



Research article

Childhood psychological maltreatment subtypes and adolescent depressive symptoms



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to understand how subtypes and the timing of psychological maltreatment contribute to adolescent depressive symptoms at age 14. The sample included 638 youth from the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN). At age 12, youth reported experiences of psychological maltreatment (degradation, isolating, and terrorizing), physical abuse (endangerment and physical injury), and sexual abuse that occurred before and during elementary school/last year. Multivariable regression models were conducted separately for females and males at each of the two time periods and accounted for demographics, primary caregiver depressive symptoms, other maltreatment subtypes, and youth-reported age 12 depressive symptoms. For girls, caregiver degradation was the only maltreatment subtype that contributed unique variance to depressive symptoms. Degradation before elementary school and chronic degradation had a stronger impact on depression symptoms. Only caregiver isolating behaviors during elementary school/last year and chronic isolation predicted depressive symptoms in boys. These results suggest that childhood psychological maltreatment is multi-dimensional and is implicated in the etiology of adolescent depressive symptoms. Future prevention efforts should consider parental psychological maltreatment in reducing risk for adolescent depression.

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Introduction

Maltreatment in childhood has been linked with a variety of mental health problems in adolescence and adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Gilbert et al., 2009; Green et al., 2010), particularly depression (e.g. Nelson et al., 2002; Widom, DuMont, & Czaja, 2007). Despite the multidimensional nature of childhood maltreatment (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), much of this literature has operationalized maltreatment as either present or absent. Studies that have considered maltreatment types have typically focused on sexual and physical abuse, while psychological maltreatment has received less attention (Feiring & Zielinski, 2011). Child protective service investigations and substantiations of psychological maltreatment occurring alone are less common than those of physical and sexual abuse and neglect (Schneider, Ross, Graham, & Zielinski, 2005; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009), possibly owing to a perception that this form of maltreatment is not as deleterious as other forms of abuse and neglect (Egeland, 2009). Nonetheless, numerous studies suggest it is a predictor of later psychosocial difficulties (e.g. Berzenski & Yates, 2010; McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009). The current

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study contributes to the extant literature by disaggregating psychological maltreatment into three subtypes and examining how associations with depression vary by sex and with timing of maltreatment.

Definitions of Psychological Maltreatment

Childhood psychological maltreatment has been variously defined, but most research definitions include acts of omission (neglect) and commission (abuse) that convey to the child that they are unwanted or worthless (Hart et al., 2011). The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC 2011) defines six subtypes of psychological maltreatment (a) spurning (hostile rejection/degradation), rejection, and degradation; (b) exploiting or corrupting; (c) terrorizing; (d) ignoring or denying emotional responsiveness; (e) isolating; and (f) mental, health, and educational neglect. The National Incidence Study (NIS) is a periodic, congressionally mandated assessment of national child maltreatment rates that uses a sentinel reporting system (Sedlak et al., 2010). The fourth NIS (NIS-4), conducted in 2005 and 2006, included 8 codes for emotional abuse and 11 for emotional neglect that overlap closely with the APSAC definitions. For example, the NIS-4 emotional abuse codes of terrorizing the child, threatening various forms of maltreatment, tying or confining in an enclosed space, and verbal abuse parallel APSAC's terrorizing, isolating, and spurning subtypes. The NIS-4 emotional neglect codes specify inadequate nurturance and affection and allowing inappropriate or unlawful behavior, which as similar to APSAC subtypes (b) and (d) above. Investigations of psychological maltreatment also use the terms emotional maltreatment, emotional abuse, or emotional neglect. Despite this multidimensional nature, most studies of childhood psychological maltreatment treat the construct unitarily (Allen, 2008).

Depression and Psychological Maltreatment

Among other psychosocial difficulties, research has found depression to be linked with psychological maltreatment. Depression is characterized by feelings of worthlessness and guilt, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities. Risk for the first onset of depression is highest in early adolescence (Avenevoli, Swendsen, He, Burstein, & Merikangas, 2015; Kessler et al., 2005), and adolescent depression confers risk for depression in adulthood (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Klein, & Seeley, 1999). Depression is also the most common psychiatric disorder found in death by suicide (Bridge, Goldstein, & Brent, 2006) and is strongly associated with suicidal ideation and behaviors (Nock et al., 2013). Given the characteristics of depression, it is not surprising that psychological maltreatment, or caregiver–child relationships that communicate to the child that they are flawed, worthless, unloved, or endangered, is associated with an increased vulnerability for depression. Several studies and one review have concluded that childhood psychological maltreatment is more consistently linked to depression than physical or sexual abuse (e.g. Alloy, Abramson, Smith, Gibb, & Neeren, 2006).

In cross-sectional studies of youth and adults that have accounted for other forms of abuse and neglect, psychological maltreatment in childhood has been found to be related to chronic or recurrent major depressive disorder (Bifulco, Moran, Baines, Bunn, & Stanford, 2002), lifetime episodes of depression (Chapman et al., 2004), depressive symptoms (Crow, Cross, Powers, & Bradley, 2014; Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006), low self-esteem (Solomon & Serres, 1999), and internalizing problems (McGee et al., 1997).

Longitudinal studies that have used youth-reports of maltreatment confirm these associations (Liu, Alloy, Abramson, Iacoviello, & Whitehouse, 2009; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Children who have experienced psychological maltreatment as children may develop low self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006) and maladaptive cognitive styles (Calvete, 2014; Crawford & Wright, 2007; Gibb & Abela, 2008). Using data from the National Comorbidity Survey, Sachs-Ericsson, Verona, Joiner, and Preacher (2006) found that self-criticism mediated the relationship between parental verbal abuse and depression/anxiety symptoms. The results from the aforementioned studies suggest that when childhood psychological maltreatment is considered, it is related to an increased likelihood of depressive symptomatology in adolescence and adulthood.

Dimensions of Psychological Maltreatment

Though most psychological maltreatment research has treated psychological maltreatment unitarily, evidence from several studies suggests that particular dimensions of psychological maltreatment may differentially impact psychosocial development. Using data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, Shaffer et al. (2009) found differences in developmental processes related to emotional abuse and emotional neglect. Social withdrawal mediated the relation between emotional abuse in early childhood, but not emotional neglect, and adolescent socioemotional competence. In a longitudinal study designed to assess the impact of marital violence on children, parents who were physically harsh to their children were also more rejecting of their children in adolescence. This rejection in adolescence was related to adolescents' proneness to experiencing shame, which in turn was linked to depression (Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005). Taussig and Culhane (2010) examined prospective relationships between an overall measure and four subtypes of emotional maltreatment obtained from official records. One of the subtypes, parental verbal aggression, predicted lower self-esteem in preadolescent males, but not females (ages 9–11).

Using the same data as the present study, Schneider et al. (2005) identified four categories of emotional maltreatment from Child Protective Services (CPS) reports; threats to psychological safety/security, acceptance and self-esteem, threats

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