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Maternal versus paternal physical and emotional abuse, affect regulation and risk for depression from adolescence to early adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Current research has established that depression is a common outcome of child abuse. The current study extends previous research by examining the relationship between parental emotional and physical abuse and adolescents' depressive symptoms using a prospective longitudinal design. We anticipated that this relationship would be mediated through problems in affect regulation, consistent with the view that the presence of abuse in the parent–child relationship would derail the development of adaptive affect regulation. Finally, we further examined gender-linked transmission of risk by considering *both* the gender of the parent perpetrating abuse and the gender of the adolescent.

Methods: A sample of high-risk youth ($N = 179$; 46% female) from juvenile justice and clinical settings completed assessments regarding maternal and paternal physical and emotional abuse, affect dysregulation and depressive symptoms during three time points over the course of five years.

Results: The relationship between maternal abuse and depressive symptoms was partially mediated through affect dysregulation at Time 1 and fully mediated at Time 2. In addition, adolescents' reports of maternal abuse at Time 1 predicted their depressive symptoms in early adulthood even after accounting for the partial mediating role of affect dysregulation at each of the three timepoints of the study. It was also found that paternal abuse was related to depressive symptoms through an indirect relationship with affect dysregulation for males, but not females.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that adolescence may be a sensitive developmental period wherein abuse experiences have profound direct and mediated influences on the risk for later depression. Adolescents or young adults who have experienced abuse may benefit from interventions designed to build affect regulation skills.

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There is ample evidence that early childhood abuse is associated with increased risk for depression across the lifespan (e.g., Hankin, 2005; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006, 2010). Retrospective studies show that the effects of abuse on risk for depression persist well into adulthood (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007) and prospective studies have demonstrated the relationship between abuse and depression in childhood (Kim & Cicchetti, 2006). Less is known, however, about the relationship between abuse experienced in adolescence and the risk for depression. This is surprising given that adolescence is a period of marked increase in risk for multiple types of abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010) and the development of mental health problems, particularly depression (e.g., Hankin, 2006). As a result, there have been calls for prospective longitudinal studies to better understand the impact of abuse on adolescent adjustment (Trickett, Negriff, Ji, & Peckins, 2011).

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We report a prospective study specifically designed to examine how adolescents' experiences of emotional and physical abuse influence their risk for depressive symptoms in adolescence and later into early adulthood. As there is growing interest in the processes that underlie the relationship between abuse and poor adjustment, we discuss affect regulation as an emerging competence in adolescence that protects youth from developing depressive symptoms. We argue that when adolescents experience abuse, the development of affect regulation may be disrupted and result in deficits in this skill. In turn, problems with the regulation of affect may mediate the relationship between abuse and depressive symptoms. We draw on research on the primary role of mothers as attachment figures and examine the differential effects of maternal- versus paternal-perpetrated abuse on risk for depressive symptoms in daughters and sons.

Abuse, Affect Regulation and Depression

Depression is a common outcome of many forms of abuse. Historically, researchers focused on the effects of sexual and physical abuse on risk for adult depression due to the profoundly damaging effects of such experiences (e.g., Boudewyn & Liem, 1995; Gibb et al., 2001; Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999). However, recent studies have demonstrated that emotional abuse is also associated with risk for depression (e.g., Liu, Alloy, Abramson, Iacoviello, & Whitehouse, 2009). As a result, more attention has been directed toward understanding the common mechanisms and processes that may mediate risk transmission across development. For example, cognitive vulnerabilities such as cognitive schemas (e.g., Lumley & Harkness, 2009; Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009), automatic negative self-associations (e.g., van Harmelen et al., 2010), and rumination (e.g., Raes & Hermans, 2008) have been proposed to arise from abuse experiences and potentially mediate the relationship between abuse and depression over time.

Others have proposed that the disturbance of the development of affect regulation and adaptive functioning (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010), including associated self-regulating strategies such as self-compassion (Vettese, Dyer, Li, & Wekerle, 2011) is implicated in the relationship between abuse and depression. Affect regulation is defined here as the ability to modulate one's emotional states without undue attempts to avoid or suppress difficult emotions. It is also the ability to reflect on or use emotional experiences as an important source of information about oneself and one's experiences in the world (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Affect regulation can be conceptualized as both a risk and protective factor (Rutter, 2003; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 1993) since at high levels, adaptive affect regulation can be protective in the context of adversity; however, low affect regulation, or affect dysregulation, is associated with a myriad of mental health problems (Romens & Pollak, 2012; Soenke, Hahn, Tull, & Gratz, 2010).

There is a strong theoretical and empirical case for proposing affect regulation as a core process that accounts for the relationship between abuse and depression. From a developmental perspective, it is clear that all forms of abuse place the child in an untenable and extremely vulnerable position: When the person whom they rely on to support them to cope with overwhelming distress is the perpetrator of abuse, the child is abandoned and left to cope with extreme distress. As a result, the child's opportunities for learning to regulate difficult emotions are stunted both by the intrusion of overwhelming distress and the abandonment of an effective parent who both soothes the child and helps them to internalize effective self-regulation strategies. Such ideas have been posited in developmental models of disorders such as borderline personality disorder (BPD) which has at its core a fundamental incapacity to regulate affect (Linehan, 1993). Similar notions appear in attachment theory in which parental abuse interferes with the child's access to a safe haven, soothing of distress, and internalization of emotion regulating strategies (Moretti & Obsuth, 2011). Consistent with these views, numerous studies have shown that childhood abuse has been associated with emotion dysregulation (e.g., Camras, Sachs-Alter, & Ribordy, 1996; Cloitre, Stovall-McClough, Zorbas, & Charuvastra, 2008; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Riggs, 2010; Romens & Pollak, 2012).

The current study extends previous research by examining the mediating role of affect regulation on the relationship between parental emotional and physical abuse and adolescents' depressive symptoms using a prospective longitudinal design. Consistent with attachment theory and developmental models of personality disorder, we predicted that parental abuse would be associated with problems with affect regulation which in turn would mediate depressive symptoms concurrently and prospectively as teens transitioned to adulthood. These predictions were tested in a clinical sample of adolescents.

Maternal versus Paternal Abuse

Relatively few attempts have been made to determine whether abuse by different perpetrators has differential effects on children. Among studies examining the impact of exposure to interparental violence (IPV), several have found that exposure to maternal- rather than paternal-perpetrated IPV is a stronger predictor of children's aggression (Verlaan & Schwartzman, 2002), particularly in relationships (Hendy et al., 2003; Moretti, Bartolo, Slaney, Odgers, & Craig, under review; Moretti, Penney, Obsuth, & Odgers, 2006). Maternal-perpetrated abuse may play an important role in placing children at risk for several reasons. Hendy et al. (2003) have argued that the primacy of maternal versus paternal maltreatment is due to the primary role of mothers as caregivers. Consequently children may be more frequently exposed to maternal rather than paternal maltreatment. Additionally, we have argued that the effects of maternal maltreatment may be a function of mothers' role as primary attachment figures, as evidenced by research showing that mothers are identified as primary sources of emotional support in childhood and extending well into early adulthood (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). As primary

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