Deater-Deckard and Dodge are to be commended on several counts for the approach they have adopted in their work on childhood aggression. Of paramount importance, they directly address the race factor and its externalizing behavior problems, their causes, and development trajectories. They have also questioned the conventional wisdom, which holds that there is a causal link between parents’ use of (harsh) physical discipline and subsequent chronic aggression and externalizing behavior problems in children. Having done these things, I think that analyses of their data and inferences derived from them might be enhanced by attention to the findings of an assortment of empirical studies on African Americans, which, when considered alongside their data, delineate a rather different picture of the etiology of aggression and conduct problems in children of African descent in the United States from the one that is implicit in contemporary developmental scholarship. The more broadly informed picture is one that probably does not generalize to children in other countries and/or of other racial backgrounds.

A good starting point for coordinating these disparate sources of information is the hypothesis that Deater-Deckard and Dodge present in their target article stating that there is a nonlinear relation between (parental physical) discipline and child aggression in the early school years. This position is restated at several points in the article in ways that imply that physical discipline per se is harsh and that physical discipline is the only type of discipline that might be pertinent to child aggression. Deater-Deckard and Dodge explicitly adopt a hypothesis that they attribute to McLoyd (1990) to the effect that the strongest proximal influence on child development is parenting. The study findings that I discuss give reasons to question both their implied and explicit premises. Although McLoyd’s (1990) hypothesis is cogently delineated, it is not well supported for African Americans, because it is based on studies of European Americans primarily. I suggest that Deater-Deckard and Dodge consider an alternative to the bivariate nonlinear function they propose, which is a set of relations between multiple independent variables and a single dependent variable (aggression/externalizing behavior problems). One independent variable is “type of punishment,” which might be physical or one of several other specific types; another is severity of punishment, which could apply to any type of punishment; another is the agent administering the punishment, which might or might not be a parent; and yet another is setting in which punishment is administered, which...
might be the home, school, or other context. Some facts about African American views on discipline and child treatment in comparison to findings of the pilot study that Deater-Deckard and Dodge report underscore the importance of these distinctions.

Casual observations that many African Americans use physical punishment as a disciplinary technique without reservation support a widespread belief among family service professionals that African Americans are also more tolerant of harsh discipline and child maltreatment. Giovannoni and Becerra (1979) conducted a large-scale study of a demographically representative sample of adults in Los Angeles recruited at random to examine the issues implicit in this view. Their survey used 78 vignettes representing a wide variety of child treatment and exposure to circumstances with potential for child maltreatment, including use of physical punishment. Contrary to beliefs common among service professionals, African Americans (and Hispanics) were more likely than European Americans to view the vignette circumstances as serious with a potential for child maltreatment, and lower class and less educated respondents were more likely than higher class and more educated respondents to perceive causes for concern of child maltreatment in the vignettes. Giovannoni and Becerra examined respondents’ rank orderings of different categories of potentially abuse-causing situations by racial/ethnic group and found that African Americans were the only group to demonstrate consensus across social class and education levels on the rank ordering of importance of the categories. Pointedly germane to Deater-Deckard and Dodge’s work, African Americans rated the “punish by spanking with hand, usually” vignette to be the least serious of all vignettes portending child maltreatment (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979, p. 177). Clearly, the African American respondents were sensitive to issues of harsh discipline or maltreatment of children, but they would not agree with Deater-Deckard and Dodge’s implicit view that physical discipline is by nature harsh. The general finding that African Americans and the less educated are more sensitive to child experiences that portend maltreatment was essentially replicated a decade later in the rural South (Ringwalt & Caye, 1989).

Heffer and Kelley (1987) studied both middle and lower class African American mothers in comparison to middle and lower class European American mothers to determine their disciplinary and child management preferences among five methods: positive reinforcement, response cost (withholding privileges), time-out, spanking, and medication. They found that positive reinforcement and response cost were equivalent in garnering the highest rates of acceptance among middle-class African American mothers, whereas response cost got the highest rate of acceptance among lower class African American mothers. However, two thirds of both middle and lower class African American mothers accepted spanking as a disciplinary technique in contrast to only a quarter of middle-class European American mothers. Interestingly, the majority of lower class African American mothers were distinguished by their nonacceptance of time-out, which highlights a disciplinary method that I consider later in this commentary. Overall, these findings corroborate those of Deater-Deckard and Dodge’s pilot study of attitudes toward disciplinary techniques among African American middle-class mental health service professionals and indicate that spanking is a widely condoned disciplinary technique among African Americans. However, they also cast doubt on the idea that physical punishment is a predominant disciplinary method among African Americans of any social class level. As Korbin (1980) pointed out, African Americans make a sharp distinction between physical punishment and abusive levels of such punishment.

These findings raise the question of whether physical abuse is more prevalent among African Americans because of acceptance of physical punishment as a disciplinary technique, in spite of a cultural prohibition against abusive levels of such punishment. A national study of the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in 1986 found no racial group differences in prevalence of physical or other types of abuse and neglect (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988), even though the survey was conducted after the ravages of job loss resulting from the decline in the manufacturing work sector and the crack cocaine drug epidemic were fully impacting the African American community. Actually, there are reports of analyses from the first national survey of the incidence and prevalence of child abuse and neglect in 1980 indicating that African Americans had a lower rate of child maltreatment when controls for social class were implemented (Bergdorf, cited in Garbarino & Ebata, 1983). Thus, child maltreatment data do not support the view that African Americans’ tolerance of physical discipline fosters physical abuse. But Deater-Deckard, Dodge, and their associates (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1995) appropriately broach the question of whether or not the opposite proposition might obtain (i.e., for African Americans, physical punishment at nonabusive levels is actually associated with greater parenting effectiveness in deterring child aggression and externalizing behaviors). Data they present imply that it might. However, their data do not address the possibility that other disciplinary techniques might account for the favorable correlation of use of physical
punishment and (lower) rate of child aggression among African Americans, which is a possibility substantiated by Heffer and Kelley's (1987) finding that physical punishment is not the preferred disciplinary technique of African American mothers. There are other robust empirical studies that provide an indication of the overall effectiveness of African American parenting practices in relation to externalizing behaviors in children. Specifically, the validation studies of the parental report Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Connors, 1991) show minimal effects of race on prevalence of externalizing behavior problems in 4- to 16-year-olds in the United States, and European Americans actually scored higher than African Americans on two externalizing checklist items, whereas African Americans scored higher than European Americans on only one of those items (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981, p. 49). This is a pattern that clearly does not support an inference of more prevalent externalizing behavior problems among African American children. However, studies that employ the CBCL underscore the importance of child gender and the school context for child behavior problems (e.g., Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Achenbach, Howell, McConaughy, & Stanger, 1995), and thereby justify greater scrutiny of both gender and school context as factors pertinent to externalizing behavior problems in African American children.

In their target article, Deater-Deckard and Dodge rely on teachers' reports of externalizing behavior problems and average these reports for 4 years to give a single rating for child participants who were in fact studied longitudinally from kindergarten through third grade. This is unfortunate because this obscures revealing information that they present in other articles that report data for each year that participants were tracked longitudinally. Also, these other articles give information on peer ratings of aggression that is very informative. Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994) divided the same sample on which their target article reports into five social class groups and reported both teacher ratings of externalizing behaviors and peer ratings of child aggression by social class category for each year from kindergarten through third grade. The lowest social class category contained 76% minorities with many unfavorable demographic indicators in their backgrounds, but the next-to-lowest social class category was only 22% minority with a lower incidence of unfavorable indicators. Teacher ratings of externalizing behavior problems were uniformly highest for the lowest social class group across the grades from kindergarten through third grade (mean T scores of 54.1, 55.9, 57.8, 57.9), and would delineate a line with slightly positive slope if they were graphed; teacher ratings for the next-to-lowest social class group are similar, except that they are very slightly lower and would trace a line with an intercept marginally lower (mean T scores of 54.0, 55.8, 56.9, 56.2). In contrast, data on peer-rated aggression for these two groups trace an intriguing interaction-like pattern of crossing lines. Peer-rated aggression in kindergarten (mean Z score of -.11) for the lowest social class (predominantly minority and presumably predominantly African American) group is lower than average and considerably lower than the next-to-lowest social class (predominantly European American) group (mean Z score of .13), which had the highest level of peer-rated aggression in kindergarten of all groups. The pattern of peer-rated aggression in the lowest social class group is one of steady increases across the grades (mean Z scores of -.11, .14, .17, .34) such that it is the highest of all social class groups by third grade. For the next-to-lowest social class group it is different; level of peer-rated aggression is the same in kindergarten and first grade (mean Z scores of .13 and .12) but doubles in second grade and remains at the doubled level in third grade (mean Z scores of .25 and .25), which is the second highest for all social class groups. Clearly, these patterns suggest that the school setting might not be a neutral environment for the developmental unfolding of endogenous and/or home-based determinants of aggression and externalizing behavior patterns.

Alternately, Deater-Deckard et al. (1995) gave a year-by-year longitudinal presentation of data on the same participants by race and dichotomous social class groupings. Graphs in this alternate presentation show that teacher-rated externalizing behavior for low-income European Americans sharply increases from first to second grade and then levels off or declines slightly; this pattern also holds for middle-income European Americans, except for those with a high number of risk factors for whom teacher ratings increase up to the third grade before declining slightly. For low-income African American children, teacher-rated externalizing behavior sharply increases from the first to the third grade, when it declines slightly for those with relatively few risk factors in their backgrounds. Most striking, however, is the pattern of slight increase in teacher-rated externalizing behavior for middle-income African American children with the lowest numbers of risk factors; there is a steep increase in teacher-rated externalizing behavior for middle-income African American children with the highest number of risk factors. Clearly, these alternate data reports also indicate sufficient racial discrepancies in patterns of externalizing behavior problems to suspect that the school setting might not be a neutral environment for developmental unfolding of endogenous and/or home-based determi-
nants of aggression and externalizing behavior patterns. This directs attention to the literature on teacher and school sanctions on child behavior and school-based discipline in terms of race. I direct our attention to the facts of grade placement first.

Kindergarten has become a locus of negative feedback about child behavior for many children, but most extensively for African American males. In 1988, statistics for the United States as a whole revealed that 29.9% of African American children were retained 1 or more years in kindergarten, but only 17.2% of European American children had this experience, and 24% of males but only 15.3% of females experienced kindergarten retention (Meisels, 1992). National statistics on history of retention for 13-year-olds reveal that 44.5% of African American males, and 35% of African American females were 1 or more years below age-typical grade level in comparison to 29% of European American males and 21% of European American females (Meisels, 1992); generally, retention occurs by third grade if not in kindergarten (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Meta-analyses of retention studies show long-term detrimental effects rather than benefits for retainees (Holmes, 1989), in spite of short-term academic benefits (Langer, Kalk, & Searls, 1984). Retention actually has some negative social consequences pertinent to the issues raised in Deater-Deckard and Dodge’s study. Plummer and Graziano (1987) found that children retained in primary grades were viewed less favorably than nonretained children by second-grade classmates, and retained children were less often preferred as playmates outside of school by fifth-grade classmates, even though height of retainee and retention status of the rater qualified these findings; their sample was 34% African American and 65% European American, however, and they did not report findings for racial groups separately.

Placement in special education programs is an additional experience reflecting negative appraisal of students’ school adaptation and African American children, particularly males, are disproportionately assigned to such programs. Up to the mid-1970s, African Americans and males were a disproportionately high percentage of students in programs for the educable mentally retarded (EMR) until judicial restrictions on such placements were instituted (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Since that time, disproportionately high placement has continued, but African Americans—particularly males—have been assigned to programs for the learning disabled and the emotionally disturbed instead of EMR (Tucker, 1980; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1986). Special education placement has implications for school-based discipline and is discussed later in this commentary.

The numerous publications produced by the empirical research program of Entwisle and her associates in Baltimore show that primary grade African Americans, and African American males particularly, experience severe negative feedback from their teachers in the form of poor conduct report card marks, that this feedback is far more condemnatory than that to European Americans with similar attributes measured prior to school entry and/or first grade, that such marks are correlated with deflected achievement trajectories of African Americans as detected in standardized test scores, and that the incidence and severity of negative teacher conduct ratings varies with the degree of discrepancy in social class origins of teachers and their students (e.g., Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Alexander, Entwisle, Cadigan, & Pallas, 1987; Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987; Entwisle & Alexander, 1988; Entwisle & Hayduck, 1978, 1982). Qualitative study of classroom interactions of African American first-grade children with their teachers has found severe negative feedback to lower class children and their relegation to instructionally neglected low-track groups (Rist, 1970).

Another ethnography (Grant, 1984, 1985) reported the ways in which equivocal, critically slanted feedback to African American children, particularly males, in their first-grade classrooms and assignment to low-ability tracks within the first few weeks of school are related to a pattern of combative relationships between African American males and their teachers. These conflictive relationships have detrimental consequences for African American male achievement, as I have recently explained (Jackson, 1996). In addition, the adversarial student–teacher relationships that these studies describe as characteristic for African American primary grade children, particularly males, and their teachers—along with low track assignments—probably contribute to peer-rated aggression. Kellam and his associates (e.g., Kellam & Rebok, 1992) are conducting a longitudinal intervention study with primary grade children in the predominantly African American Baltimore public schools to prevent behavior and mental health problems. They found marked variation in the incidence of peer-rated aggressiveness of classmates by classroom environment, even though students were randomly assigned to classrooms and their analyses controlled for many child characteristics, such as kindergarten evaluations, retention status, gender, and age. For example, in one school where the prevalence of male aggressive behavior was 60%, there was one classroom where 85% of the children were rated as aggressive by their classmates, whereas in another classroom only 33% of the children received such a rating (Kellam & Rebok, 1992, p. 177). Overall, there is much in reports of these studies that suggests that the ecology of the school has a good
deal to do with the etiology of aggression and externalizing behavior problems in African American children. Studies of school-based discipline practices reported in the literature on special education give more direct indications of a probable role of schools in the development of externalizing problems in African American children, particularly males. A number of states permit physical punishment administered by school authorities at school, even though African Americans, as indicated in a study of college students, are opposed to it and are distinguished by their opposition to its use with young, primary grade children (Tingstrom & Silver, 1989). Florida is a state that permits physical punishment as a school disciplinary method, but the state also requires that its administration be documented. An archival study of the records of the general school population of one school district found statistically significant race and gender effects for administration of physical punishment, such that African American males more often received physical punishment (Shaw & Braden, 1990). McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992) studied the records of a Florida school district to determine if special education assignment, as well as race, played a role in administration of physical punishment. They found that physical punishment was most often administered to elementary school students, African American students more frequently received severe punishment such as physical punishment and suspension from school, and African American male special education students—particularly those in the emotionally handicapped and learning disabled categories—were punished more severely than others for commission of the same offenses.

Harsh punishment is not confined to Southern schools or to physical punishment as a method, as studies of disciplinary practices in classes for the emotionally handicapped and learning disabled in Northern schools have shown. Time-out is the most commonly recommended method of child behavior control (Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995), and surveys reveal that 88% of special education teachers (Ruhl, 1985) and 85% of school psychologists (Shapiro & Lentz, 1985) use this disciplinary technique. Skiba and Raison (1990) and Costenbader and Reading-Brown (1995) studied the use of time-out in special education programs in which African Americans were overrepresented and found that students spent a substantial amount of time in isolation from their classroom on average and that a few students were isolated excessively; the latter fact was revealed in large variances in the measures of time in time-out. Because neither study provided a behavioral or demographic profile of those few students who were isolated excessively, the question of discriminatory use of this technique cannot be answered. Nonetheless, these study findings indicate that even disciplinary methods that are regarded as exemplary can be used in a way that is harsh and potentially debilitating to children, and suggest that excessive use of such discipline may contribute to the externalizing behavior problems of African American children. It may be this awareness that led a majority of lower class African American mothers to reject time-out as a disciplinary method (Heffer & Kelley, 1987), as previously noted.

There are biological factors that affect child externalizing behavior problems, as Deater-Deckard and Dodge presume, but they do not discuss the biological factors that are probably most influential for young African American children. Environmental toxins, for example, affect behavior disorders in children, and recently reported research indicates that African Americans are more likely than European American children to be affected. Low-level lead poisoning of school-age children in a predominantly African American sample was recently reported by Needleman, Riess, Tobin, Biesecker, and Greenhouse (1996). In their study, lead exposure was not associated with any child behavior problems as measured by the CBCL at age 7. However, for 11-year-olds, lead exposure was associated with both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems as measured by the CBCL, including aggressive and delinquent behaviors. Clearly, this finding suggests that either experiences in the school age years and/or delayed effects of the lead exposure potentiated the detrimental effects of lead toxicity for their sample. Another study of an all African American preschool sample indicates that there are child behavior problems attributable to lead exposure, even when effects of elementary schooling are ruled out. Sciarillo, Alexander, and Farrell (1992) studied low-level lead exposure in 2- to 5-year-old Baltimore children and maternal reports of child behavior on the CBCL. After controlling for maternal mental health, they found that the relatively high-exposure children exhibited significantly more externalizing and internalizing behavior problems and that the patterns of behavior problems differed by child gender.

The implications of these studies are serious in light of the fact that lead exposure in the ranges associated with symptoms in these studies is extensive among African American preschool children. Results of a 1988–1991 national survey (Brody et al., 1994) revealed that preschool-age children, males, African Americans, older adults—particularly African Americans—and central city residents were more likely to have detectable blood lead than others, that the prevalence of detectable blood lead was 20% to 21.6% for preschool African Americans in contrast to 3.7% to 8.5% for their European American counterparts, but the
rate of lead exposure was an astronomical 36.7% for African American children living in central cities with populations of 1 million or more. In light of the extreme residential segregation in the United States that confines African Americans of all income and educational levels to urban residence (Massey & Denton, 1993), the issue of lead poisoning looms as an especially grave one for African Americans.

The results on lead poisoning in school-age children in comparison to results of the validation studies of the CBCL implicate schooling as a particularly hazardous experience for African American children. In spite of racial group differences in level of lead exposure, Achenbach and his associates (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Achenbach et al., 1991), as noted previously, found no racial group differences in externalizing behavior problems and very small social class differences on the CBCL. This suggests that there were either forces affecting European Americans selectively that elevated their levels of externalizing behavior problems to those of the disproportionately lead-exposed African American children, or there were forces operating to offset the greater vulnerability of African American children due to lead exposure (possibly effective African American parenting), or both. Nonetheless, Needleman and his associates (Needleman et al., 1996) had a predominantly African American sample and found greater externalizing behavior problems and delinquency in their higher lead-exposed male participants by 11 years of age. This suggests a potentiating role of unidentified aggression and delinquency promoting factors. Placement in special education might be such a factor, given the stigmatization associated with it and the occasional harsh discipline to which African American children in such programs appear to be subjected. An archival follow-up study of a predominantly Hispanic group of children who had been screened for lead poisoning as preschoolers (Coppens et al., 1990) revealed that those with elevated levels of lead were more likely to be assigned to special education classes in elementary school than matched controls with minimal levels of lead exposure. It seems likely that lead exposure has the same problematic consequence for African American children by increasing assignment to special education.

Patterns of findings on lead exposure and IQ in European American samples illustrate the invalidity and nonapplicability of conventional methods of determining genetic heritability of IQ and aggressive behavior/externalizing behavior problems for African Americans. Awareness that low-level lead exposure is associated with both primary grade IQ deficiencies and long-term learning disabilities and educational disadvantage among European Americans (e.g., Needleman, Schell, Bellinger, Leviton, & Allred, 1990) has become widespread in professional circles. Less widely known are the results of cross-national prospective studies of lead exposure that have tracked children from birth to preadolescence. Such studies show that both individual and sample variations in the context of development operate to both confound and modify the lead–IQ correlation in ways that preclude prediction of lead effects (Bellinger, 1995). For example, in a study of prenatally exposed Boston children from generally very high socioeconomic status (SES) European American backgrounds, those from the relatively lower SES strata with the highest level of lead exposure had higher IQs ($M = 116$) than counterparts from the highest SES strata ($M = 111$; Bellinger, 1995, p. 207). Studies of effects of nutrition in relation to lead exposure have pointed implications for African Americans also. Mahaffey (1985) reviewed literature on the influence of dietary components on lead absorption and toxicity, and reported that calcium and iron deficiencies, which are more common in low-income urban African American children, increase lead absorption. All of these findings considered in conjunction with the facts of substantial age variability and racial differences in lead exposure in the adult population make it clear that genetic heritability calculations using twin study, kinship correlations, and adoption research designs are meaningless for African Americans. Efforts to detect the genetic factors in IQ and aggression/externalizing behaviors are too extensively confounded by social and physical environmental influences.

Robins (1992) listed slightly low IQ, poor school success, attentional deficits, and hyperactivity as the "personal attributes" of young children that prognosticate a developmental trajectory of antisocial behavior and conduct problems. I think that Deater-Deckard and Dodge should initially visit some of the issues that I have raised in this commentary rather than revisit the conventional wisdom that parental discipline and genetic factors cause externalizing behavior problems, in their attempt to understand the sources of the attributes listed by Robins and the etiology of externalizing behavior problems and aggression in African American children.

**Note**

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Physical Punishment Is a Problem, Whether Conduct Disorder Is Endogenous or Not

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The target article by Deater-Deckard and Dodge starts out with the well-documented link between parents’ use of harsh, physical discipline and later child aggression and conduct disorder, and implicitly adopts the hypothesis that this is a causal link. At the same time, the authors cover all their bases by acknowledging an “emerging consensus that both genetic and environmental factors play roles in the development of [these behaviors].” Thus no one can fault their theoretical approach.

The main part of the article is given over to an examination of four hypotheses about the effects various social-environmental factors have in moderating and modulating the relation between punishment and externalizing behavior problems under a variety of conditions. (One should note that the article deals almost exclusively with physical punishment, which most people would not consider synonymous with the word discipline, specified in the title). These hypotheses are: (a) the association between discipline and child aggression includes a nonlinear component, (b) the parent behavior–child behavior link varies across cultural groups, (c) parental discipline effects on children vary according to the context of the broader parent–child relationship, and (d) the discipline effect is maximized in same-gender parent–child dyads.

Because Deater-Deckard and Dodge offer some evidence for the conclusions on their main points and these also accord with some subjective “common sense” idea, one is inclined to accept them. Their target article, I would say, is most useful for understanding and explaining relations between physical punishment and externalizing behavior within a nondeviant (not extreme) population.

The Nature of Physical Punishment and Its Advocates

It is necessary to remember that physical punishment comes in very diverse forms, from a slap on the wrist to the use of implements, as, for instance, implied by the words belting or paddling. These differences are often not captured in research, because, when scales of severity are used, they are dimensional and depend on frequency or amount of physical punishment. Yet it is sensible to assume that the very large qualitative variations in the forms of physical punishment just noted would make a difference to the outcome. The parent who slaps a child’s wrist, maybe even a few times a week, is simply not the same parent as the one who takes a belt to “discipline” his or her child, even if this does not result in bruises that would be the indication of “physical abuse” (cf., Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). Hence future research might create new insights by working with categories of physical punishment.

It is a positive feature of the target article that it suggests, and provides some evidence for, the existence of differential relations in the effect of punishment on externalizing behavior: Lower doses of physical punishment have not been found to be related to the development of externalizing behavior, whereas more severe...