Self-control, parenting, and problem behavior in early childhood: A multi-method, multi-informant study

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

\textbf{Background:} Early childhood self-control and parenting are suggested to play key roles in the development of child problem behavior. The current study aims to 1) replicate earlier work by examining the unique and combined effects of child self-control and parenting on child problem behavior and 2) extend earlier work by including both mother and father reports.

\textbf{Methods:} Data were used from 107 Dutch families: mothers, fathers, and their two-year old child. Child self-control was measured using both father's and mother's reports of effortful control and with an observed behavioral task (i.e., gift-in-bag task). Similarly, parenting (i.e., emotional availability and discipline) and child problem behavior (i.e., externalizing and internalizing problems) were measured by using both father's and mother's reports.

\textbf{Results:} Child self-control reported by fathers and mothers, but not observed self-control, was related to fewer externalizing and (mother-reported) internalizing problems. Paternal emotional availability showed a modest association with fewer child externalizing problems, maternal emotional availability was related to fewer internalizing problems. Finally, there was an interaction between father- (but not mother) reported self-control and paternal emotional availability in the prediction of child internalizing problems. No main or interaction effect was revealed for discipline.

\textbf{Conclusion:} Findings confirm prior work on self-control, parenting, and child problem behavior. Most importantly however, the current study adds to the literature by highlighting the need for additional research including maternal as well as paternal data. Specifically, insight in the unique role of fathers may shed light on aspects of child adjustment not covered by mother reports alone.

\section{1. Introduction}

Research has consistently shown an association between problem behavior in early childhood and later development of mental disorders (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2010; Campbell, 1995). Given the long-term consequences of childhood emotional and behavioral problems (Campbell, 1995; Denham et al., 2000), it is important to reveal factors relating to problem behavior at an early age. Today, a range of risk and protective factors has been suggested for the development of problem behavior in early childhood. In particular, the links between child temperament (e.g., self-control) and child problem behavior, and between parenting and child problem behavior are well established (e.g., Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Brook, Zheng, Whiteman, & Brook, 2001; Caspi et al., 2004;

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Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2004, 2009; Karlsch, 1999; Raby et al., 2014; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Increasing evidence, however, suggests that the complexity of developmental processes can be captured best by taking into account the interaction between temperament and parenting, in addition to examining the unique effects of the individual factors (Bates, Pettit, Dodge, & Ridge, 1998; Belsky, 2005; Bradley & Corwyn, 2008; Gartstein & Fagot, 2003; Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, & Dekovic, 2009; Kochanska, 1997; Magnusson & Stattin, 1998). The present study aims at examining both the unique and combined effects of child self-control (i.e., parent-reported effortful control and observed behavioral control) and parenting (i.e., emotional availability and discipline) on problem behavior (i.e., externalizing and internalizing problems) in early childhood. In the current study, two aims can be distinguished. First, this study aims to replicate prior findings on the predictions from parenting behavior, child self-control and the interaction between these variables, to child problem behavior. Second, the study aims at extending earlier research by including not only mother reports, but also father reports of child self-control and problem behaviors. The merit of studying both father and mother reports is two-fold: it allows us to test the potentially crucial differential role of fathers and mothers (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; DeKlyen, Biernbaum, Speltz, & Greenberg, 1998; Rinaldi & Howe, 2012) and it provides us with multi-informant data which enables cross analyses and reducing informant bias.

1.1. Self-control in early childhood

Self-control is the ability to control one’s impulsive feelings, thoughts, and behavior in order to comply with social and personal standards and to achieve long-term goals (Moffit et al., 2011; Waegeman et al., 2014). In young children, self-control is often operationalized in terms of effortful control (Kochanska & Knaack, 2003; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000), and defined as a temperamental feature reflecting “the efficiency of executive attention, including the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors” (Rothbart & Bates, 2006, p. 129). Self-control has been suggested to encompass both an attentional aspect (i.e., the ability to shift and/or focus attention), and a behavioral aspect (i.e., the inhibition of impulsive or undesirable behavior; Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2009; Waegeman et al., 2014). Individual differences in self-control (generally operationalized in terms of effortful control) emerge during the first years of life and further develop across childhood and adolescence (Rothbart & Bates, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Self-control, and effortful control specifically, has usually been measured using either parent questionnaires (often filled out by the mother; Gartstein & Fagot, 2003; Lemery, Essex, & Smider, 2002) or observed behavioral tasks (at home or in a lab; Kochanska & Knaack, 2003; Kochanska et al., 2000). Nonetheless, only relatively weak associations have been found between questionnaire data and actual observed behavioral control, with correlations rarely exceeding 0.40 (Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Karreman et al., 2009). This suggests rather low convergent validity of parent-reported and observed behavioral control, and as such including both measures may provide a more comprehensive indication of self-control than the use of one instrument only (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

1.2. Self-control and child problem behavior

A prominent finding in earlier literature is the predictive value of self-control for greater health, wealth, and success in general (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Moffit et al., 2011) and fewer behavioral problems more specifically (Brody & Ge, 2001). Problem behavior can be manifested in externalizing and internalizing problems, which both tap independent aspects of early problem behavior (Carter, Briggs-Gowan, Jones, & Little, 2003). In toddlers, externalizing problems (i.e., disinhibited and unresponsive behavior directed towards others) include high activity, impulsivity, aggression, and defiance; whereas internalizing problems (i.e., inhibited behavior directed towards oneself) include depression, social withdrawal, anxiety, separation distress, and extreme inhibition/shyness (Carter et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2001).

The association between self-control and externalizing problems has been studied more often than the association between self-control and internalizing problems. The studies on self-control and externalizing problems have shown stronger and more consistent findings than those on self-control and internalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2001). A relation between low self-control and externalizing problems in children has been reported abundantly, when investigated in terms of parent-reported child self-control (i.e., effortful control; e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2004, 2009; Eisenberg, Sadovsky et al., 2005; Eisenberg, Zhou et al., 2005; Gartstein & Fagot, 2003; Lemery et al., 2002; Olson, Samaroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005; Spinrad et al., 2007) and also in studies on observed behavioral control (Karreman et al., 2009; Kochanska & Knaack, 2003; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, White, & Stouthamer-Loober, 1996; Murray & Kochanska, 2002, Olson et al., 2005; Rapport, Tucker, DuPaul, Merlo, & Stoner, 1986; Spinrad et al., 2007).

Results on the association between self-control and internalizing problems are relatively limited and seemingly inconsistent. Some studies found parent-reported child self-control to relate negatively to child internalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2004, 2009; Lemery et al., 2002; Spinrad et al., 2007), whereas others found child self-control to relate positively to internalizing problems (Murray & Kochanska, 2002), or observed no relation between these constructs (Houck & Lecuyer-Maus, 2004; Krueger et al., 1996; O’Brien & Frick, 1996). Although much remains unknown on the factors contributing to these inconsistencies, these may partly be the result of differences in the definition and precise conceptualization of self-control. That is, self-control is generally seen as an umbrella term encompassing an attentional, a behavioral and possibly also an emotional component (Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2004, 2009). It may be that the attentional aspect of self-control is related to the development of internalizing problems in particular. That is, attentional control (i.e., attentional shifting) has been found to facilitate self-control in young children (e.g., Mischel & Ayduk, 2002), and it has been suggested to be mostly the shift in attention from negative feelings, thoughts or environmental cues to more positive ones that is crucial in the prevention of internalizing problems (Derryberry & Reed, 2002;
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