



Parental psychological control and aggression in youth: Moderating effect of emotion dysregulation



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ABSTRACT

Previous research shows that parent psychological control and child emotion dysregulation are both associated with the development of aggression in children. This longitudinal study sought to clarify these relations by examining emotion dysregulation as a moderator of the associations between psychological control and relational and physical aggression. Participants were 271 elementary school students ages 8–12 ($M = 9.31$ years; $SD = 0.98$) and their primary classroom teachers. Children completed measures of parental psychological control and emotion dysregulation at T1, while teachers rated children's relational and physical aggression at T1 and six months later at T2. Emotion dysregulation significantly moderated the association between psychological control and both forms of aggression, with no sex differences evident. Results suggest that psychologically controlling parenting strategies contribute to increased relational and decreased physical aggression among emotionally well-regulated children and the opposite pattern among emotionally dysregulated children. Implications for intervention and future research are discussed.

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According to developmental models of antisocial behavior, children's aggressive behavior emerges through a series of reciprocal behavioral processes that unfold between biological and environmental factors across settings and over time (Dishion & Patterson, 2006; Granic & Patterson, 2006; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993). Specifically, during early and middle childhood, the coercive interplay between poor parenting practices and a child's biological and temperamental vulnerabilities sets the stage for the development and reinforcement of aggressive behavior. Indeed, evidence has emerged to support the notion that coercive family processes (e.g., Kuppens, Laurent, Heyvaert, & Onghena, 2013; McFadyen-Ketchum, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996) and child characteristics such as emotion regulation and temperament (e.g., Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002; Li, Zhang, Li, Wang, & Zhen, 2012) influence the development of aggression.

The developmental psychopathology perspective examines developmental pathways to adaptive and maladaptive outcomes (Beauchaine, 2003; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996; Silk et al., 2007). Developmental psychopathology emphasizes the interplay between child characteristics, including biology, genetics, psychology, and environmental factors across development, encouraging examination of interactions between these variables (e.g., why do some children with a certain risk factor go on to

develop a poor outcome, while others develop typically?; Hart & Marmorstein, 2009). Family processes may confer risk for maladaptive outcomes for youth; however, these factors may function as non-specific risk factors, increasing the likelihood of a poor outcome, whereby the specific outcome is determined through complex interactions with the child's characteristics and exposure to other risk and protective factors.

Within emotion regulation theory, emotion dysregulation refers to an underlying deficit in one's ability to identify, respond to, or manage a broad spectrum of emotions (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). Inherent within this theory is the important role emotion regulation plays in the development and maintenance of a myriad of psychosocial concerns (e.g., Helmsen, Koglin, & Petermann, 2012; Suveg, Hoffman, Zeman, & Thomassin, 2009). In a recent review, Benavides (2015) identified numerous studies that demonstrated better emotion regulation served a buffering functioning for youth exposed to a variety of extrinsic risk factors, including domestic violence (Lee, 2001), and poverty (Prelow & Loukas, 2003). Such findings exemplify emotion regulation as an important child characteristic that may interact with other risk factors, serving to either buffer against, or exacerbate the impact of numerous environmental risk factors. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks emphasize the importance of understanding interactions between child characteristics, such as emotion regulation, and environmental factors.

Specific to the current study, child emotion dysregulation may interact with parenting practices to increase the risk of developing a maladaptive outcome. When in an environment in which parents are manipulating emotions, and there is poor emotional control, aggression and other acting out behaviors may be particularly likely. Conversely,

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better emotion regulation may serve to buffer the impact of poor parenting practices, reducing the risk of maladaptive outcomes. The central aim of the current study was to elucidate how parenting interacts with children's emotion regulation to influence particular forms of aggressive behavior. Specifically, we longitudinally examined the effect of parent psychological control on children's physical and relational aggression, with child emotion dysregulation as a possible moderator of these associations.

Forms of aggression

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that aggressive behavior has deleterious effects on children's development and is associated with a host of long-term adjustment difficulties (for a review, see Vitaro & Brendgen, 2012). Aggression is commonly distinguished into subtypes according to the form that the behavior takes, and previous research has demonstrated that these forms of aggression may have different etiologies and developmental pathways (e.g., Crick, 1996). Physical aggression involves harming another by means of physical force or threat of physical force, and it includes acts such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or forcibly taking objects (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). Relational aggression, on the other hand, refers to the manipulation of social relationships in order to cause harm, and it comprises behaviors such as spreading lies, rumors, or secrets, threatening to withdraw friendships, ignoring, and social ostracism (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Extant evidence suggests that physical and relational forms of aggression follow distinct trajectories across developmental periods, such that physical aggression peaks in early childhood and then gradually declines throughout middle childhood (Dodge et al., 2006), while relational aggression increases from middle childhood into early adolescence (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukainen, 1992; Murray-Close, Ostrov, & Crick, 2007). Developmental theories of aggression posit that these distinct trajectories occur, in part, due to varying predictors and differential interactions between environmental and child characteristics (Bonica, Arnold, Fisher, Zeljo, & Yershova, 2003; Dionne, Tremblay, Boivin, Laplante, & Pérusse, 2003; Dishion, Duncan, Eddy, Fagot, & Fetrow, 1994; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Namely, developmental models of physical aggression stipulate that the decline in aggressive behaviors throughout middle childhood is credited to social modeling, such that children learn more effective methods of interacting and communicating with others in conjunction with neural development that better equips children to effectively self-regulate (Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). Consequently, however, the same factors that may function to reduce physical aggression, may also serve to increase relational aggression, which inherently requires more developed cognitive and social skills (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Indeed, there is evidence that some youth who exhibit early physical aggression go on to display relational aggression, either in place of, or in addition to, physical aggression (Côté, Vaillancourt, Barker, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2007). The overlap between physical and relational aggression implies some shared risk factors between both forms that necessitates further inquiry and examination of these forms separately.

Parental psychological control and aggression

Psychological control is characterized by emotional manipulation on the part of the parent, using guilt induction and excessive personal control as a means of using the parent-child relationship as capitol for achieving their own ends (Barber, 1996). Psychological control differs from other parenting practices such as behavior control (limit setting and parental monitoring) in that appropriate behavioral control (i.e., not too limited, or too excessive) has been shown to be protective against physical aggression in children (Mills & Rubin, 1998; Nunes, Faraco, & Vieira, 2013), whereas psychological control has been proposed as a source of risk for both forms of aggressive

behavior (Albrecht, Galambos, & Jansson, 2007; Kuppens et al., 2013; Loukas, Paulos, & Robinson, 2005; Murray, Haynie, Howard, Cheng, & Simons-Morton, 2013). Social learning theory supports the link between parental psychological control and both forms of aggression, in that psychologically controlling parents model poor methods of interacting and responding to others, and fail to model prosocial behaviors (Hart, Ladd, & Burleson, 1990; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006), which may increase youth's risk for engaging in aggressive behaviors with others. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) may also explain associations between psychological control and both forms of aggression, such that youth exposed to psychologically controlling parents may fail to understand positive social relationships, and believe others to be antagonistic, which in turn may contribute to increased aggressive responding (Michiels, Grietens, Onghena, & Kuppens, 2008; Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001). While parental psychological control increases risk for youth's aggressive behavioral overall, it may be especially important in the development of relational aggression. Consistent with social learning theory (Patterson, 1982), psychological control may be an especially salient risk factor for relational aggression as youths may model the specific strategies modeled by their parents, such as social manipulation as a means of goal attainment (Casas et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2006). Indeed, previous research indicates that psychological control is a markedly strong risk factor for youth relational aggression (Kuppens et al., 2013). Given the documented differences in associations among psychological control and physical and relational aggression it is necessary to consider each form separately when examining the predictive role of parental psychological control in youths' aggressive behavior.

Emotion regulation and aggression

Previous research has found a consistent link between youth emotion dysregulation and aggression. This association has been established longitudinally, such that early experience of emotion dysregulation, defined here as dysregulated expression of anger and sadness, contributes to later relational and physical aggressive behaviors (McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Mennin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2011; Röll, Koglin, & Petermann, 2012). For example, McLaughlin et al. (2011) demonstrated that emotion dysregulation predicted increases in both forms of aggressive behavior over a 7-month interval in a sample of adolescents. Moreover, Calvete and Orue (2012) examined the moderating role of adaptive emotion regulation strategies between adolescents' anger and aggression. They found that the relation between anger and both forms of aggression was significantly weaker for adolescents who reported more effective emotion regulation.

This body of the literature indicates that emotion regulation may influence the impact of other risk factors on the development of aggressive behaviors. Indeed, in a previous cross-sectional study, Cui, Morris, Criss, Houlberg, and Silk (2014) found that anger regulation moderated the association between parental psychological control and older adolescents' aggression. Specifically, parental psychological control was significantly, positively correlated with aggression only for older adolescents with poor anger regulation; however, for older adolescents with better control over feelings of anger, psychological control did not predict aggressive behavior. Importantly, however, Cui and colleagues did not differentiate between the forms of aggression displayed by the adolescents in their sample, rather generating a composite measure of aggression, which has implications for long-term outcomes (Vitaro & Brendgen, 2012). Further, Cui and colleagues' study included an adolescent sample (mean age = 13.37), a time when parental behaviors may be less influential than during earlier developmental periods.

Finally, previous work demonstrates the importance of considering multiple emotions in evaluating associations between both forms of aggression and emotional functioning, with literature supporting both anger and sadness dysregulation contributing to general aggressive behavior (McLaughlin et al., 2011; Sullivan, Helms, Kliewer, & Goodman,

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