



Parenting practices, parental attachment and aggressiveness in adolescence: A predictive model

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A B S T R A C T

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The aim of this study was twofold: a) to test the mediation role of attachment between parenting practices and aggressiveness, and b) to clarify the differential role of mothers and fathers with regard to aggressiveness. A total of 554 adolescents (330 girls and 224 boys), ages ranging between 16 and 19, completed measures of mothers' and fathers' parenting practices, attachment to mother and to father, and aggressiveness. Acceptance/involvement of each parent positively predicted an adolescent's attachment to that parent, and coercion/imposition negatively predicted attachment to a lesser extent. Using structural equation modeling, a full mediation model provided the most parsimonious explanation for the data. With attachment in the model, the paths between the two parenting practices and aggressiveness were minor and statistically non-significant. Only attachment to the father, was predictive of adolescents' aggressiveness. Results are discussed in the light of the importance of the father–son/daughter relationship in adolescence.

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Researchers state that the incorrect management of aggressiveness may bring the individual to adverse situations in the short or long run (e.g., Berkowitz, 1996; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick, 1996; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999; Renfrew, 1997). Aggressiveness has specifically been associated with traits such as low self-esteem (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), substance use (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2007), psychopathy (Marsee, Silverthorn, & Frick, 2005), or psychopathology (Helfritz & Stanford, 2006). Findings in several works suggest that the quality of family relationships established in infancy and childhood will have an influence on the development of children and adolescents' future psychological features (e.g., Jiménez, Musitu, & Murgui, 2005; Sheffield Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007; Stocker, Richmond, & Rhoades, 2007). For this reason, and acknowledging that parental figures are both the first and main sources of socialization, being the most important model for future relationships, researchers have focused their attention on clarifying the role of family variables in the development of aggressiveness (i.e. Buschgens et al., 2010; Woodhouse, Dykas, & Cassidy, 2009).

In fact, within the ample range of parental practices, attachment and socialization seem to be the variables most closely related to aggressiveness and its development (Farrington, 2009). However, there are only a handful of works in which the relationship between attachment and socialization practices are analyzed, and none of them clarifies the specific contribution of these variables in the development of aggressiveness (i.e. Bosmans, Braet, Van Leeuwen, & Beyers, 2006; Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005). For this reason, in this study we have tried to fill this gap by examining the specific weight of parenting practices and attachment variables in adolescents' aggressiveness, and by testing two mediation models of parental attachment. We have also attempted to provide a response to the question of how each parental figure's attachment and

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parenting practices contribute separately to aggressiveness, due to the findings indicating the differential effect of fathers' and mothers' involvement in adolescents' psychological well-being (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). These authors found that both father and mother involvement contributed significantly and independently to children's happiness. This issue has been somehow neglected or, at least, not properly taken care of hitherto – especially in the father's case (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

Below, we will describe previous studies that analyzed the relationship between parenting practices and attachment variables and aggressiveness in adolescence. Firstly, we will review works in which the relationship between parenting practices and aggressiveness has been studied in adolescence. Secondly, we will give an account of research on attachment and its association with the development of aggressiveness. Thirdly, we will refer to the specific works in which both socialization and attachment have been taken into account in relation to the development of aggressiveness in adolescence. Lastly, we will describe the studies in which different effects of fathers' and mothers' practices have been documented.

Parenting practices and aggressiveness

The main function of family is children's and adolescents' care and training, widely known as socialization. It is the process via which an individual acquires identity and learns beliefs and behavioral norms which can be established or expected by people around her/him (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Family socialization refers, therefore, to the group of interaction processes happening within the family context whose objective is to imprint a system of certain values, norms and beliefs in children (Musitu & García, 2001).

Family socialization, however, takes a different form depending on each person's parenting style. Parenting style may be defined as a group of attitudes toward the child or adolescent, which, taken together, create an "emotional climate" where parents' behavior is expressed (Musitu & García, 2004). Since Baumrind's early works (1978), research has emphasized two basic dimensions or factors that account for the highest variability in parents' disciplinary behavior or parenting style: parental support or responsiveness and parental control or demandingness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In this work, adopting Musitu and García's framework (2001), we will also use the terms acceptance/involvement and coercion/imposition to refer to parental support and parental control respectively.

Although parenting practices, as part of the socialization process, demand more perseverance and continuity in childhood, both affection and parental supervision continue being essential factors in adolescence for adjustment and mental health (Fralely & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). For instance, lack of care and affection has been associated with drug use (Pires & Jenkins, 2007), with greater frequency of victimization and poorer mental health (Rigby, Slee, & Martin, 2007), as well as with psychological disorders (Dwairy, 2008). Furthermore, a recent study (Buschgens et al., 2010) suggests that adolescents who perceive a lack of emotional warmth and high levels of rejection or overprotection, are described as more aggressive and criminal by their parents and teachers. These authors suggest that perceived parental rejection could even have a greater effect on aggression and criminal behavior, than on any other kinds of symptoms such as lack of attention, impulsivity or hyperactivity.

Most studies that examine effects of parenting practices on children and adolescents, focus on the behavioral element of aggressiveness (i.e. aggression), neglecting the cognitive and emotional elements. However, taking into account that parenting practices could not be understood outside the family emotional climate and that they involve value transmission, it seems reasonable to expect that those practices would also exert important effects on cognitive and emotional levels of aggressiveness. The more precise level of analysis focusing on the possible distinct manifestations of the three elements of aggressiveness – behavioral, cognitive and emotional – could clarify how family variables (i.e. parenting practices and parental attachment) contribute to the development of aggressiveness.

Attachment to parents and aggressiveness

Since attachment theory was first formulated by Bowlby (1969), and the process through which children establish emotional bonds with their main caregivers explained, many efforts have been made to determine the effect of parent–infant relationships' quality on future development of boys and girls (see DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008). Mikulincer and Shaver (2011) explain how these primary attachment experiences would affect future emotional, cognitive and behavioral processes. As a result of the interaction with attachment figures, and of the perception of their (lack of) availability (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988), each individual develops specific mental (emotional and cognitive) models, called internal working models. These mental models work as cognitive schemas that are activated in the interpretation and expectations of everyday experiences.

It is well documented that the establishment of secure bonds with main caregivers promotes the development of characteristics such as self-esteem or emotion regulation (e.g., Gomez & McLaren, 2007; Sheffield Morris et al., 2007). However, internal models developed in an insecure relationship are characterized by anger, distrust, chaos, and insecurity in relationships with others (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993).

The importance of the attachment bond in relation to future mental health has also been tested in adolescence. Although during this period the individuation/identity formation process takes place and adolescents start differing from their parents, the latter continue being a clear source of protection and support (Allen, 2008). The predominance of security in the discourse about attachment experiences is associated with competence with others, lower levels of internalizing symptoms, and lower levels of maladaptive type of behaviors (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998). Moreover, secure adolescents, in comparison

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