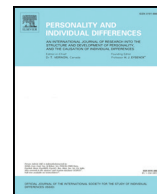




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The mediating role of parenting in the relation between personality and externalizing problems in Russian children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to explore the extent to which parenting practices mediate the relation between child personality traits and externalizing behavior in Russian cultural context. Participants were primary caregivers of 370 primary caregivers of preschool-age children. Parenting practices was measured by the Russian version of the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire - Preschool Revision (APQ-PR), child personality was measured by the Inventory of Child Individual Differences-Short version (ICID-S), externalizing problems were measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The results show that the effect of child personality on externalizing problems is partly mediated by parental discipline practices. The additional direct effects of personality traits was also found indicating that dysfunctional parenting practices do not provide a complete account of relations between child personality and externalizing problems, whereas positive parenting does not contribute to problem behavior when child personality is taken into account. The pattern of relationships between child personality, parenting practices, and externalizing behavior is similar for boys and girls. The findings are in accord with previous empirical evidence on the mediating role of parenting in the relationship between child personality and externalizing behavior found in western cultures.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been much interest in a range of factors which are associated with the development and persistence of externalizing problems in children. On the one hand, decades of research have demonstrated the direct links between child personality traits, especially Disagreeableness and Conscientiousness, and externalizing behavior (Caspi & Shiner, 2008; De Pauw & Mervielde, 2010). On the other hand, it has been shown that parenting behaviors such as low positivity and low involvement, harsh punishment, inconsistent discipline and poor monitoring are associated with the risk for externalizing, especially conduct problems in children (Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996; Cunningham & Boyle, 2002; Clerkin, Halperin, Marks, & Policaro, 2007). Contemporary conceptual models suggest that both child personality and parenting contribute uniquely to children's behavioral adjustment and produce a complex interplay between child individual differences and parent behaviors (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011).

1.1. Child personality and externalizing problems

Personality traits involve variations in emotion and regulation, and are shaped by the interplay of heredity and experience (Caspi & Shiner, 2008; De Pauw & Mervielde, 2010). Research suggests that child personality traits predict several important developmental outcomes. At the domain level, low Agreeableness and low Conscientiousness and, to a lesser extent, high Neuroticism, are generally found to be major predictors of externalizing problems (for a review see De Pauw & Mervielde, 2010). There is accumulating evidence for a common biological basis of normal individual differences and abnormal behaviors (Clark, 2005; Bijttebier, Beck, Claes, & Vandereycken, 2009).

1.2. Child individual characteristics and parenting behaviors

It has also been shown that child individual differences affect parenting practices. Ge et al. (1996) using an adoption design have shown that heritable child characteristics have systematic effects on the negative parenting from their caregivers, which, in turn, placed them at further risk for antisocial or hostile behavior. Twin studies using a genetically sensitive design have demonstrated that children's difficult and coercive behavior provokes harsh discipline from adults (Jaffee et al., 2004). Longitudinal studies have examined the prospective relationship between child personality and perceived parenting and found that more

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benevolent and imaginative children reported higher levels of parental warmth and lower levels of psychological control five years later (Egberts, Prinzie, Deković, de Haan, & van den Akker, 2015). Scaramella, Conger, Spoth, and Simons (2002) found that toddlers' distress reactivity and negative emotionality predicted lower parental support over time. Thus, current findings appear that child individual characteristics may shape parenting, especially during young childhood.

1.3. Parenting behaviors and child externalizing problems

Evidence suggests that problematic parenting such as harsh punishment, inconsistent disciplinary technique, poor monitoring, low warmth and positivity exacerbate the risk for conduct problems in children (Shelton et al., 1996; Cunningham & Boyle, 2002; Clerkin et al., 2007; Kiff et al., 2011). These parenting practices have been the targets of many parent management interventions that were effective in reducing behavioral problems in children (Shaffer, Kotchick, Dorsey, & Forehand, 2001).

It is undoubtedly important to conduct studies that incorporate both the parenting and the child's individual differences concurrently because parent and child cocreate their emerging relationship (Hinshaw, 2015). A recent review on the interrelations among parenting, child temperament and adjustment problems indicates that physical punishment, overprotection, intrusiveness, or overcontrol were strongly related to adjustment problems for children high in negative emotionality and irritability and low in effortful control; parental inconsistent parenting was more strongly related to depression and conduct problems for children higher in impulsivity, whereas parental rejection was related to adjustment problems for children low in positive emotionality (Kiff et al., 2011).

The studies also showed the mediational role of parenting in the relation between child personality traits and externalizing behavior. Belgian studies of school-age children demonstrated that the associations of children's Agreeableness and Emotional Stability with externalizing behavior were mediated by parenting variables including negative discipline, coerciveness, and overreactivity (Prinzie et al., 2004; Prinzie, Van Der Sluis, De Haan, & Deković, 2010). One Dutch study found a mediating effect of parent–adolescent relationship in the associations of Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, and Conscientiousness with externalizing behavior (Manders, Scholte, Janssens, & De Bruyn, 2006). In addition, results of these studies indicate that child personality traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Extraversion also contributed directly to externalizing problem behavior.

However, all existing evidence for a mediation role of parenting in the relation between child personality and externalizing problems were found in elementary school-age children and adolescents in western cultures. The aim of current study was to explore the direct effects of child personality on externalizing behavior and indirect effects through parenting practices in preschool-age children in Russian cultural context. Based on the reviewed research, we hypothesized that (a) Agreeableness and Conscientiousness would be directly and negatively related to externalizing problems; (b) the effect of child personality on externalizing behavior would be partially mediated by negative parenting practices, such as inconsistent parenting and physical punishment, and also by positive parenting.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and procedure

Participants represent a community sample of children and their parents from Western Siberia, most were living in Novosibirsk, Russia's third largest city, 20% were from a nearby town, and 10% were from rural area. There were caregiver reports of 370 children (47% female) aged between 2 and 7 years (mean age 5.1; SD = 1.3). Demographic items indicated that 89% of the children lived with both biological

parents, 8% with a single mother, 3% with a mother and a stepfather; 72% of the children had one or more siblings. Table S1 in the Supplementary materials presents the background characteristics of the sample: parents' age, education, occupation, and family income measured as subjective assessment of purchasing power. Compared to the general population of Novosibirsk region, the study sample had a similar proportion of participants with college education and more participants with university education. For occupation, the parents ranged from unskilled or manual workers to specialists and administrative staff.

The sampling was mostly convenience, but the recruitment aimed to collect data from the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were recruited through a variety of methods: caregivers were approached via kindergartens, and in person, including home visits. The kindergarten sample (N = 264, 71% of the total sample) was drawn from ten non-selective municipal kindergartens; a smaller number of participants (N = 17, 5%) were recruited from a child sport club. The remaining participants (N = 84, 23%) were recruited by research assistants and undergraduate students who identified and contacted parents with a preschool-aged child; if the parents agreed to participate, they were provided with the questionnaires, which they completed and returned to the investigators. Most of the data came from mothers (92%), 7% of the children were rated by fathers, 1% - by both parents. The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee.

2.2. Measures

Child personality was measured by the Inventory of Child Individual Differences-Short version (ICID-S, Slobodskaya & Zupancic, 2010) - an age and culture neutral instrument designed to assess child personality from 2 to 18 years. The ICID-S includes 62 items measuring five higher-order factors and fifteen lower-order traits: Extraversion (sociable, activity level, positive emotions), Conscientiousness (achievement orientation, organized, compliant, distractible), Neuroticism (fearful, negative affect, shy), Openness (intelligent, open to experience), and Agreeableness (antagonism, strong willed, considerate). The Russian version has been validated, supporting good reliability of the scales and the invariance of the Five-Factor structure across informants, genders and ages 2 to 15 (Knyazev, Zupancic, & Slobodskaya, 2008). In the current study only higher-order factors were used; alphas for ICID-S domains are presented in Table S1 of the Supplementary materials.

Externalizing problems were assessed with the two scales from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001): hyperactivity–inattention and conduct problems. Each of these scales comprises five items (e.g. 'Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long', 'Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers') with 3-point response scales (not true, somewhat true, certainly true). The Russian version of the SDQ has both good reliability and validity (Goodman, Slobodskaya, & Knyazev, 2005).

Parenting was measured by the Russian version of the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire – Preschool Revision (APQ- PR, Clerkin et al., 2007) - a measure of empirically identified aspects of positive and negative parenting practices for preschool-age children. Parent reports on the APQ in a preschool sample were found to converge well with observational data, were associated with child outcomes and were not confounded by social desirability for physical punishment (Hawes & Dadds, 2006). The Russian version of the APQ-PR has been validated in a community sample (Loginova, Slobodskaya, Kozlova, & Kornienko, 2016), supporting a three-factor structure and good internal consistency, discriminant and criterion validity of the scales. This study used 7-item Positive Parenting, 3-item Corporal Punishment and 4-item Inconsistent Parenting scales.

2.3. Data analyses

First, we examined the means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations for the study variables using SPSS 19.0. Correlational analyses

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