

Contextual risk and parenting as predictors of effortful control and social competence in preschool children

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Abstract

Using a short-term longitudinal design (6 months), this study examined cumulative contextual risk as a predictor of effortful control (EC) and social competence in a community sample of children ($N = 80$, ages 33–40 months at time 1). Maternal parenting was examined as a mediator of contextual risk. EC was assessed using laboratory tasks, and parenting was assessed using observational ratings. Time 1 contextual risk was negatively related to time 2 EC after controlling for time 1 EC. Mothers' limit setting and scaffolding predicted higher time 2 EC and accounted for the effect of contextual risk. Time 1 EC, contextual risk, and parenting predicted time 2 social competence, and contextual risk had an indirect effect on social competence through parenting. Results suggest that contextual risk predicts smaller relative increases in EC and that parenting accounts for this effect. Knowledge of the factors that divert or promote effortful control can provide targets for intervention to enhance effortful control abilities and better adjustment.

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1. Introduction

Understanding self-regulation processes is crucial for understanding children's adjustment (Posner & Rothbart, 2000), and self-regulation is a predictor of adaptive and maladaptive functioning (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000). Also, self-regulation differentiates resilient vs. non-resilient responses to cumulative risk (Lengua, 2002) and poverty (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003). Given the importance of self-regulation to children's adaptation, it is critical to understand early influences on the development of self-regulation. Understanding of the factors that abate self-regulation abilities can facilitate the identification of children at risk for adjustment problems, and knowledge of the processes that promote self-regulation provides targets for interventions aimed at improving child adjustment.

Parenting has been shown to predict self-regulation (e.g., Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000; Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Schilling, 2002). However, little is known about broader contextual influences on self-regulation. Contextual risk might divert the development of self-regulation, resulting in problems in academic, social, and emotional adjustment (e.g., Blair, 2002). This study examined cumulative contextual risk as a predictor of effortful control and social

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competence across six months in a community sample of preschool children. In addition, mothers' parenting behaviors were tested as mediators of the effects of cumulative risk.

Effortful control is a central aspect of self-regulation, referring to the attentional and inhibitory control mechanisms that facilitate inhibition of a dominant response to perform a subdominant response (Rothbart et al., 2000). Effortful control demonstrates a dramatic developmental increase between the ages of 3 and 6 years (Kochanska, Murray, Jacques, Koenig, & Vandegest, 1996) and is related to children's social competence (e.g., Kochanska et al., 1996; Rothbart, Ahadi, & Hershey, 1994). Effortful control reflects the function of the anterior attentional system, an executive system located in the areas of the midfrontal lobe (Vogt, Finch, & Olson, 1992; Posner & Rothbart, 1994). Recognition of plasticity in neural activity and structure has led to an increased focus on the role of experiences in shaping brain development (Posner & Rothbart, 2000). Davidson, Jackson and Kalin (2000) suggest that the period from 3- to 11-years of age is marked by pronounced plasticity in the prefrontal cortex. Therefore, it is important to account for contextual and socialization factors, such as contextual risk and parenting, that might influence these developing brain regions. Consequently, examination of contextual influences on effortful control during this developmental period can shed light on processes that promote or divert its development.

Little is known about contextual influences on effortful control, although a number of contextual risk factors have been shown to predict adverse outcomes for children. For example, risk factors such as poverty (e.g., Mistry, Biesanz, Taylor, Burchinal, & Cox, 2004), low parental education (e.g., Ritscher, Warner, Johnson, & Dohrenwend, 2001), single-parent household (e.g., Compas & Williams, 1990), household density (e.g., Evans, Saegert, & Harrid, 2001), and maternal depression (e.g., Shaw, Keenan, & Vondra, 1994) each have been shown to predict children's adjustment. In addition, being a member of an ethnic or racial minority group is thought to place children at increased risk for adjustment problems, not only as a result of a greater prevalence of other sociodemographic risk factors, but also as a result of experiences of discrimination and prejudice (e.g., Farkas, 2003; Spencer, 1990). Each of these contextual factors can result in more negative or stressful experiences for children or might engender more coercive family relationships that might lead to adjustment problems. Also, many of these risk factors tend to co-occur. For example, low family income is associated with higher levels of maternal depression, greater neighborhood risk (e.g., Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebenov, 1994), household density (Evans, 2003) and a host of other risk factors.

Given the co-occurrence of many contextual risk factors, a useful way to examine contextual risk is through a cumulative risk model. Cumulative risk is a count of the presence of stable demographic, psychosocial, and environmental risk factors (e.g., poverty, low parental education, single-parent household, household density, parental history of psychopathology, neighborhood risk, etc.). The examination of the number of such risk factors reflects the assumption that children's developmental outcomes are better predicted by combinations of risk factors than by individual factors alone. Research has demonstrated that cumulative risk predicts child outcomes equally well or better than consideration of any one factor (e.g., Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1998; Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, & Greenspan, 1987). Cumulative risk studies allow for tests of ecological models in which demographic, psychosocial, and environmental risk factors are jointly considered in predicting children's developmental outcomes (Elder & Caspi, 1988; Sampson & Laub, 1994). They also model the effect that the co-occurrence of risk factors can have, where contextual risk factors tend to be concentrated among the poor (Evans, 2003).

Studies of cumulative risk consistently show a relation between the number of risk factors present and greater cognitive, social, and behavioral problems in children (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1982; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1994). In the Rochester Longitudinal Study, a cumulative risk index significantly predicted lower social-emotional competence in children better than any single risk factor alone, and the effects could not be accounted for by any particular subset of the risk factors (Sameroff et al., 1987). Similarly, chronic and cumulative adversity was related to lower competence across academic, conduct and peer domains (Masten et al., 1999). In the present study, the risk factors that compose the cumulative risk score, including poverty, single-parent status, ethnic or racial minority status, household density, major life events, and moves, reflect chronic or disruptive risk factors that might pervasively affect the child's experience. These factors might impact child behaviors directly, as a result of children's direct experience of the risk factors, or indirectly through their association with other socialization and interpersonal experiences. In this study, it was hypothesized that a greater number of contextual risk factors present would reflect greater disruption in children's lives, diverting the development of effortful control.

Previous studies have demonstrated an association between cumulative risk and self-regulation. For example, 8- to 10-year old children growing up in poverty performed less well on a delay of gratification task than children in middle-income families. Cumulative risk, that is, the presence of substandard housing, noise, crowding, family turmoil, early

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