



# The persistence of early childhood physical aggression: Examining maternal delinquency and offending, mental health, and cultural differences<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To examine the persistence of physical aggression in preschoolers and associated correlates (i.e., socio-demographic, socioeconomic, criminality, parenting practices, maternal mental health).

**Methods:** One-year follow-ups are completed with 240 mothers and their preschool children (boys and girls) from the Vancouver Longitudinal Study on the Psychosocial Development of Children. A series of structural equation models are examined.

**Results:** Maternal psychological symptoms, juvenile delinquency, and adult offending are associated with higher levels of physical aggression in their offspring. Children of non-Caucasian mothers and those born outside of North are less physically aggressive. Cultural differences in the correlates of physical aggression were identified.

**Conclusions:** Maternal past delinquency, current adult offending, and mental health are important factors in the development of children's physical aggression. The findings suggest that there are multiple pathways leading to chronic physical aggression, which may be culturally-based. Cultural differences should be taken into account when developing programs and intervening with families of children with behavioral problems.

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## Introduction

Criminology is progressively searching earlier in the life course to explain the development of antisocial and criminal behavior. Developmental criminologists propose that early life events and circumstances can have cumulative consequences on an individual's behavioral development (e.g., Loeber, Slot, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2008; Moffitt, 1993). Similarly, Cullen (2011) suggests that criminology should focus on the developmental periods prior to adolescence, stressing that infants emerge from the womb with individual differences and such differences are carried on to the next developmental stages. The focus on these very early individual differences, especially those associated with later violent behavior, is emphasized by longitudinal studies (e.g., Caspi et al., 2002). Genetic or biological studies may provide information on the magnitude of the influence of antisocial and violent behavior (for reviews, Glenn & Raine, 2014; Moffitt, 2005; Rhee & Waldman, 2002), but do not necessarily explain the underlying process by which the risk for violence develops over time. Recent research shows that known risk factors for violence are predictive of childhood aggression

as early as 6 and 12 months old (Hay et al., 2011, 2014), while criminogenic risk factors are associated with patterns of physical aggression in preschoolers as young as 36 months old (Lussier, Corrado, Healey, Tzoumakis, & Deslauriers-Varin, 2011; Tzoumakis, Lussier, & Corrado, 2012; Tzoumakis, Lussier, & Corrado, 2014). Moreover, recent theoretical advances suggest that theories of crime need to incorporate the development of temperament and associated behavioral problems in infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, adolescence, and across adulthood (DeLisi & Vaughn, 2014; Walters, 2014). The period from infancy to early childhood is therefore important for theoretical development, and empirical evidence continues to indicate that antisocial behavior originates during this time (e.g., Farrington, 2005; Moffitt, 2003).

The early childhood/infancy period is also vitally important for policy reasons. For instance, a recent meta-analysis shows that early intervention programs (i.e., family/parent training) are effective not only in decreasing antisocial behavior in childhood, but also have positive long term effects on delinquency and offending in adolescence and adulthood (Piquero, Farrington, Welsh, Tremblay, & Jennings, 2009). The effectiveness of early intervention is therefore critical, particularly since a substantial amount of research indicates the financial costs of delinquency and crime are extremely high (see Cohen, 1998; Cohen, Piquero, & Jennings, 2010). Further understanding of the processes occurring with children and their parents during infancy and early childhood, particularly from a criminological perspective, can help to improve prevention, intervention, and approaches to studying the origins of antisocial behavior. Moreover, as many communities become

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increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse, understanding these processes among different cultural, ethnic, and immigrant groups is also important. The current study explores the development of physical aggression during this early childhood period, and considers a neglected area in current research along these lines, cultural differences.

#### *Developmental psychology and childhood physical aggression*

Research in developmental psychology emphasizes the importance of the early childhood period, particularly regarding the development of physical aggression. Aggression during childhood is normative, and most children exhibit some form of physical aggression, with peaks in the frequency of aggression at approximately one and half, and, two to three and a half years of age (Hay, 2005; Tremblay et al., 1999). After this early childhood period however, aggression tends to decline dramatically (e.g., Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1989; Goodenough, 1931; Hartup, 1974). While many studies have examined developmental trajectories of violence aggression in adolescence and adulthood (for a review, Jennings & Reingle, 2012), fewer studies have focused specifically on the development of physical aggression before school entry (e.g., Côté, Vaillancourt, Le Blanc, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2006; Côté et al., 2007; NICHD, 2004; Piquero, Carriaga, Diamond, Kazemian, & Farrington, 2012; Tremblay et al., 2004). Findings from these studies show that: 1) approximately one third to half of preschool children belong to a very low (approaching zero) trajectory of physical aggression; 2) preschool children exhibiting the highest levels of physical aggression in a cohort were the smallest trajectory identified (approximately 15%); 3) those belonging to the high physical aggression trajectories are more likely to show antisocial behavior and violence into adolescence and adulthood; and, 4) a number of risk factors are associated with belonging to the high physical aggression trajectories in early childhood, including: male gender, low socioeconomic status, maternal past antisocial behavior, maternal young age at birth of child, maternal low education, prenatal smoking, presence of young siblings, coercive parenting. Critically, virtually none of these early childhood studies examine an ethnically diverse sample, or the impact of ethnic or cultural differences in the development of physical aggression.

Findings from trajectory studies therefore reaffirm the importance of understanding aggression during the early childhood period, while informing us about the risk factors associated with the long-term development of aggression. However, one limitation is that they do not necessarily capture heterogeneity of patterns of physical aggression in the short-term, or explain how short-term physical aggression is influenced, particularly during the critical period before school entry. For example, the question of how patterns of behavioral development manifest in the short-term may yield very different observations than broader patterns over a five or ten year period. Moreover, it is unclear whether correlates associated with short-term change are the same or different from those associated with the predicted long-term trajectories of physical aggression in children. The period before children begin school is critical as it provides an important window of opportunity for primary and secondary intervention because this is when socialization processes are taking place where children learn alternatives to aggression and other maladaptive behavior (e.g., Kochanska, 1993; Kopp, 1982; Maccoby, 1980; Tremblay, 2003). Therefore, examining the more proximal factors and life circumstances of families dealing with children with aggression and behavioral problems is also informative for program development, and for clinicians and others intervening with these families. A greater level of specificity, or targeted intervention, may be more beneficial in this context, especially for different cultural groups.

#### *Motherhood and the transmission of antisocial behavior*

The socialization process in the preschool years falls to the parents, and mostly to mothers, as they are typically the primary caregivers.

Studies in psychology often consider characteristics of mothers, such as mental health, that contribute to the development of aggression and other behavioral problems in their children (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Jaffee, Belsky, Harrington, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2006; Shaw, Owens, Giovannelli, & Winslow, 2001). Criminologists on the other hand, traditionally focus on the role of the father in the context of the intergenerational transmission of antisocial and criminal behavior (for reviews, Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; van de Rakt, Nieuwbeerta, & De Graaf, 2008). Although females are far less likely to participate in crime than males (e.g., Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996), the impact of maternal participation in delinquency and offending should not be underestimated. For instance, studies that have considered the role of both mothers and fathers in the development of children's antisocial behavior find considerable continuity in antisocial behavior from mothers to their children (Smith & Farrington, 2004; Thornberry, Freeman-Gallant, & Lovegrove, 2009). Moreover, females with a history of conduct disorder and juvenile delinquency are at risk for experiencing a number of negative life circumstances in adulthood, including: low socioeconomic status, substance abuse, mental health problems, abusive interpersonal relationships (e.g., Lanctôt, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2007; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Odgers et al., 2008; Zoccolillo et al., 2005). In other words, when these women become mothers, these research findings tend to suggest that they may find themselves in 'high-risk' situations that subsequently make it more difficult to provide ideal supportive and nurturing caregiving environments.

Sampson and Laub argue that socialization experiences and life transitions (e.g., marriage, employment) in adulthood can change the course of criminal behavior over the life span (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Moreover, research on desistance from crime suggests that becoming a parent can contribute to reducing antisocial and criminal behavior for females (e.g., Graham & Bowling, 1995; Kreager, Matsueda, & Erosheva, 2010). However, studies examining the adult outcomes of females with a history of antisocial behavior also suggest that these women are more likely to continue participating in antisocial behavior in adulthood (e.g., Lanctôt & Le Blanc, 2002; Moffitt et al., 2001). Moreover, some qualitative accounts show that while many women attribute the birth of their child and motherhood as positive events that play an important role in their desistance from delinquency and crime, for others it is a source of stress that compounds their parental difficulties (e.g., Giordano, 2010; Michalsen, 2011). Hence, whether motherhood is a positive or negative experience may be contingent on a number of individual and life circumstances, but it may pose a particular challenge for women involved in antisocial and criminal behavior.

#### *Motherhood in a New Cultural Context*

In an era of increased globalization, longitudinal studies and life-course criminology have neglected to account for the impact of immigration and the influence of new cultural contexts on offending and the transition to parenthood. On the one hand, research in the field of nursing has scrutinized the process of women attaining a maternal role identity (i.e., acquiring a new self-definition as a mother) for several decades (e.g., Koniak-Griffin, 1993; Rubin, 1967). Importantly, this field of research highlights that this process can be difficult for some women, and in particular for certain populations such as cultural minorities and adolescent mothers. On the other hand, all women do not experience motherhood the same way, and this is especially true for different cultural groups and immigrant mothers who are highly influenced by their cultural of origin (Koniak-Griffin, Logsdon, Hines-Martin, & Turner, 2006). Cultural displacement has an important yet minimally understood effect on motherhood because it is potentially challenging for mothers to raise children to function effectively in two different cultures (Tummala-Narra, 2004). In other words, accounting for cultural differences and immigration in the study of the relationship between motherhood and behavioral development in children is especially salient in multicultural nations.

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