

Trajectories of classroom externalizing behavior: Contributions of child characteristics, family characteristics, and the teacher–child relationship during the school transition

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Abstract

The unique and interactive contributions of past externalizing behavior, negative parenting, and teacher–child relationship quality to externalizing behavior trajectories after the transition to school were examined. In a sample of 283 children, random regression analyses indicated that conflict in the teacher–child relationship during the school transition contributed to faster rates of increase in externalizing behavior from kindergarten through third grade above and beyond negative parenting and initial levels of externalizing behavior. A significant interaction between teacher–child closeness and the externalizing behavior intercept indicated that decreases in externalizing behavior were associated with teacher–child closeness, especially for children with the highest levels of externalizing behavior upon school entry. Family socioeconomic status and initial levels of classroom externalizing behavior in kindergarten were also significant contributors to the prediction of externalizing behavior trajectories. © 2005 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Children who begin to exhibit externalizing behavior in childhood have an increased likelihood of sustained patterns of externalizing behavior across the lifespan and are at increased risk for developing long-term negative outcomes, including antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Broidy et al., 2003; Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987; Loeber, DeLamatre, Keenan, & Zhang, 1998; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Loeber et al., 1993; Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002). Although these behaviors are usually stable once developed, not all children who express early emerging externalizing behavior problems (e.g., aggression, oppositionality, and conduct problems) manifest a stable externalizing trajectory (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Keenan, Shaw, Delliquadri, Giovannelli, & Walsh, 1998). At present, our understanding of which characteristics of the child and his/her social worlds will serve to increase or decrease the likelihood of stable externalizing trajectories is limited. The current study examined the contribution of child and family characteristics prior to school entry, as well as teacher–child relationship processes after the transition to kindergarten, to the development of externalizing behavior across the first four years of elementary school. In this endeavor, of interest were two aspects of externalizing behavior: levels of externalizing behavior at kindergarten entry and growth in externalizing behavior from kindergarten through third grade.

A developmental perspective on the precursors and correlates of externalizing behavior trajectories

In studying externalizing trajectories in the early school years, it is necessary to move beyond univariate models of risk and protection to examine the ways in which child and contextual influences jointly influence development. In approaching the study of child development, several researchers and theorists have highlighted the complex interplay between child characteristics and the multiple social contexts children inhabit (Boyce et al., 1998; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dodge & Pettit, 2003; Ladd, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Within these ecologically oriented theories, several key tenets emerge. First, both child and contextual characteristics influence development, and they do so in unique and interactive ways. Second, *multiple* contexts, and relationships within these contexts, have developmental significance for children. Third, the impact of these contextual characteristics is dynamic and changes across time, such that relevant relationships broaden with age to encompass new contexts, with the salience of specific relationships varying across development. These theories suggest that there are child and relational risks that take shape early (e.g., child behavior, negative parenting) that may play a role in the development of sustained maladaptive trajectories. Also, relationships encountered later in development (e.g., with teachers) have emotional significance that, together with previous child and family factors, serve to promote adaptive or maladaptive developmental trajectories. Particularly relevant to the current study is the application of these ideas to understanding child adjustment during the transition to kindergarten (Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Kahen-Johnson, & Measelle, in press; Ladd, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

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