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## Family and school influences on adolescents' adjustment: The moderating role of youth hopefulness and aspirations for the future



Jean M. Gerard\*, Margaret Zoller Booth

Bowling Green State University, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Using a school-based sample of 675 adolescents, this short-term longitudinal investigation examined the relationships among individual, family, and school influences on adolescent adjustment problems. Adolescents' perceptions of school climate and their sense of connectedness to school were negatively associated with conduct problems. A significant interaction between parental academic support and adolescents' academic aspirations was detected for the total sample, boys, and White youth, indicating that parental support serves a protective function against conduct problems for students with low academic expectations. Adolescents' hopefulness, parental academic aspirations, and school connectedness were negatively associated with depression. Adolescents' hopefulness and their academic aspirations moderated associations between both family and school influences on adolescent adjustment with youth gender and race qualifying these interaction effects.

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Adolescence is a period marked by rapid growth and psychosocial change. In addition to the dramatic physical alterations of puberty, adolescents develop abstract thinking skills, explore possibilities in pursuit of identity, realign relationships with parents as the need for autonomy increases, and navigate significant school transitions. These transformations present opportunities for enhanced development; however, they also present challenges that can trigger vulnerabilities. Although most teenagers traverse these changes successfully without undue stress this developmental stage is marked by increases in behavioral and emotional problems (Hawkins & Monahan, 2009; Roza, Hofstra, Ende, & Verhulst, 2003). Conduct problems are a major concern because adolescents who manifest behavioral problems are also at risk for adverse educational outcomes such as peer rejection, school failure, and dropping out (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Roeser & Eccles, 2000). Likewise, depression involves emotional and behavioral downswings that can impede social development and scholastic performance (Keys, 2006).

Myriad factors are implicated in the onset of problem behaviors; however, some of the most critical impacts stem from the proximal settings in which adolescents reside including the family and school context (Resnick et al., 1997). Both contexts potentially promote well-being when they provide ample resources and support (e.g., Prelow, Bowman, & Weaver, 2007), yet both are potential arenas of risk that can hinder development when they are unsupportive (Call & Mortimer, 2001) or at odds

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [jgerard@bgsu.edu](mailto:jgerard@bgsu.edu) (J.M. Gerard).

with adolescents' developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). At the same time, consideration must be given to individual differences as children exhibit variability in response to environmental demands. Accordingly, we integrate ecological theory with a risk-protection framework to examine associations among quality of educational support systems (i.e., family and school), individual attributes, and adolescent adjustment problems. Drawing from two waves of youth-report data, the purpose of this paper is to: a) examine the unique and relative influence of the family context (i.e., parents' academic support and academic expectations for their children) and school context (i.e., climate and connectedness) on conduct problems and depression; b) determine whether adolescents' hopefulness and aspirations for the future, as individual attributes, serve as buffering agents against conduct problems and depression when youth perceive the family context and school context as unsupportive; and c) assess the equivalence of these associations across youth gender and racial groups.

## Theoretical framework

Our conceptualization of family and school as key social arenas for developing youth is grounded in ecological theory—an approach that is useful for understanding development as it occurs in multiple intersecting ecologies. According to this perspective, the social environment can contribute to positive functioning by exposing children to supportive networks and opportunities for enhanced development; conversely, it can contribute to poor functioning through exposure to unfavorable conditions or by imposing constraints that limit psychosocial growth (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004). As microsystem influences, family and school constitute immediate contexts that directly impact adolescents largely through proximal processes that either restrict or support their development. These proximal processes include key people (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) in the form of interpersonal relationships and key places in the form of safety, satisfaction and opportunity (Bowen, Roderick, Powers, & Glennie, 2008). The quality of experiences in the family and school setting are a matter of great import as it is through these contexts that children not only learn norms for expected behavior but also are afforded the opportunities necessary to acquire the fundamental knowledge, skills, and values that enable them to lead productive lives, engage successfully in social relationships, and develop healthy responses to change.

Reflecting a transactional process, ecological theory assumes that development is shaped by the interplay between qualities of the individual and the quality of the environment in which the individual resides (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This assumption is compatible with a risk-protection framework, the second theoretical perspective undergirding this study, which seeks to understand why some individuals fare poorly in the face of adversity or persistent risk, whereas others seem to escape this risk with little psychological harm.

For purposes of this study, risk is defined as a condition within the youth's socialization context that potentially increases the likelihood of unfavorable developmental outcomes, represented in this study as perceived lack of educational support in the familial and school context. Protective factors, on the other hand, are individual or environmental safeguards that shield youth from risk agents by fostering positive outcomes or reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes (Gerard & Buehler, 2004). Three general classes of protective factors have been identified in literature: individual attributes, family support, and external support (Masten & Garmezy, 1985). Given our primary interest in understanding how adolescents' cope with challenging educational/ecological contexts, we focus on individual attributes as possible protective factors, in this case adolescents' hopefulness and academic aspirations — personal assets or psychological strengths that youth may draw upon when they perceive their educational environments as unsupportive. Scholars have identified numerous personal characteristics that serve an ameliorative function in the context of risk. However, little attention has been given to youth hopefulness and academic aspirations — personal characteristics that warrant consideration as protective agents given their potential to enhance psychological well-being through optimism, a sense of purpose, and a goal-seeking orientation. In the present research context, high hope and academic aspirations may be particularly salient as a motivational force and deterrent to socio-emotional problems when educational support in the home and/or school environment is lacking. The emphasis on personal attributes aligns with ecological theory by recognizing adolescents' agency in managing the social contexts in which they are embedded, represented here as an operating belief system based on optimism and goal aspiration (Snyder, 2002).

## Family context and support for academics

To the degree that parents provide sufficient resources and emotional support for their children's ongoing education, the family is a pivotal school-related context for adolescents' socio-emotional functioning (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010). Based on this guiding premise, we focus on two academic-based aspects of the familial context: parents' academic support and educational aspirations for their teenaged children—facets of the familial environment that have been conceptualized in the literature as elements of social capital. Broadly defined, social capital refers to resources derived from social relationships that minimize, prevent, or solve common problems for individuals and communities (Coleman, 1988; Smylie, Medaglia, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2006). Linking this theoretical idea to the ecological framework, Crosnoe (2004) describes social capital as resources that “flow through relationship ties to enhance individual functioning”, which are evident at both the micro-level (i.e., personal relationships) and macro-level (i.e., social networks or institutions; p. 268). Such resources include information channels, support networks, and norms for behavior. According to this view, supportive parent–child networks and access to parents' aspirations facilitate the transmission of resources from parent to child in the form of encouragement, instrumental

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