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Do children fare for better *and* for worse? Associations among child features and parenting with child competence and symptoms [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Children vary in their sensitivity to parenting practices, which may influence their competence and development of psychological symptoms. Three theoretical frameworks that address youth's sensitivity to parenting and potential outcomes include the diathesis-stress model, differential susceptibility hypothesis, and the vantage sensitivity hypothesis. The purpose of the present review is to examine the relations among child genetic, endophenotypic, and phenotypic attributes with parenting, and links to social and emotional adjustment and symptoms from infancy to young adulthood (18 years of age) that support the diathesis-stress model, differential susceptibility hypothesis, or vantage sensitivity hypothesis. We also examined whether (a) the assessment method (e.g., questionnaires, observations) and (b) developmental period (e.g., early childhood, adolescence) during which variables were assessed influenced support for the theoretical perspectives considered. Support was found for each framework but differed across studies. This inconsistent support may be because some child-specific features act as vulnerabilities, whereas others operate as plasticity factors; the parenting dimension under consideration may influence the adjustment of youth differently; or sex differences in child-specific features may differentially predict youth social and emotional competence or symptom development. Other potential explanations involve issues related to informants and contextual variations in children's behaviors, different analytic approaches, the assessment method, and developmental period of assessment.

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Introduction

Developmental psychologists generally agree that children interact with environmental features in a bidirectional, reciprocal manner that influences their adjustment (e.g., Boyce & Ellis, 2005; Steinberg & Avenevoli, 2000), though some youth are more reactive and sensitive to context than others (e.g., Ellis & Boyce, 2008). Context-sensitive children, who are sometimes compared to orchids or plants that are highly sensitive to environmental variation, may possess characteristics that confer greater physiological responsiveness across environmental conditions (Dobbs, 2012; Kennedy, 2013). Less context-sensitive youth, sometimes compared to dandelions, may possess attributes that make them less responsive to or affected by environmental contexts (Kennedy, 2013).

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Youth who are more sensitive to context may be at a disadvantage when exposed to contextual adversity, as these youth often evidence poorer outcomes (e.g., Kim & Kochanska, 2012; Morrell & Murray, 2003). Consistent with the diathesis–stress or dual-risk transactional framework (Sameroff, 1983), some youth may possess “vulnerabilities” or a “diathesis” (e.g., difficult temperament or “risk” alleles) that confers risk for impaired adjustment (e.g., internalizing or externalizing symptoms) in the context of an external stressor (e.g., harsh parenting; Zuckerman, 1999). The degree of the diathesis present, presence of a specific risk factor, or absence of a specific feature (e.g., short allele of the serotonin-transporter-linked polymorphic region; 5-HTTLPR) may influence one’s reactivity to stressful contexts (Salomon & Jin, 2013). That is, individuals with a specific diathesis may have difficulty with self regulation and/or experience heightened reactivity when exposed to contextual stressors, increasing the likelihood of impaired adjustment relative to youth without this diathesis. Moreover, individuals with more than one diathesis (e.g., higher negative affectivity and lower effortful control) may exhibit impairment even at lower levels of stress (Derryberry, Reed, & Pilkenton-Taylor, 2003; Salomon & Jin, 2013).

Extending the diathesis–stress model, the differential susceptibility hypothesis suggests that children with certain attributes may not only be at risk for impaired adjustment in the face of a contextual stressor (e.g., harsh parenting), but may also obtain enhanced benefit from positive environmental circumstances (e.g., positive parenting) relative to youth without these attributes (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2007). Thus, the differential susceptibility hypothesis suggests that children may be more plastic and reactive to both positive and negative environmental influences because of their individual differences (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Belsky et al., 2007). This hypothesis is thus similar to the biological sensitivity to context theory, which proposes that youth possess attributes that influence their responsiveness to context (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Guided by evolutionary models, the differential susceptibility hypothesis maintains that individual variability in environmental responsiveness may increase human reproductive fitness (Belsky, 2005; Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Del Giudice, Ellis, & Shirlcliff, 2011; Ellis, Boyce, Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2011; Korte, Koolhaas, Wingfield, & McEwen, 2005). For example, if the rearing environment threatens an individual’s survival, it would be adaptive for some youth to be relatively unaffected by contextual influences. However, if the parenting environment is supportive of youth’s development, it may be advantageous to produce offspring more sensitive to the environment to optimize their developmental outcomes (Ellis et al., 2011).

The vantage sensitivity hypothesis similarly posits that youth vary in the degree to which they are affected by environmental stimuli; however, it proposes that some youth may disproportionately benefit from environmental resources and may not necessarily be more affected by contextual adversity (Pluess & Belsky, 2013). For example, highly intelligent youth may benefit disproportionately from a high-quality education, but these youth may not experience worse educational outcomes when exposed to poorer quality schooling relative to their peers (Pluess & Belsky, 2013). The extent of vantage sensitivity may depend on “vantage sensitivity factors” or child-specific features that make youth more sensitive to environmental support and less likely to experience challenges in the face of environmental stressors (Pluess & Belsky, 2013). For example, vantage sensitivity factors may include higher levels of positive attributes (e.g., higher effortful control) or lower levels of negative characteristics (e.g., lower negative affectivity). These attributes may confer higher levels of competence when exposed to environmental enrichment or decreased vulnerability when exposed to environmental adversity. The literature on vantage sensitivity is limited as this model was proposed relatively recently compared to the diathesis–stress and differential susceptibility models (Pluess & Belsky, 2013). Nevertheless, this model suggests that when exposed to a positive context (e.g., positive parenting practices), youth with more vantage sensitivity factors will exhibit enhanced adjustment relative to youth with fewer vantage sensitivity factors; moreover, when exposed to contextual adversity, youth with greater vantage sensitivity features would be less affected by negative experiences relative to youth with fewer vantage sensitivity characteristics.

The present review

Individual studies have shown support for the diathesis–stress, differential susceptibility, and vantage sensitivity frameworks. However, to our knowledge, there are no reviews that consider whether findings from studies that jointly consider child-specific features (phenotypic, endophenotypic, and genetic) and parenting behaviors with social and emotional competence or youth symptoms are consistent with the diathesis–stress, differential susceptibility, and/or vantage sensitivity explanations. Two reviews examined children’s features with various contextual factors (e.g., negative life events, parenting quality, socioeconomic status) in predicting an array of children’s outcomes (e.g., attention problems, sensation seeking) and indicated study findings that were consistent with the differential susceptibility hypothesis (Belsky & Pluess, 2009) or the vantage sensitivity hypothesis (Pluess & Belsky, 2013); however, these reviews did not jointly consider whether study findings were more consistent with the diathesis–stress, differential susceptibility, or vantage sensitivity hypotheses as we do in the present review.

We thus build on work by Belsky and Pluess (2009) and Pluess and Belsky (2013) by examining whether study findings examining children’s attributes and parenting in the prediction of specific outcomes (social and emotional competence, internalizing and externalizing symptoms) are consistent with the diathesis–stress model, differential susceptibility hypothesis, or vantage sensitivity hypothesis. Moreover, rather than including different contextual domains, we focus specifically on the parenting environment and children’s outcomes. Identifying whether youth possessing child-specific features exhibit impaired competence and higher symptoms in negative parenting contexts can aid intervention efforts by determining

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