Parent predictors of changes in child behavior problems

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether ineffective discipline, single parent status, social support, parent involvement, and parent depression predicted changes in preschoolers' ($N = 129$) behavior problems. This study also evaluated whether child sex and ethnicity moderated the relations between these variables and changes in problem behavior. Parents completed questionnaires at the beginning of the study, and parent, teacher, and observational ratings of children's behavior problems were collected twice during the school year. Parents' own social support predicted improvement for boys and parent depression was associated with worsening symptoms for girls. Single parenthood and parent involvement predicted changes in behavior problems for the sample as a whole. Several significant ethnic differences emerged, highlighting the importance of considering cultural context in studies of parenting and child externalizing behavior.

Behavior problems, including aggression, acting out, and noncompliance, are relatively common in toddlers and preschoolers, and are often not thought to be cause for alarm (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000). However, research has shown that while approximately half of the children exhibiting behavioral problems in preschool will outgrow them, the other half will continue to have substantial difficulties (Campbell, Breaux, Ewing, & Szumowski, 1986; Harvey, Youngwirth, Thakar, & Errazuriz, 2009). Although researchers have begun to examine the stability of behavior problems and patterns of change over time (e.g., Schaeffer et al., 2006; Shaw, Owens, Giovannelli, & Winslow, 2001), we still know too little about what predicts these different behavior trajectories. Being able to distinguish children who are likely to have transient behavioral issues from those at high risk to continue to have serious problems is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. Such knowledge will contribute to theory regarding what exacerbates problem behavior, guide the development of more effective interventions, and allow more efficient targeting of resources towards those who most need help.

The preschool years represent an important window of opportunity for dealing with negative child behavior. Compared to grade school, preschool offers a flexible, less structured environment where teachers can spend time trying to address children's problematic behaviors. Parents are also typically more involved with school during this time period (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999) and there is more potential for them to work together with teachers to address their children's behavioral difficulties. Once children enter elementary school, demands on children increase, child/teacher ratios increase, and the focus on academic development may lead to less flexibility. In addition, children typically remain in the same school and peer group for several years, so any negative impressions of teachers and peers may be difficult to change, with broad and lasting effects (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). Children's behavior problems at school entry are associated with increased risk for a host of other difficulties, including poor social skills, peer rejection, and academic problems (e.g., Loeber & Farrington, 2000). Additional knowledge about the window of time prior to school entry could help us better understand, predict, and remedy potential problems before formal schooling.

Cross-sectional versus longitudinal findings

Many cross-sectional studies have identified a variety of factors that are associated with child behavior problems; child characteristics such as temperament and negative emotionality (Owens & Shaw, 2003) and parent characteristics such as maternal depression, decreased social support, and single parent status (Campbell, 1995) have all been implicated. Various aspects of parenting, including harsh and permissive discipline, are also related to behavior problems (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993). However, few studies have examined whether these factors predict changes in problems over time. Cross-sectional data leave causal pathways unclear and provide insufficient evidence that these variables relate to behavior changes. Longitudinal studies are crucial to identifying factors that predict whether problems worsen or improve over time.

Importance of examining sex and ethnicity

In investigating predictors of behavior change, child sex needs to be considered. Numerous studies have shown that boys are at increased

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risk for behavior problems compared to girls (e.g., Spieker, Larson, Lewis, Keller, & Gilchrist, 1999). Unfortunately, this has led many researchers to focus on boys in studies of externalizing behavior, making it difficult to determine whether findings apply equally to girls. Although there are more boys than girls with behavior problems, there are still many girls who show consistently high levels of externalizing behavior and negative outcomes (Schaeffer et al., 2006). Miller, Loeber, and Hipwell (2009) found that harsh parenting and low parental warmth concurrently predicted behavior problems in girls, mirroring associations found in boys, but additional research is needed to replicate these findings and determine whether relations between parenting and changes in problem behavior differ for boys versus girls.

Researchers also need to more closely examine ethnic differences in these relations. Much research has focused on European American, middle-class families. Some studies focusing on African American families have found differential effects of parenting as a function of ethnicity (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Polaha, Larzelere, Shapiro, & Pettit, 2004), but there is a paucity of research dealing with Latino families.

Discipline

Many researchers have found a link between discipline practices and behavior problems in young children (Del Vecchio & O'Leary, 2006; Miller-Lewis et al., 2006; Snyder, Cramer, Afrank, & Patterson, 2005). Overreactivity (i.e., harsh, coercive discipline) and laxness (otherwise referred to as permissive or inconsistent parenting) are two specific discipline styles that have frequently been associated with externalizing problems (Arnold et al., 1993). Social learning theory suggests that children may learn to behave aggressively through interactions with harsh, aggressive caregivers (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Patterson (1982) emphasizes the role of "coercive cycles" in the development and maintenance of problem behavior. He proposes that harsh, inconsistent parenting and noncompliant, aggressive child behavior become mutually reinforcing over time, which serves to solidify a coercive interaction pattern and worsen problem behaviors. Although some studies with older children have found that harsh discipline predicts changes in externalizing behavior over time (Grogan-Kaylor, 2005), other studies examining much younger children (such as toddlers) have not (O'Leary, Slep, & Reid, 1999). In one of the few empirical studies that has specifically examined discipline and changes in preschoolers' behavior problems, Spieker et al. (1999) found that mothers' use of negative control tactics (such as yelling and spanking) predicted increases in problem behavior.

There is some evidence to suggest that the association between discipline and child behavior problems differs depending on ethnicity. Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997) found that mothers' harsh discipline in kindergarten was associated with higher teacher-reported externalizing problems for European American children in every year of their study, from kindergarten through 6th grade. By contrast, there were no significant associations between harsh discipline at age 5 and later problems for African American children. Polaha et al. (2004) found that mothers' physical discipline was associated with lower levels of teacher-reported problems, but only for African American boys. Other researchers have not found any differences between these two ethnic groups, with both showing similar positive associations between physical discipline and child behavior problems (e.g., Amato & Fowler, 2002; Spieker et al., 1999).

Single parent status

Single parenthood is frequently associated with fewer financial resources, increased life stress, and more chaotic home environments (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003). Several researchers have found that children in single parent households are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems than those living in two parent families (Boyle & Lipman, 2002; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Moore, Vandivere, & Redd, 2006). Although a number of researchers have included single parents in their studies of child externalizing behavior (Heller, Baker, Henker, & Hinshaw, 1996; Shaw et al., 2001), to our knowledge none have examined whether single parent status is a predictor of changes in preschool behavior problems. Several researchers have found that the cross-sectional relation between single parent status and child externalizing problems differs depending on ethnicity. Although single parenthood has frequently been associated with behavior problems in European American families, findings for African American families have been mixed (Shaw, Winslow, & Flanagan, 1999). Few studies have examined single parenthood and child behavior problems in Latino families.

Social support

Social support can refer to emotional support from friends and family or instrumental support such as assistance with childcare or transportation. Different studies have focused on different aspects of social support, and findings have been mixed. Although some researchers have found that higher levels of social support were related to fewer child behavior problems (Dodge et al., 1994; Leadbeater & Bishop, 1994), others have found no relation (Oravecz, Koblinsky, & Randolph, 2008). Most of these studies have been cross-sectional and focused on European American or African American families. The current study assessed parents' perceived emotional support and whether it predicts changes in behavior problems over time.

Parent involvement

Parents' involvement in their children's education is generally thought to affect children's academic outcomes. More recently, researchers have found that parent involvement also relates to children's externalizing behavior (e.g., Domina, 2005; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010). The association between parent involvement and behavior problems could be negative or positive. When parents are more involved in their children's education, those children may exhibit fewer behavior problems. On the other hand, when children are exhibiting behavior problems, parents may become more involved in response. In several cross-sectional studies, researchers have found that higher levels of parent involvement were associated with lower levels of behavior problems in elementary school children (e.g., Domina, 2005; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). In two recent longitudinal studies, one with elementary school students (El Nokali et al., 2010) and one with preschoolers (Powell et al., 2010), higher levels of parent involvement predicted decreases in problem behavior over time. Some researchers have noted ethnic differences in the level of parent involvement; for example, African American families have been found to experience more barriers to involvement (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004).

Parent depression

Parent depression is associated with externalizing problems in childhood (Miner & Clarke-Stewart, 2008; O'Leary et al., 1999; Spieker et al., 1999), but it is unclear whether parental depression predicts changes in externalizing behavior over time. Although many of the studies dealing with maternal depression have focused on European American families, a few have included substantial numbers of African American and Latino families. In two cross-sectional studies, maternal depression was found to be associated with higher levels of child behavior problems in both African American and Latino families (Leadbeater & Bishop, 1994; Riley et al., 2009). Thus, cross-sectional data appears to suggest similar relations between parent depression and behavior problems for families of different ethnic groups.