

The two claims that I sought to evaluate from the Conscious Discipline website were that implementation of Conscious Discipline would a) decrease aggression in preschool children and b) decrease impulsivity and hyperactivity in “difficult” students. I believe that the research used to support these points shows compelling evidence of poor research design, limited attempts to mitigate bias, and manipulation of data to skew relevance, in addition to various other concerns. The two studies I looked at were different designs- one was a non-experimental pre-test/post-test mixed methods action research design, and the other was a quasi-experimental quantitative design. Here, I will dive into the two articles and their associated concerns, as well as evaluate whether the results found back the Conscious Discipline website’s claims in an ethical way.

The first article I analyzed was “Reducing Aggressive Acts of Young Children in Child-Care Settings,” by Kay Zastrow (2004). She is an itinerant special education teacher who came across Conscious Discipline at a conference. After attending a workshop, she took the opportunity to conduct action research that would support her research question (and opinion)- “What effect will Conscious Discipline behavioral teaching strategies have on reducing the incidence of the aggressive acts of young children in childcare settings?” The hypothesis formed from this is that Conscious Discipline will have a positive effect on reducing the incidents of acts of physical aggression among preschoolers in her targeted childcare center. From the get-go, there were multiple red flags that appeared as I dug deeper into her research. The first major red flag happened when reading her rationale. Zastrow is obvious about her passion and desire to find data to support a program that she says will “align with my values and belief system.” For reference, her values and belief system are clearly defined in the reflective commentary section- “...The message and principles of Conscious Discipline cannot be separated from the connections and belonging that comes from being part of a church family.” Her obvious bias (and hedgehog-like thinking) is never addressed or identified as even being a concern. She makes no effort to examine opposing viewpoints or data, and her literature review is heavily influenced by positive reports of Conscious Discipline. The evidence of the bias in this report is in Zastrow’s tone and word choice, as well as the fact that each page of the report has an “advertisement” for Conscious Discipline at the bottom. She makes no efforts that I could identify to reduce the amount of bias or noise in her research or seek any outside opinions. Zastrow’s action research also suffers from poor design and instrumentation. To begin, Zastrow’s sample was only one teacher at a child-care facility (originally 5 “key staff members,” but only 3 completed the process, 2 of which were unusable in the study), and the number of students in the group was never identified. Also, the methods and instruments that Zastrow chooses to utilize are not effective. The pre- and post-observations were done with 7 months between them, but Zastrow doesn’t even explore what “noise” this could cause in her research (maturation of students, continued teaching of classroom expectations, etc.), even after identifying a difference in the conditions of one of the events (a bike being present outside). Finally, Zastrow’s action research has a heavily manipulated and overgeneralized analysis and results section. Initially, she identified six sub questions for her action research. In reflecting on these, she bases most of her evaluation on her opinion, not collected data. All six of the sub question conclusions are debatable as best, and completely inaccurate at worst, and none of her conclusions are supported by an accurate reflection on the collected data. Regarding her analysis of collected data, she doesn’t do any, even just calculating means. Her data shows that there was a reduction in the frequency of acts of aggression. She chooses bar graphs to show this in the most “impactful” way. She also reports the results in misleading language (“it reduced x to zero”

sensationalizes it, when she could have easily said “reduced by y%”). She also glosses over the fact that the teacher reported no change in classroom behavior.

The second claim I investigated is that Conscious Discipline “decreases impulsivity and hyperactivity in ‘difficult’ students.” The research used to support this statement was a quasi-experimental study done in two Florida K-6 schools. The article I examined was “Training Teachers in Classroom Management: Evidence of Positive Effects on the Behavior of Difficult Children” by Hoffman, Hutchinson, and Reiss (2005). Immediately upon starting to evaluate this article, I found concerning information that brings its results and conclusions into question. The primary concerns are a flawed study design and unethical presentation of research results. The first issues I encountered were ones with the study design, including participant selection, group assignment, procedures, and instrumentation. The participant selection claims to be “random,” but no more detail is given. It seems highly unlikely that 11 male students and 1 female student is representative of demographics as the authors claim. Of the 12 student-teacher pairs that participated, two were selected to be in the control group. Both were from the same school, both were female teachers with male students, and most confusing for me is the fact that the control group was selected *after* the intervention. All 12 teachers received the Conscious Discipline training, but the 2 control teachers were selected because they reported “minimal use” of it. Because the researchers concluded that “they were not unusual,” they made the decision to denote “those two teacher-student pairs as our control group and the other 10 as our experimental.” Keep in mind that this was decided “when researchers administered the BASC-TRS *post-test*.” This means that they would have completed the rest of the study, and the researchers just didn’t want to include them in their results, knowing that it would drag them down. If procedures had been listed and followed, their results would be slightly more useful, though not much. The final issue in study design was with instrumentation. Their instrument measured how teachers perceived the behavior (so it measured changes in perception), not in the actual frequency of behaviors. The other main concern with this second article is the fact that it presents its findings in a misleading and unethical way. Mentioned above is delegating the control group after the fact, but also the researchers use the word significant a ton. They don’t define if they are talking about statistical or practical, and regardless, the word has little meaning here. Because the sample population was so small, significance is much easier to find. In my opinion, the authors also seem to manipulate their data in ways that make it appear more impactful, drawing conclusions and finding causality where there may not be any (they never address limitations or how applicable their data really is).

In conclusion, I do not believe the research found on the Conscious Discipline website is based on valid and reliable studies that apply directly to the claims on the site. The studies showed serious amounts of unmitigated bias (regarding sponsorship and personal opinions), weak participant selection, and issues with data collection and analysis. Many of the results in the reports are not presented accurately, and logical conclusions are jumped past in favor of more exciting and “significant” conclusions. Each study is also incredibly limited, based on sample size and participants, and applying it to an entire school district may not be relevant. Additionally, recent research (within the last 10 years) reveals very little support for Conscious Discipline outside of their own website. Based on this information, I believe that implementation of Conscious Discipline would be best in early childhood grades only, not the entire district, and should be researched more before purchased. Though there are many positive testimonials to be found online, it appears that most of their research appears heavily biased and misleading,