



## Research article

# Development pathways from abusive parenting to delinquency: The mediating role of depression and aggression<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the long-term relationship between abusive parenting and adolescent mental health, and the path to delinquent behavior. Longitudinal data from 5th through 7th graders from the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey (KCYPS) were analyzed to examine if abusive parenting was a predictor of early adolescent delinquency behavior, via aggression and depression as mediating factors. The results were as follows. First, parental abuse (both emotional and physical) was found to have significant effects on children's psychosocial factors (aggression and depression), while parental neglect (both emotional and physical) had significant effects on depression alone and not on aggression. Second, aggression exerted significant effects on both violent and non-violent delinquent behaviors, while depression had a significant effect on only non-violent delinquent behaviors. Third, children's psychosocial factors (aggression and depression) played significant mediating roles between earlier abusive parenting and delinquent behaviors. Fourth, for children living in a family with their grandparents, paths from abusive parenting, psychosocial adaptation, and later delinquent behaviors were not significant, implying that living with grandparents played a protective factor in these relationships.

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## Introduction

In Korea, legislative revisions for child abuse prevention are relatively recent. It was not until January 2000 that clauses related to child abuse were added to official protection laws and child protection institutions were systematized. Thus, a systematic approach in preventing children from risk of abuse has not yet been fully formulated (Kim & Yoo, 2012). The cultural perception of child abuse in Korea is that it should remain more or less a family issue, that is, a private matter (Yon, 1992). This perception makes it difficult to prevent child abuse and protect child victims from abusive situations. In Article 3 No. 7 of the Child Welfare Act of Korea, child abuse is defined as "The behavior of adults or guardians inflicting physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that can damage the child's health, welfare, or normal development, and the act of child neglect or abandonment". The National Child Protection Agency (2012) is in charge of all national child abuse prevention programs. According to their guidelines, there are four child abuse subtypes: Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Physical neglect, and Emotional neglect. Different types of abuse have distinctive physical and behavioral characteristics.

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Child abuse occurs when the guardian's hostile, premeditated, and aggressive behavior intentionally harms the child. To be specific, physical abuse is to inflict deliberate or accidental bodily injury on a child. In cases of physical abuse, the parent or guardian inflicts physical injury and pain, such as intentionally and deliberately hitting or inflicting burns, and causing harm through physical violence (Kwack, 2005). Emotional abuse is to cause emotional wound and pain to a child and refers to abusive acts that hinder the self-esteem or social interaction of the child. For example, an emotionally abusive parent or guardian may ignore the child or say words that insult and threaten the child (Kwack, 2005). While abuse is related to direct action toward the child, neglect has to do with lack of action or care. Child neglect is when the guardian does not respond to or adequately care for the needs of the child and remains indifferent toward the child's welfare (National Child Protect Agency, 2012). Physical neglect is not providing or permitting the appropriate measures needed for a child's nurturing and growth, or behaviors that delay them (Ahn, 2000). Emotional neglect occurs when the parent does not provide the emotional support or protection needed for the healthy development of a child's personality (Ahn, 2000). While there are differences in the types of abuse, the common link among them is the negative outcome resulting from all forms of abuse.

The negative effects of abusive parenting on adolescence have been widely reported. Childhood abuse was found to have negative impacts on individual behavioral problems, including alcohol and drug addiction, family violence, and suicidal tendencies, as well as social problems such as juvenile delinquency and criminal acts (Dube et al., 2001; Felitti et al., 1998; Osofsky, 1999). Empirical studies showed approximately one-third to two-thirds of juvenile delinquents have experienced some form of child abuse (Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001); and those who have experienced child abuse are more likely to engage in crime (Currie & Tekin, 2006) and adolescent delinquency (Hwang, 2009). For example, many of those who had committed serious criminal acts, such as violent and sexual crimes, were found to have experienced chronic abuse in childhood (Hamilton, Falshaw, & Browne, 2002). The negative impact that abusive parenting has on adolescent development may extend beyond disruptive behavioral and social problems to deeper levels of psychological and emotional maladjustment.

Adolescent psycho-emotional problems are another layer related to abusive parenting. Previous studies have shown that children who have experienced family abuse are generally more aggressive than those who have not (Chung, Park, & Ku, 2006; Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1993), and higher levels of aggression eventually lead to violent behaviors (Finzi, Ram, Har-Even, Shnit, & Weizman, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2011; Lee & Yoo, 2011; Swogger, You, Cashman-Brown, & Conner, 2011; White & Widom, 2003). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), these findings imply that domestic violence could create the environment in which children might develop and internalize favorable values on violence, which later leads to delinquent behaviors (Luntz & Widom, 1994; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Um, 2001). Moreover, adolescents' psychological malfunctions, including depression and aggression, are manifested as external problems, such as adjustment problems at school, hypergasia, and delinquency. That is, depressed and aggressive children might choose external delinquent actions as a possible way of showing their internal problems (Cantwell & Baker, 1991; Kim & Nam, 2012; Koenig, 1988). These results indicate the need to focus on depression and aggression, which are common psycho-emotional struggles of abused and delinquent adolescents.

The evidence of the damaging effects of abusive parenting on abuse victims lends support for the idea that there are different levels of impact. The negative effects of abuse include maladjustments on physical, behavioral, and psychological levels. For adolescents in particular, abuse inhibits physical, psychological, emotional, and social growth and development. The general belief of parents and guardians as protectors, providers, role models or nurturers for adolescents' well-being is antithetical in meaning for circumstances where it is the parents or guardians themselves who are the perpetrators of abuse. Rather than protecting, abusive parents are inflicting harm that impact children beyond adolescence into adulthood. Victims of abuse could possibly experience lifelong behavioral and social problems that may affect their quality of life. Therefore, this study aims to explain the relationships from abusive parenting to psycho-emotional problems and delinquent behaviors.

#### *Literature review*

*Child Maltreatment and Its Impact on Delinquency.* The family is often the foundation from which people first begin to learn the basic patterns of behaviors and roles; it is also within the family unit that people experience relationships and these experiences play a significant role in determining his or her future behavior (Um, 2001). Thus, family environment and parenting are significant factors in studying adolescent delinquency.

According to previous research, parenting behaviors exerted significant effects on delinquency (Ahn, 2010; Baldry, 2003; Kim & Park, 2002). Chronic and repeated child abuse resulted in severe youth crimes such as violent crime and sexual crime (Hamilton et al., 2002), and abused children had higher chances of experiencing juvenile imprisonment (Currie & Tekin, 2006). In particular, studies showed that physical abuse had the biggest impact on adolescent delinquency (Hwang, 2009; Um, 2001), and that abused children showed a higher level of aggression (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007).

Nevertheless, the direct influence of abusive parenting is not solely responsible for adolescents' delinquency, as not all victims of child abuse show delinquent behaviors. In fact, a large body of research has argued for the indirect effect of abuse on delinquency (Cho & Kang, 2010; Chung & Kim, 2012; Kim & Nam, 2012; Stuewing & McCloskey, 2005; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2001). Thus, the influence of abusive parenting on delinquency needs to be understood not as a simple causal relationship, but rather a complex process of abusive parenting and victims' experiences. These studies seem to suggest a mediating mechanism within the patterns of abuse as it affects victims' experiences and negative outcomes. For example, it may not be as straightforward as physically abuse directly causes adolescents to become violent. The indication of indirect effects takes into account a more comprehensive impact on adolescents' well-being that includes physical, psychological, emotional, and

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