



Emotional self-regulation, peer rejection, and antisocial behavior: Developmental associations from early childhood to early adolescence

Christopher J. Trentacosta^{a,*}, Daniel S. Shaw^b

^a Wayne State University, USA

^b University of Pittsburgh, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 4 March 2009

Keywords:

Self-regulation
Emotion regulation
Peer relationships
Antisocial behavior
Developmental psychopathology

ABSTRACT

This study examined relations among emotional self-regulation, peer rejection, and antisocial behavior in a sample of 122 boys from low-income families who participated in a summer camp and were followed longitudinally from early childhood to early adolescence. Emotional self-regulation strategies were coded in early childhood from a waiting task, measures of peer rejection were collected during middle childhood at the summer camp, and reports of antisocial behavior were obtained during early adolescence. Structural equation modeling was utilized to examine longitudinal relations among these constructs, with results supporting a negative association between use of active distraction and peer rejection and a positive association between peer rejection and antisocial behavior. Furthermore, an indirect effect of active distraction on antisocial behavior was found through peer rejection. Thus, adaptive self-regulation strategy use in early childhood demonstrated direct longitudinal relations with peer rejection and an indirect association with antisocial behavior in early adolescence. Results have implications for early prevention and intervention efforts to foster adaptive self-regulation of emotion and reduce risk for later social problems and delinquency.

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1. Introduction

Aggression and other forms of overt externalizing symptoms reach their peak between ages two and three. However, a small minority of children continue to show high levels of disruptive behavior problems across childhood (Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003), and early conduct problems are associated with delinquency and mental health problems in adolescence (Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002; Shaw & Gross, *in press*). Due in part to the personal, economic, and social toll that delinquency takes on individuals and society, predictors of antisocial behavior have received extensive examination. Perspectives on early-starting conduct problems have emphasized the interplay of child temperamental factors and context in the emergence and maintenance of these problems across childhood (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Shaw, Bell, & Gilliom, 2000). In line with a focus on individual and social mechanisms in the persistence of early-starting conduct problems from early childhood to early adolescence, the present study examined emotional self-regulation and peer rejection as precursors to early adolescent antisocial behavior.

The present study was also informed by a developmental psychopathology perspective on sensitive periods in development, which emphasizes that each stage of child development presents key tasks and challenges. A developmental psychopathology perspective suggests that deviations from normative processes at earlier stages of development increase the likelihood of psychopathology later in development (Sroufe, 1997). In early childhood, one key challenge is the attainment of self-regulation of

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, 5057 Woodward Avenue, 7th Floor, Detroit, MI 48202, USA. Tel.: +1 313 577 9413; fax: +1 313 577 7636.

E-mail address: chris.trentacosta@wayne.edu (C.J. Trentacosta).

emotion (Kopp, 1989), and difficulty with adaptive emotional self-regulation may portend later social and behavioral problems (e.g., Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg, & Lukon, 2002). In middle childhood, peer inclusion becomes a critical element of positive adaptation (Rose-Krasnor, 1997), and peer rejection indicates poor social adaptation and risk for antisocial behavior (e.g., Laird, Jordan, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2001). Previous research has not simultaneously examined the influences of emotional self-regulation and peer rejection during developmental periods when normative deviations may be particularly salient for later adaptation. In the present study, we examined whether self-regulation strategies in early childhood predicted peer rejection in middle childhood and how these constructs were associated with antisocial behavior in early adolescence. Longitudinal data allowed examination of the central hypothesis that peer rejection would account for indirect relations between emotional self-regulation strategies in early childhood and antisocial behavior in early adolescence.

1.1. Emotional self-regulation in early childhood

Emotion regulation is a multi-faceted construct without a single, widely-accepted definition (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). At a broad level, emotion-related regulation can include attentional, cognitive, or behavioral attempts to manage internal states or the external expression of emotion (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Smith, 2004). Because emotion regulation is a multi-faceted construct, numerous approaches exist to examine emotion regulatory processes, ranging from studies of the reflexive regulation of distress in infancy to the analysis of emotion dynamics in interpersonal interactions. An increasingly common approach to investigate emotion regulation involves structured observation of “self-initiated attempts to modulate negative emotion” (Cole et al., 2004, p. 325). This method to examine emotion regulation is particularly relevant during early childhood because it reflects the developmental importance and rapid growth of multiple levels of self-regulatory competence during the toddler and preschool periods (Calkins & Fox, 2002).

For example, self-regulatory attempts to focus, shift, or inhibit attention, behavior, and emotion increase during the toddler period when aggressive outbursts peak and caregivers are frequently needed to calm distressed toddlers (Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000; Kopp, 1989; Shaw et al., 2000). As children move into the preschool years, a growing proficiency with effortful control promotes increased use of adaptive self-regulation strategies and fewer behavioral problems (Kochanska et al., 2000). When confronted with a distressing event, young preschoolers are often able to actively distract themselves from distressing stimuli or focus on more pleasant aspects of the situation (Denham, 1998). However, children who are *unable* to master adaptive strategies for emotional self-regulation during the preschool period demonstrate numerous problematic outcomes, including impaired social competence and externalizing problems (e.g., Denham et al., 2003; Gilliom et al., 2002).

In line with an operational definition of emotion regulation that focuses on self-regulatory attempts to manage negative emotion, the present study examined behavioral strategies for regulating emotion in the context of a frustrating situation. Previous research has focused on specific self-regulation strategies that may be more or less adaptive in the immediate context and in relation to later adaptation (e.g., Silk, Shaw, Skuban, Oland, & Kovacs, 2006). For example, the ability to utilize self-regulatory strategies to delay gratification during a waiting task in preschool predicted social and academic competence during adolescence (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). Specific emotional self-regulatory strategies may have unique implications for externalizing behaviors, including early-starting conduct problems that emerge in childhood (Calkins & Howse, 2004; Dishion & Patterson, 2006). In an earlier report using data from the present study, a tendency to focus on the desired object and less use of self-regulatory distraction during a frustrating waiting task at age 3.5 were associated with teacher reports of externalizing problems 3 years later (Gilliom et al., 2002). No prior research has examined specific self-regulation strategies in early childhood as predictors of antisocial behavior during early adolescence. However, a broad observational composite of self-control that included ratings of emotional reactivity and regulation at age 3 was related to antisocial behavior in adolescence and differentiated life-course-persistent from adolescent-limited antisocial behavior in the Dunedin study (Caspi, Henry, McGee, Moffitt, & Silva, 1995; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001).

1.2. Peer rejection in middle childhood

The role that school-age peer relationships play in pathways from emotional self-regulation in early childhood to antisocial behavior in adolescence also has yet to be elucidated. In particular, characteristics of peer relationships may account for indirect relations between earlier emotional self-regulation and later antisocial behavior, a hypothesis that is best examined with a longitudinal study.

Youngsters typically develop their first friendships during the toddler and preschool periods, but inclusion by peers takes on heightened significance during middle childhood as children increasingly make social comparisons based on shared feelings, values, and loyalty (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Thus, a substantial portion of the empirical research on the developmental salience of peer rejection has been conducted during middle childhood. Middle childhood peer rejection predicts concurrent and later antisocial behavior (for a review, see Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006), even after accounting for the effect of earlier externalizing problems (e.g., Laird et al., 2001).

Because peer rejection is a consistent risk factor for negative behavioral outcomes, there is an extensive literature examining its precursors. Children’s adaptive self-regulation of emotion often occurs concomitantly with positive social adaptation and also serves as a buffer against peer rejection (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; Hubbard & Dearing, 2004). Children who use more adaptive emotional self-regulation strategies in distressing situations are more likely to master the social skills necessary for effective social relationships (e.g., Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). Conversely, children who have difficulty managing their negative

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