, aside from the age of the child, only the age of the parent was significantly related to psychological aggression, although SES approaches being significantly related to overall psychological aggression.

Age of parent. After controlling for the other seven variables, the age of the parent is significantly related to using psychological aggression as a disciplinary tactic, $F(2, 99) = 6.26, p = .002$. Parents aged 18-29 averaged 22 instances of psychological aggression in the previous 12 months. This decreased to an average of 19 times per year for parents aged 30-39 and further decreased to 15 times per year for parents aged 40 and over. The same tendency for older parents to be less likely to use psychological aggression was found for severe psychological aggression, but the effect is not statistically significant.

SES. The SES scale almost met the .05 level for a significant relation to overall psychological aggression, $F(4, 991) = 2.31, p = .06$. Parents in the first 2 quintiles used the least psychological aggression. Parents in the middle quintile used the

most, and psychological aggression decreased in the 4th and 5th quintiles.

Interaction Effects

We examined all the two-way interactions of the independent variables. Of the 28 interactions tested, the following 5 were significant.

There were three significant interactions with region of residence. The main effect for SES described above applied to all regions except the Midwest, where there was no difference between SES quintiles in the use of psychological aggression. Mothers in the Northeast and the Midwest used more psychological aggression than did fathers, but there was no difference between mothers and fathers in the South or the West. The amount of psychological aggression was greater in two-parent households in all regions except the West, where there was no difference between one- and two-parent households.

The relation of child's age to psychological aggression followed the pattern of increasing with age for each two of the three parental age groups. For the youngest mothers (ages 18-29), this applied only up through ages 5-8; then psychological aggression decreased for mothers of children ages 9-12 and 13-17. Because of the small *ns* in these two cells, the decrease could be a random fluctuation.

When the respondent was the father of the referent child, there was more psychological aggression if the father was living with a partner than in male-headed single-parent families. When the mother was the respondent, there was also more psychological aggression by mothers living with a partner, but the difference was much smaller.

DISCUSSION

This study of a nationally representative sample of 991 American parents revealed an extremely high prevalence of psychological aggression. Even infants were not immune from being yelled at in anger by parents, and by ages 2–4, almost all parents reported yelling, screaming, or shouting as a method of correcting or controlling the behavior of the child. By the teen years, about half of all parents reported using one or more of the three severe behaviors in the Psychological Aggression scale. Moreover, parents of teen-agers who used severe psychological aggression as a means of controlling and correcting behavior tended to do so frequently, with an average of 10 instances during the previous year.

Of the eight child and family demographic characteristics examined, differences in the use of psychological aggression were noted for two: the age of the child and the age of the parent. In combination with the high prevalence rates, and the lack of demographic differences in use of psychological aggression, this means that nearly all parents, regardless of sociodemographic characteristics, used at least some psychological aggression as a disciplinary tactic. In view of the evidence that psychological aggression is psychologically harmful to children (Hart et al., 1987; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing et al., 1991), reducing the use of psychological aggression by American parents may be an important step in primary prevention of mental illness.

What Is the Threshold for Psychological Abuse?

We have avoided using the term psychological *abuse* for the parental behavior described in this article. One reason is that abuse is used in overlapping but different ways. It can refer to a judgment based on informal social norms and also to a legal or administrative category for purposes of welfare services or criminal intervention. Psychological aggression by a parent can be judged as abusive but not fall within the legal or administrative category of reportable abuse. In principal, to be legally or administratively classified as abusive requires that the behavior exceed a level of severity and chronicity that a caseworker or criminal justice official believes puts the child at risk of injury. In practice, an injury needs to have actually occurred and needs to be attributable to the psychological aggression. This is very difficult to demonstrate in an individual case and, as a result,

few cases of psychological aggression meet the legal or administrative criteria to be judged serious enough to confirm psychological abuse. But as Gracia (1995) concluded from a study of 69 cases of maltreatment, this classification “does not represent psychological reality of these children” (p. 1090). This means that many children in need of protection, and many parents in need of help, do not receive services that could potentially make a large difference in child and family well-being. Further research is needed on the extent and severity of psychological aggression and what would justify defining it as abusive.

An alternative hypothesis is based on the theory that any act of psychological aggression against a child, regardless of whether the aggression is a purely expressive emotional outburst or is a means of correcting or controlling misbehavior, puts the child at increased risk for mental disabilities. Consequently, the rate of social and psychological problems will start to increase from the beginning of the psychological aggression distribution. If this hypothesis is supported, it means that any psychological aggression is abusive. If so, the results of this research would mean that close to 100% of American parents, by their own report, psychologically abuse their children, some starting in infancy.

In the absence of research showing that each increase in the amount of psychological aggression is associated with an increased probability of child behavior problems, there may not be many who regard any psychological aggression as abuse. We will evaluate four somewhat overlapping reasons for rejecting the idea that engaging in even one of these acts of psychological aggression constitutes child abuse and provide counter arguments.

Reason one. The idea that any use of psychological aggression is child abuse may be rejected because of a belief that labeling it as abuse would involve criminal-justice or child-welfare intervention. If that were the case, we would agree. But many less extreme steps to end psychological aggression are possible, starting with public service television spots to sensitize parents to the problem. For example, in the early 1990s the National Committee To Prevent Child Abuse used a very dramatic poster and television spot showing a sad child and “Stop using words that hurt.” Sweden and several other countries have declared that both corporal punishment and psychological aggression by parents are illegal (Durrant, 1999; Durrant &

Olsen, 1997); however, there are no criminal penalties. These laws are statements of national policy and authorize funds for educational efforts and help for parents. Other nonpunitive and broadly applicable steps to reduce psychological aggression include teaching parents more effective disciplinary strategies than hitting and yelling.

Reason two. It can be argued that children are resilient and an occasional instance of psychological aggression will not harm a child. A related argument is based on distinguishing between angry yelling, and “blowing off steam” at a child’s persistent misbehavior, as compared with malicious psychological attacks on a child. American culture defines the former as harmless if not too frequent and therefore acceptable. There is no empirical evidence to support either of these assertions, however, and as indicated above, the issue needs to be investigated by research on the effects of occasional psychological aggression.

Reason three. Another reason we have heard for reluctance to label the acts in the Psychological Aggression scale as psychological abuse is that even loving and excellent parents “lose it” sometimes and should not be branded as abusers. This statement provides an *explanation* for some psychological aggression, not a *justification* of psychological aggression.

Reason four. It can also be argued that the criterion of abuse is not whether these acts occur, but whether it is a chronic pattern. Regarding psychological aggression as abuse only if it is very frequent is the implicit cultural norm in contemporary American society. The presence of this norm is illustrated by the study in Table 1, which operationalized psychological abuse as cases in the upper quartile of psychological aggression. The difficulty is in determining the threshold. How frequent is *chronic* psychological aggression? For example, should it be some absolute number or a frequency of psychological aggression above that used by the 25th, 50th, or 75th percentile? Should it be not more than once a year, not more than once a month, or not more than once a week? We believe it should be never. This is probably an unattainable goal, but its unattainability does not mean it should not be the goal. One can see this from comparing it with the rule against shoplifting. The law says never, which is also an unattainable goal. But that does not mean there should not be a law prohibiting shoplifting. A crucial dif-

ference between shoplifting and psychological aggression against children is that there are no implicit cultural norms saying that shoplifting is acceptable up to a certain point. The expansion of humanitarian concerns that has occurred in respect to other areas of childhood, such as child labor, suggests that it is possible that the norms will change and we will someday feel the same way about psychological aggression against children that we feel about shoplifting.

Implications for Parents

Regardless of whether occasional instances of psychological aggression damage the child, any act of psychological aggression against a child is an unacceptable mode of human relationships and provides a poor role model for the child. Parents should never use psychological aggression as a means to correct or control misbehavior. The idea of never using psychological aggression is likely to be regarded by many parents as unrealistic or even disastrous, especially when viewed in combination with the decline in social approval of spanking (Glover, 2000). As one irate father said to one of us, “Things have gotten out of hand. You can’t spank, you can’t even yell at your kid. Kids are running wild.” The implication is that spanking and psychological aggression are necessary discipline techniques. On the contrary, no spanking and no psychological aggression does not mean no discipline. The research evidence shows that, even in the short run, spanking is no more effective than other methods of correction and control, and that in the long run it tends to increase the level of subsequent misbehavior (Glover, chapter 12; Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997). Similarly, psychological aggression by parents has been shown to be associated with higher rates of delinquency and psychological problems (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Vissing et al., 1991). Thus, avoiding discipline techniques that involve psychological as well as physical aggression increases the probability of the child being well behaved and well adjusted, rather than resulting in “kids running wild.” Parents can and should criticize misbehavior, but should do so by criticizing the behavior and not the child as a person.

Research and Theoretical Implications

Research on frequency and severity. Although the studies cited in this article show that psychologi-

cal aggression adversely affects children in a number of ways, many issues need to be investigated, including threshold effects and moderator effects. For example, the fact that parents frequently use psychological aggression raises the possibility that there are some levels or forms that are not as harmful, perhaps depending on the context and history in a particular parent-child relationship.

The role of pain in learning. An important issue raised by this research is the role of pain in the socialization of children. In behavior theory, all behavior is conditioned by reinforcement or pain aversion. Intrinsic to aversion is some element of psychological pain. Even simply saying "no" to a child involves psychological pain. Because psychological pain is an inherent part of life, it can be argued that the issue concerns the level or threshold of pain that children can accommodate. Alternatively, the issue may be the nature or source of the pain. It is possible that pain in the form of frustration resulting from being denied a prohibited behavior or as the natural consequences of accidents, mistakes, and forbidden behavior is not damaging, whereas the pain from psychological aggression is damaging if children experience it as an attack on their self-esteem and integrity.

The nature of family relationships. Although the frequency and severity of psychological aggression varies greatly, at least some psychological aggression is a nearly universal aspect of American parental behavior. We interpret this as an indication of implicit cultural norms that excuse or tolerate acts of psychological aggression when used in response to persistent misbehavior by a child. These norms do not make psychological aggression a preferred socialization strategy, but psychological aggression is obviously also not taboo. The near universality of psychological aggression by parents needs to be recognized in the conceptualization of family relationships, including the socialization process. We suggest that the almost universal experience of psychological aggression at the hands of parents shown by this study is an important part of the explanation for those norms. There is a similar pattern of almost universal prevalence of psychological aggression toward dating and marital partners (Straus & Sweet, 1992) and similar implicit norms that tolerate this behavior. We suggest that normative tolerance and high prevalence of psychological aggression between partners has one of its origins in the experience of psychological aggression by the parents of al-

most all American children. If that hypothesis is correct, steps to reduce the level of psychological aggression by parents will also contribute to less psychological aggression in dating and marital relationships.

NOTE

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