



Child temperamental flexibility moderates the relation between positive parenting and adolescent adjustment[☆]



Jill A. Rabinowitz^{a,*}, Deborah A.G. Drabick^a, Maureen D. Reynolds^b, Duncan B. Clark^c, Thomas M. Olino^a

^a Department of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, United States

^b School of Pharmacy, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, United States

^c Department of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, United States

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ABSTRACT

Temperamental flexibility and lower positive parenting are associated with internalizing and externalizing problems; however, youth varying in flexibility may be differentially affected by positive parenting in the prediction of symptoms. We examined whether children's flexibility moderated prospective relations between maternal and paternal positive parenting and youth internalizing and externalizing symptoms during adolescence. Participants ($N = 775$, 71% male) and their caregivers completed measures when youth were 10–12 and 12–14 years old. Father positive parenting interacted with child flexibility to predict father-reported internalizing and externalizing problems. Consistent with the diathesis-stress model, children lower in flexibility experienced greater symptoms than children higher in flexibility in lower positive parenting contexts. Among children lower in flexibility, lower paternal positive parenting was associated with greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms compared to higher paternal positive parenting. However, among youth higher in flexibility, symptom levels were similar regardless of whether youth experienced lower or higher paternal positive parenting.

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Internalizing and externalizing symptoms often develop in early and middle childhood and are associated with significant impairment and later psychological problems (Bornstein, Hahn, & Suwalsky, 2013; Fanti & Henrich, 2010). Internalizing problems refer to social withdrawal, anxiety, fearfulness, and depression, whereas externalizing problems manifest as hyperactivity, aggression, defiance, and destructive behavior. Because internalizing and externalizing symptoms may place a child at risk for poor social and behavioral outcomes, it is important to identify children at risk for these problems early in development for timely intervention and prevention of these symptoms, correlates, and sequelae (Fanti & Henrich, 2010; Gilliom & Shaw, 2004).

To understand individual differences in risk for the development of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, many researchers have employed the diathesis-stress model, which proposes that some individuals possess attributes (e.g., difficult temperament, high physiological arousal) that increase their risk of developing psychological problems when faced with a stressor (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg,

& van-Ijzendoorn, 2007; Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Salomon & Jin, 2013). Thus, children with certain attributes are hypothesized to be more likely to be adversely affected by an environmental stressor than those without these attributes. Consistent with the diathesis-stress model, when exposed to more negative parenting practices, children and adolescents with certain features may experience more adverse outcomes (Kochanska, Kim, Barry, & Philibert, 2011; Yaman, Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010; Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2014).

In addition to the predictions that stem from the diathesis-stress model, the differential susceptibility hypothesis adds that children with certain attributes (e.g., temperament) may not only be at risk for maladjustment in the face of a stressor, but may obtain enhanced benefit from positive environmental circumstances (Belsky et al., 2007). That is, the differential susceptibility hypothesis suggests that children's individual differences may make them more reactive to both positive and negative environmental influences (Pluess & Belsky, 2010). For example, although children with difficult temperaments could become emotionally dysregulated in response to negative parenting practices, these children may benefit disproportionately from positive parenting practices, which may facilitate their self-regulation (Gallagher, 2002; Pluess & Belsky, 2010). This possibility is consistent with evidence that when exposed to more sensitive caregivers, young children with difficult temperaments manifested fewer externalizing problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2008) and better academic competence and social skills (Stright, Gallagher, & Kelley, 2008) compared to

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122, United States. Tel.: +1 914 330 3699; fax: +1 215 204 5539.

E-mail address: jill.alexandra.rabinowitz@temple.edu (J.A. Rabinowitz).

young children with easy temperaments. Despite evidence that younger children with difficult temperaments may benefit disproportionately from positive parenting practices, it is unclear whether exposure to positive parenting practices may result in enhanced adjustment among older children and adolescents. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate whether adolescents varying in temperament exhibited different levels of adjustment, defined as internalizing and externalizing symptom levels, when exposed to positive parenting.

As suggested, one attribute that may affect differential susceptibility to the environment is temperament. According to [Thomas and Chess \(1977\)](#), temperament can be defined as individual differences in behavioral responses across contexts. Based on their model of temperament, children who withdraw from situations; demonstrate slow adaptability; manifest high negative affect (e.g., fear, anger), high intensity of response, and dysrhythmicity (i.e., irregularity in biological functions) are characterized as possessing a difficult temperament, whereas children without these characteristics are characterized as having an easy temperament ([Frick & Morris, 2004](#); [Muris & Ollendick, 2005](#); [Thomas & Chess, 1984](#)). Although children with difficult temperaments are at increased risk for externalizing ([Giancola, Mezzich, & Tarter, 1998](#)) and internalizing ([Blackson, Tarter, Martin, & Moss, 1994](#)) symptoms, the relation between difficult temperament and maladjustment is likely more complex than these linear associations would suggest ([Frick & Morris, 2004](#); [Rettew & McKee, 2005](#)). For example, recent work suggests that, in fact, the lower-order difficult temperament dimension of fear is predictive of internalizing problems, whereas the lower-order difficult temperament feature of anger is predictive of externalizing problems ([Rydell, Berlin, & Bohlin, 2003](#)). These findings underscore the importance of considering more specific temperamental facets typically associated with difficult temperament.

Much of the available research examining specific temperamental attributes and internalizing and externalizing problems has focused on affect, withdrawal behaviors, activity level, and dysrhythmicity. Few studies have examined temperamental flexibility and how this characteristic may confer risk or resilience for maladjustment. Temperamental flexibility can be defined as one's ability to adapt pre-existing cognitive or behavioral approaches to new situations ([Schultz & Searleman, 2002](#)). Temperamental flexibility may be a reflection of the temperamental constructs of (a) effortful control, which refers to one's volitional ability to shift attention and inhibit dominant responses for alternative or subdominant responses ([Eisenberg et al., 2005](#); [Rothbart & Bates, 2006](#)), and (b) reactive control, which refers to more involuntary, automatic responses (e.g., inhibition to novelty, impulsivity) that are influenced by motivational states and emotional experiences ([Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997](#)). Specifically, youth lower in temperamental flexibility may be more likely to experience fear and focus on potential threats in the environment. In various environments, youth lower in flexibility may be more likely to experience emotional distress and have difficulty in modulating attention and activating problem solving strategies to reduce anxiety, increasing risk for internalizing problems ([Windle & Davies, 1999](#)). Moreover, youth lower in flexibility may be more likely to feel threatened across situations and may respond aggressively to minimize or eliminate the perceived threat, increasing risk for externalizing behaviors ([Miller-Lewis et al., 2006](#)). Consistent with these possibilities, research indicates that youth lower in flexibility may be at risk for internalizing and externalizing problems ([Schultz & Searleman, 2002](#)).

Although children with lower temperamental flexibility are at risk for psychological symptoms relative to youth higher in temperamental flexibility, it is likely that contextual factors, such as parenting, influence risk, resilience, and symptom severity among young children and adolescents who differ in temperamental flexibility ([Bates, Pettit, Dodge, & Ridge, 1998](#); [Drabick & Steinberg, 2011](#); [Kiff, Lengua, & Bush, 2011](#)). Consistent with a developmental psychopathology framework, the initiation or maintenance of problematic behaviors often occurs through the transactions between an individual's characteristics and his or her

environment ([Meaney, 2010](#); [Steinberg & Avenevoli, 2000](#)). Much research has shown that parenting behaviors interact with a child's temperamental features (e.g., negative affectivity, impulsivity) to influence the onset and course of maladaptive behaviors (e.g., [Bates et al., 1998](#); [Ellis & Boyce, 2011](#); [Oldehinkel, Veenstra, Ormel, de Winter, & Verhulst, 2006](#)); however, there is a dearth of research examining whether parenting practices exacerbate or diminish risk for symptoms depending on youth varying in temperamental flexibility. Because it may be challenging for youth lower in flexibility to adapt to various settings, these youth may have more limited social opportunities and thus may be more sensitive to socialization by parents than children higher in flexibility ([Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007](#)). Parents that engage in positive parenting behaviors such as providing warmth and guidance may help youth lower in flexibility to modify perseverating thoughts and behaviors. These parents may, moreover, provide problem solving and coping skills that could facilitate youth adaptation to novel situations. However, parents that engage in lower positive parenting (e.g., lower levels of encouragement and support) may impair youth's ability to flexibly address problems, potentially increasing the use of ineffective self-regulation processes that may be associated with maladjustment. As such, the differential susceptibility hypothesis suggests that children lower in temperamental flexibility would benefit from positive parenting more than children higher in temperamental flexibility. However, consistent with both the diathesis-stress and differential susceptibility models, when exposed to negative parenting, children lower in temperamental flexibility would be expected to show relatively greater maladjustment compared to children higher in temperamental flexibility ([Belsky et al., 2007](#)).

Although children varying in temperamental flexibility may be differentially influenced by parenting across developmental periods ([Eisenberg et al., 2005](#)), the transition to adolescence may be of particular interest because this period is characterized by dramatic changes in biology, cognition, emotion, and social interactions ([Drabick & Steinberg, 2011](#); [Steinberg & Morris, 2001](#)). These developmental experiences may be perceived as stressful and thus may interfere with a child's emotion regulation abilities ([Kerns, Siener, & Brumariu, 2011](#)), particularly among children lower in temperamental flexibility who may have difficulty adapting to novel situations. Thus, the transition to adolescence may contribute to heightened vulnerability for emotional and behavioral problems among youth ([Steinberg & Morris, 2001](#)); however, to date, no studies have considered whether children varying in temperamental flexibility are differentially affected by positive parenting behaviors in the prediction of internalizing and externalizing problems during this developmental period.

An additional limitation is the lack of consideration of mothers' and fathers' practices on children lower in temperamental flexibility. This omission is significant given that mothers' and fathers' behaviors may differ during this developmental period, which may have differential effects on children's outcomes (e.g., [Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005](#)). For example, during middle childhood and adolescence, youth tend to spend more time with and report feeling greater intimacy with mothers compared to fathers ([Kosterman, Haggerty, Spoth, & Redmond, 2004](#); [Repinski & Shonk, 2002](#)). However, mother interactions with youth tend to be more directive and contentious, whereas interactions with fathers tend to be more focused on instrumental goals (e.g., achievement), problem solving, and the development of youth autonomy ([Collins & Russell, 1991](#); [Kosterman et al., 2004](#)). The different relationship dynamics that youth have with mothers and fathers may influence risk or resilience for youth internalizing and externalizing problems, which is consistent with work that indicates higher father-child connectedness and involvement is negatively associated with adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behaviors ([Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009](#)). Moreover, the impact of mother and father parenting practices on youth symptoms may further depend on youth's temperament. This possibility is consistent with findings that among youth with difficult temperaments,

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