



## Trajectories of maternal harsh parenting in the first 3 years of life<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Despite the high prevalence rates of harsh parenting, the nature of developmental change in this domain early in life and the factors that contribute to changes in harsh parenting over time are not well understood. The present study examined developmental patterns in maternal harsh parenting behavior from birth to age 3 years and their related longitudinal risk factors (contextual and intrapersonal). Partner aggression was also tested as a time-varying predictor to examine its time-specific influence on maternal harsh parenting.

**Methods:** Longitudinal data from 4 assessments of a community sample of 488 at-risk mothers were analyzed using latent growth curve modeling. Maternal risk factors and harsh parenting behaviors were assessed at birth and at ages 1, 2, and 3 years.

**Results:** There was a significant increase in maternal harsh parenting from birth to age 3, particularly between ages 1 and 2. There was a significant direct effect of maternal alcohol use and abuse history on maternal harsh parenting at age 3, and maternal age was positively associated with change in maternal harsh parenting over time. In addition, partner aggression was significantly and positively associated with maternal harsh parenting at each time point.

**Conclusions:** The findings suggest possible developmental trends in the emergence of maternal harsh parenting during infancy and toddlerhood. Further investigation is needed to elucidate individual differences in the developmental patterns and to differentiate predictive factors that persist across time and factors that are unique to specific developmental stages.

**Practice implications:** The overall high prevalence rates of harsh parenting behavior and growth of such behavior in infancy and toddlerhood support the need for developmentally sensitive early intervention programs.

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### Introduction

Researchers have indicated that harsh verbal and physical parenting during infancy and toddlerhood is a relatively common parenting practice in the United States (McKee et al., 2007; Straus & Field, 2003; Straus & Stewart, 1999). Although

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evidence has consistently suggested that such practices negatively impact a range of developmental outcomes, including child self-esteem and internalizing and externalizing behaviors (McKee et al., 2007; Solomon & Serres, 1999), harsh parenting has received attention only when it is chronic and severe enough to be reported to protection agencies (Gracia, 1995). Thus, many of the findings about the etiology and effects of harsh parenting have been based on child maltreatment research (Simons, Johnson, & Conger, 1994), particularly regarding certain types of maltreatment (i.e., categorical outcomes).

However, harsh parenting is most accurately conceptualized along a continuum of parenting, with child maltreatment at the extreme end (Gershoff, 2002a), and the developmental patterns of harsh parenting along this continuum and the predictors of those patterns are not well understood (Lansford et al., 2009; Parke, 2002). Parent–child relationships are continually transformed and renegotiated across developmental stages, being influenced by parent, child, and environmental changes (Parke, 2002). Thus, harsh parenting may be best conceptualized from a developmental perspective (Parke, 2002), taking into account that harsh parenting may vary over time and may be influenced by factors that vary over time.

In the current study, we used longitudinal data from a community sample of at-risk mothers to examine developmental patterns in maternal harsh parenting from birth to age 3 years and to identify related risk factors (contextual and intrapersonal factors as time-invariant predictors). In addition, we examined partner aggression (an interpersonal risk factor) as a time-varying predictor. The time-invariant predictors were conceptualized as being relatively stable over time and exerting influence on the developmental process of maternal harsh parenting, and the time-varying predictor was conceptualized as exerting proximal contemporaneous effects on maternal harsh parenting independent of the developmental process (see Hussong, Curran, Moffitt, Caspi, & Carrig, 2004). This conceptual framework allowed us to examine the contributions of risk factors to the trajectory of maternal harsh parenting and to time-specific changes in maternal harsh parenting over time. Differentiating these influences has potentially important clinical implications. Because the risk factors that influence the trajectory of maternal harsh parenting may differ from those contributing to time-specific changes, prevention and intervention targets may vary depending on the type and timing of such influences.

### *Harsh parenting and development*

The findings from research on harsh parenting have indicated that verbal aggression alone has significant detrimental effects on child self-esteem and psychological adjustment (Solomon & Serres, 1999). Furthermore, such verbal or psychological aggression is often accompanied by physically harsh parenting, the combined effects negatively affecting a wide range of child behaviors (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; McKee et al., 2007). In particular, early exposure to harsh parenting appears to disrupt the development of security, self-worth, and self-regulatory skills, all of which facilitate the development of positive adjustment across the life span (Bradley & Corwyn, 2007). Recent evidence further indicates that early adversity (e.g., harsh or abusive parenting) has significant effects on the maturation of a number of neurobiological systems involved in self-regulation, placing children at increased risk for various forms of psychopathology across development (Fisher, Gunnar, Dozier, Bruce, & Pears, 2006; Gunnar, Fisher, & Early Experience, Stress, and Prevention Network, 2006).

Overall, the results from these studies suggest that harsh parenting compromises subsequent child development more seriously in earlier development than in later development (Carlson, Furby, Armstrong, & Schlaes, 1997; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Additionally, parents who use harsh discipline, particularly corporal punishment, might be more likely to become abusive (Gershoff, 2002b; Straus, 2000). Thus, understanding the etiology of early harsh parenting practices might be critical in efforts to prevent abusive parenting and subsequent child adjustment problems.

### *Developmental patterns of harsh parenting in early childhood*

The risk for harsh parenting appears to increase across infancy and toddlerhood. In Windham and colleagues' (2004) study of at-risk mothers and children, maternal psychological aggression toward children (i.e., "self-esteem assault") increased from 10% to 21% between ages 1 and 2 years and to 26% by age 3 years. Notably, severe physical discipline increased from 1% to 4% between ages 1 and 2 years but decreased to 3% by age 3 years. In a nationally representative survey, Straus and Stewart (1999) found that 35% of infants and 94% of toddlers experienced some form of physical discipline during the previous year, peaking at age 2 years. Using the same survey data, Straus and Field (2003) found psychologically harsh parenting to reach 90% by age 2 years.

Although these findings suggest that children are particularly at risk for harsh parenting during infancy and toddlerhood and that there may be developmental changes in parenting behavior over time, most of the above studies were based on cross-sectional data. In the present study, our first goal was to examine developmental patterns of harsh parenting using longitudinal data from a community sample of at-risk mothers and their children. The trajectories of maternal harsh parenting were expected to increase significantly from birth to age 3 years.

### *Correlates of harsh parenting*

In previous studies (Belsky, 1984; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006), researchers have suggested that parenting behaviors such as harsh discipline are determined by intrapersonal parental characteristics and interpersonal dynamics in addition to being influenced by the social context and that risk and protective factors in each of these domains interact over time. One of the

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