



Big five parental personality traits, parenting behaviors, and adolescent behavior problems: A mediation model

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ABSTRACT

The direct links between mothers' and fathers' personality, parenting behaviors, and adolescent behavior problems were examined, as well as the potential mediating influence of parenting behaviors on links between parental personality and child adjustment. This longitudinal, prospective study included 111 adolescents and their mothers and fathers. Results based on mothers', fathers', and adolescents' reports of behavioral adjustment concurred: adolescents with more conscientious mothers had fewer externalizing behaviors. Additionally, mothers and fathers who rated themselves as more conscientious reported greater ease in setting limits for their adolescents. For both parents, parenting behaviors related to their adolescent's externalizing behavior problems. Maternal limit setting mediated the direct relation between maternal personality and adolescent adjustment. These findings highlight parental conscientiousness as a personality trait related to parents' ease in setting limits in their parental role and corroborate the significant relation between limit setting as a parental behavior potentially facilitating adolescents' behavioral adjustment.

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1. Introduction

Numerous factors contribute to individual differences in parenting behavior, and parental personality has been assigned a major role by some theorists (Vondra, Sysko, & Belsky, 2005) because it relates to both the way mothers and fathers execute the parental role as well as to the quality of their close relationships (Belsky & Barends, 2002). Given that adult personality is stable over time (Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006), it has the potential to relate consistently to parenting behaviors. Research has indicated direct links between certain parent personality traits, such as parental psychopathology or negative emotionality, and child behavior problems (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Kochanska, Clark, & Goldman, 1997); moreover, researchers have identified indirect links from parental personality to children's behavior problems through parenting behaviors (Brook, Whiteman, & Zheng, 2002).

1.1. Direct relations between parental personality and child outcomes

Parental personality may directly influence children's behavior through means such as modeling (Brook et al., 2002; Prinzie et al., 2005) or through genetic factors (Prinzie et al., 2005). Much of the research examining relations between parental personality

factors and child outcomes has focused on neuroticism, which relates positively to externalizing behavior problems in children of various ages. Maternal neuroticism (e.g., negative emotionality, disagreeableness, anxiety, or depression) has been linked to defiant and angry behavior in toddler-aged children (Kochanska et al., 1997), to externalizing problems in 8-year-old boys (Bates, Bayles, Bennett, Ridge, & Brown, 1991), and to overt signs of antisocial behavior in a clinical sample of boys ages 6 to 12 years, half of whom were diagnosed with ADHD (Nigg & Hinshaw, 1998). Likewise, fathers' neuroticism positively related to symptoms of ADHD (Nigg & Hinshaw, 1998). Prinzie and colleagues (2004, 2005) found a negative relation between mothers' emotional stability and children's externalizing problems in a Belgian sample of over 500 school-aged children. Thus, evidence shows that parental neuroticism or emotional instability has a consistent positive direct relation with behavior problems in children from toddler through elementary school ages.

Fewer studies have examined the remaining personality dimensions of the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality (Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; Goldberg, 1990) as they relate to child behavior problems. Children whose parents report high levels of Extraversion (Prinzie et al., 2005) and Conscientiousness (Nigg & Hinshaw, 1998; Prinzie et al., 2005) demonstrate lower levels of behavior problems. In contrast, Openness to new experience in fathers positively relates to antisocial behavior in elementary school-aged children (Nigg & Hinshaw,

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1998). Research on parental Agreeableness has shown mixed findings. Although Nigg and Hinshaw (1998) observed that mothers' Agreeableness was negatively related to ADHD, Prinzie and colleagues (2004) found mother's Agreeableness positively related to school-aged children's externalizing problems.

1.2. Parent personality and parenting behaviors

Empirical evidence corroborates relations between parental personality and parenting behaviors. For example, supportive and nurturing parenting is positively associated with Extraversion and Openness (Metsapelto & Pulkkinen, 2003), Agreeableness (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995) and Conscientiousness (Clark, Kochanska, & Ready, 2000; Losoya, Callor, Rowe, & Goldsmith, 1997), and inversely related to Neuroticism (Metsapelto & Pulkkinen, 2003). In contrast, negative, controlling parenting is positively associated with Neuroticism and inversely related to Agreeableness (Belsky et al., 1995; Losoya et al., 1997).

1.3. Indirect relations between parent personality and child behavior problems

In addition to the direct relation between parent personality and child outcomes, parent personality may relate to child behavioral outcomes through its influence on parenting behaviors (Belsky & Barends, 2002). Parenting behaviors that relate to positive child development and low levels of problem behavior include parental warmth/responsiveness and behavioral control (Baumrind, 1966). Although current conceptualizations expand the number of dimensions of parenting style (Steinberg, 2001), Baumrind's twin dimensions continue to be considered as core facets of parenting. In research that examines parental warmth and child outcomes, empirical evidence establishes that when parents have warm, responsive relationships with their sons and daughters, children demonstrate fewer aggressive and delinquent behaviors and lower levels of social withdrawal, psychological distress, and somatic symptoms (Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997). In terms of the control dimension, parents' use of firm behavioral control relates to lower levels of adolescents' externalizing problems (Galambos, Barker, & Almeida, 2003) and lower levels of adolescents' aggressive behavior (Mazefsky & Farrell, 2005). In addition, Heaven and Ciarrochi (2006) found that warmth and control predicted lower levels of Eysenckian psychoticism in adolescent boys.

Recent evidence shows that parenting behaviors serve as mediators between parent personality and toddler behavior. Prinzie and colleagues (2004) found parent personality was directly related to externalizing problems in children and was also related to negative parenting, which in turn was linked to child behavior problems.

1.4. Contributions of the current study

In the current study, we extend the literature in important ways. Previous studies examined the links between parent personality and behavioral adjustment of toddlers and school-age children. We examine these links in a sample of parents with adolescent children. Moreover, data analyzed herein were collected prospectively over a five-year period. Contrary to much past research that has focused primarily on maternal Neuroticism, we measured all factors of the FFM for both mothers and fathers. Finally, our measures of adolescent behavioral adjustment included multiple informants: mothers, fathers, and adolescents.

The first purpose of the present study was to examine the direct links between each of the FFM factors of both fathers and mothers and adolescent behavior problems. Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that parental Neuroticism would relate positively to externalizing problems (Bates et al., 1991; Kochanska et al.,

1997; Nigg & Hinshaw, 1998; Prinzie et al., 2004, 2005) and that Conscientiousness and Extraversion would relate negatively to externalizing problems (Nigg & Hinshaw, 1998; Prinzie et al., 2005). Given positive relations between nurturing parenting and Openness (Metsapelto & Pulkkinen, 2003) and Agreeableness (Belsky et al., 1995), we predicted they would relate inversely to externalizing problems.

Second, we examined the relation between parental personality and parenting behaviors. We hypothesized that parental Neuroticism would relate negatively to responsive parenting (Losoya et al., 1997; Metsapelto & Pulkkinen, 2003) and that the other four personality factors would relate positively (Bates et al., 1991; Clark et al., 2000; Kochanska et al., 1997; Prinzie et al., 2004, 2005). These predictions parallel the conclusions of Vondra and colleagues (2005, p. 43) who, after reviewing this literature, said, ". . . if one could choose one's parents, the most beneficial choice would be parents who are low in neuroticism, high in extraversion and agreeableness, and perhaps high in openness to experience and conscientiousness."

Finally, we examined the extent to which the parenting behaviors serve as mediators between parental personality and adolescent behavior problems. We predicted that parental limit setting and involvement would mediate the relation between parental personality and adolescent behavior problems as they reflect qualities of the parent-child relationship, a linkage previously reported by researchers studying younger children (Brook et al., 2002; Prinzie et al., 2004).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This investigation is based on the Fullerton Longitudinal Study (FLS), a prospective project that began in 1979 with 130 children who were 1 year of age and their parents who averaged approximately 30 years of age (mothers: $M = 28.6$, $SD = 4.2$; fathers: $M = 31.5$, $SD = 5.1$). Data analyzed herein were collected at annual assessments when participants were 13 through 17 years old. Return rates consistently exceeded 80%, with no evidence of differential attrition (Guerin, Gottfried, Oliver, & Thomas, 2003). At the 17-year assessment, the sample included a wide range of middle SES families ($M = 48.7$, $SD = 11.3$) as measured on the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, unpublished manuscript). Demographically, participants were predominantly Euro-American (90%) with approximately equal numbers of males and females. For additional demographic information see Guerin et al. (2003).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)

At the 13-year assessment, mothers and fathers completed the NEO-FFI, Form S (Costa & McCrae, 1989). This inventory measures five global domains of personality: Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness (O), Agreeableness (A), and Conscientiousness (C). Each of these scales includes 12 items. Respondents indicate their agreement on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistencies for mothers and fathers in our sample were: .82 and .86 for N, .82 and .78 for E, .71 and .70 for O, .68 and .69 for A, and .85 and .88 for C. *T*-scores were used for all analyses.

2.2.2. Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI)

To assess parenting behaviors, mothers and fathers completed the PCRI (Gerard, 1994) at the 15- and 16-year assessments. This measure includes 78 statements that utilize a four-point Likert

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