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Unsupervised self-care predicts conduct problems: The moderating roles of hostile aggression and gender

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread speculation about the detrimental effect of unsupervised self-care on adolescent outcomes, little is known about which children are particularly prone to problem behaviors when left at home without adult supervision. The present research used data from a longitudinal study of 674 Mexican-origin children residing in the United States to examine the prospective effect of unsupervised self-care on conduct problems, and the moderating roles of hostile aggression and gender. Results showed that unsupervised self-care was related to increases over time in conduct problems such as lying, stealing, and bullying. However, unsupervised self-care only led to conduct problems for boys and for children with an aggressive temperament. The main and interactive effects held for both mother-reported and observational-rated hostile aggression and after controlling for potential confounds.
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During the transition from childhood to adolescence, youth undergo many changes. They begin to take on different roles not only within the home, but also in school and social settings, where they gain more autonomy and begin to interact within larger social networks outside the family. During this developmental transition, youth are often afforded more independence and greater freedom to choose how and with whom to spend their time. These choices often prove highly consequential as the youth navigate their adolescent years, with some launched on trajectories of problem behaviors and others on more prosocial pathways.

One particularly critical developmental context is how youth transitioning into adolescence spend their time outside of school (Mahoney & Parente, 2009; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Many youth spend their after-school time under the supervision of their parents or in structured activities that are supervised by adults such as intramural sports, school clubs, and community programs. The benefits of structured after-school activities are well-established from previous research (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lauer et al., 2006; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). In contrast, other youth engage in unstructured activities that lack adult supervision, such as spending time in unsupervised self-care with siblings, peers, or alone at home (i.e., latchkey kids). Eleven percent of children aged 5–14, who

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live with their mother, are in unsupervised self-care, at an average rate of 6.5 h per week (Laughlin, 2013). Of these children, 4.7% of elementary-aged children (5–11 years) and 26.9% of middle-school aged children (12–14 years) spend time in self-care.

Despite its prevalence, there is a paucity of empirical research on the developmental consequences of youth caring for themselves without adult supervision. The few extant studies provide conflicting findings, with some studies showing it can be developmentally enriching (Garbarino, 1981; Stroman & Duff, 1982) and others showing it is associated with a broad range of problems including antisocial behavior (Posner & Vandell, 1994; Steinberg, 1986), risk-taking behavior (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Schuster, 2002; Dwyer et al., 1990), substance use (Mott, Crowe, Richardson, & Flay, 1999; Richardson, Radziszewska, Dent, & Flay, 1993), and poor psychological adjustment (Pettit, Laird, Bates, & Dodge, 1997). However, the factors that determine whether unsupervised self-care leads to enriching or adverse outcomes are poorly understood.

A core theoretical concept in many theories of adolescent development is that behavior is shaped by a dynamic interaction between environmental conditions and individual characteristics that are mutually influential over time (e.g., Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Magnusson & Stattin, 1998; Sameroff, 2010). Similarly, researchers have long noted that the autonomy afforded by unsupervised self-care could be good, neutral, or bad for children, depending on the context and characteristics of the child (Galambos & Dixon, 1984; Stewart, 1981). A few studies have examined the role of contextual factors, including the environment of sibling care in a nationally-representative sample (Greene, Hynes, & Doyle, 2011) and self-care within and outside the home (Coley, Morris, & Hernandez, 2004). However, little research has attended to the temperamental traits that children bring to the situation. Whether unsupervised self-care is an opportunity for increased responsibility, self-reliance, and independence on the one hand, or increased delinquency, alcohol and tobacco use, and peer orientation on the other hand, may depend largely on the child's temperament.

Temperament refers to “constitutionally based individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation” (Rothbart, 2011). Reactivity is conceptualized in terms of affective and motivational processes to stimuli, whereas self-regulation refers to individual differences in top-down control of reactive processes. Children with a hostile aggressive temperament, for example, will perceive and react differently to unstructured, novel, or threatening situations than those with a less hostile aggressive temperament. In the present context, we expect that unsupervised self-care and hostile aggression will independently predict higher levels of antisocial behavior, but of particular importance, we expect that the co-occurrence of these two risk factors will have interactive effects above and beyond their additive effects. Consistent with this possibility, unsupervised children at greatest risk are those who are already prone to problem behavior, though these results are based on longitudinal studies with a limited time span (two assessments 16 months apart) or a primarily European–American sample (Coley et al., 2004; Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Meece, 1999). This suggests that hostile aggressive youth may be more likely to exhibit conduct problems in self-care situations, which then leads to even more problem behavior later in development. However, children without a hostile aggressive temperament may take advantage of self-care situations in more adaptive ways, which then diminishes their risk for engaging in problem behaviors.

Another factor that may moderate the effect of self-care on conduct problems is the child's gender. We expect the effects of self-care to differ for boys and girls for several reasons. First, there is a difference in dosage, or amount of time in self-care. Parents are more likely to leave boys in unsupervised self-care than girls for longer periods of time (Lovko & Ullman, 1989; Messer, Wuensch, & Diamond, 1989; Mulhall, Stone, & Stone, 1996; Pettit et al., 1999; Vandivere, Tout, Zaslow, Calkins, & Capizzano, 2003; but see Casper & Smith, 2004), and boys are left in self-care at younger ages than girls (Messer et al., 1989). Second, there is a difference in how boys and girls handle their time in unsupervised self-care. Boys in unsupervised self-care are more likely to “hang out” outside the home, where problem behaviors are more commonly exhibited, than girls in unsupervised self-care (Goyette-Ewing, 2000). From these previous findings, we would hypothesize that the effect of unsupervised self-care on conduct problems would be stronger for boys. In other words, unsupervised self-care may be associated with problem behaviors for both genders, but if boys spend more time in unsupervised self-care and are more likely to use this time in maladaptive ways, then the link between self-care and problem behaviors may be exacerbated for boys in comparison to girls. Although some studies have found a stronger link between self-care and problem behavior in boys than in girls (Diamond, Kataria, & Messer, 1989; Shumow, Smith, & Smith, 2009), others have found the opposite pattern (Galambos & Maggs, 1991; Steinberg, 1986) or no gender difference in the effect of self-care (Pettit et al., 1999). These inconsistencies in the literature suggest that the role of gender in self-care is poorly understood.

Given that unsupervised self-care allows the adolescent to choose what to do with their unstructured time, we hypothesize that there is something inherently important about this environmental context for affecting developmental outcomes. To account for the possibility that latchkey kids may simply live in a broader neighborhood context that encourages antisocial behavior, such as high crime rates, we include indices of neighborhood risk as covariates in the current study. Previous research has provided evidence for this possibility by demonstrating that the amount of time spent in unsupervised self-care is associated with neighborhood characteristics (Lord & Mahoney, 2007).

The present study

In the present study, we used longitudinal data from a sample of 674 Mexican-origin youth to test whether children's hostile aggression and gender moderate the effect of unsupervised self-care on conduct problems, assessed at ages 10 and 12. Specifically, we addressed the following four research questions: (1) How does time in self-care relate to conduct problems two years later? (2) Is the effect of unsupervised self-care on change over time in conduct problems stronger for boys or girls?

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