



The unique relation of childhood emotional maltreatment with mental health problems among detained male and female adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Mounting evidence indicates that emotional maltreatment is at least as harmful as physical and sexual abuse. Notwithstanding their high occurrence among detained adolescents, the link between emotional maltreatment and mental health problems in these youths is not well researched. This study, therefore, was designed to examine the unique link between emotional maltreatment and mental health problems, with particular attention to gender differences. Well validated self-report measures of maltreatment experiences (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire) and mental health problems (Youth Self Report) were completed by 341 detained adolescents (156 boys, 185 girls) aged 12 to 18 years. As expected, girls reported higher levels of maltreatment experiences and internalizing and externalizing mental health problems than boys. Blockwise multiple linear regression analyses indicated that in both genders emotional abuse was uniquely and positively associated with internalizing and externalizing mental health problems, over and above the influence of other types of maltreatment. Furthermore, sexual abuse was uniquely related with internalizing problems in girls only, whereas only in boys this type of abuse was uniquely related with externalizing problems. Detained adolescents who have been the victim of emotional abuse in combination with another type of maltreatment may be the worst subgroup in terms of mental health problems. Therefore, emotional maltreatment experiences in adolescents who offend should receive more research and clinical attention.

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The majority of detained adolescents have mental health problems (e.g., Colins et al., 2010; Fazel, Doll, & Langstrom, 2008; Vermeiren, Jespers, & Moffitt, 2006) and maltreatment experiences (e.g., Aebi et al., 2015; King et al., 2011; Moore, Gaskin, & Indig, 2013). While mounting evidence indicates that emotional maltreatment is at least as harmful as physical and sexual abuse (Mills et al., 2013; Paradis et al., 2009; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006) the link between emotional maltreatment and mental health problems in criminal-justice involved youths remains understudied.

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For example, one recent study on correlates of maltreatment in male detained adolescents did not examine the unique contribution of emotional maltreatment (Aebi et al., 2015). The present study was designed to fill this void.

Emotional maltreatment, also known as psychological maltreatment, refers to a pattern of non-physical interactions, which potentially harm the victim's health and development. Two forms of emotional maltreatment exist: emotional neglect and emotional abuse (Glaser, 2002). Emotional neglect concerns parental/caretaker's failure to provide significant warmth, support, emotional stimulation, and/or attunement to the child, whereas emotional abuse refers to parental/caretaker's criticism, rejection, devaluation, or humiliation (Briere & Jordan, 2009). In the UK and the US, about 8% of adult women and 4% of men, reported exposure to severe emotional maltreatment (Gilbert et al., 2009). In adolescent detainees, the few studies on the topic showed that between 33% and 69% experienced emotional maltreatment (Haapasalo & Hamalainen, 1996; Kimonis, Cross, Howard, & Donoghue, 2013; Moore et al., 2013; Aebi et al., 2015). Parental warmth and emotional availability are essential for children's psychological development, and a lack thereof is likely to negatively impact mental health (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Yap, Pilkington, Ryan, & Jorm, 2014). General and clinical population studies further showed that emotional maltreatment is associated with specific mental health problems (English et al., 2005). Internalizing problems, including anxious and depressed feelings, are more prevalent among emotionally maltreated children than among physically maltreated children (Gibb, Chelminski, & Zimmerman, 2007; Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English, & Everson, 2003; Mills et al., 2013; Yap et al., 2014). In reverse, among physically maltreated compared with emotionally maltreated children, higher rates were reported of externalizing problems, such as attention deficit and hyperactivity problems, substance abuse and rule-breaking behavior (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997; Litrownik et al., 2003; Mills et al., 2013; van der Put, Lanctôt, de Ruiter, & van Vugt, 2015). A warm, nurturing parental relationship has been postulated to protect against negative mental health outcomes of traumatic experiences such as physical and sexual abuse (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Tyler, 2002). In victims of physical and sexual abuse, more mental health problems were seen when they also experienced emotional maltreatment (Aebi et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2013; Teicher et al., 2006). This suggests that having experienced emotional maltreatment has a unique, incremental negative effect on mental health. However, the relation between emotional maltreatment and mental health problems after controlling for its overlap with other types of maltreatment, has to date not been studied in detained adolescents.

Prior work in detained youths showed that in girls, compared to boys, the occurrence and comorbidity of in- and externalizing problems was higher (Van Damme, Vanderplasschen, & Colins, 2014), while girls also more often reported experiencing multiple types of maltreatment (Abrantes, Hoffmann, & Anton, 2005). These gender differences can be explained by the so-called gender paradox (Loeber & Keenan, 1994). According to this paradox, fewer girls than boys offend seriously, while those that do, constitute a more serious group in terms of (comorbid) mental health problems. For instance, in a large US study on youth in juvenile detention, nearly 60% of boys and more than two thirds of girls fulfilled criteria for any psychiatric disorder other than conduct disorder (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002). Furthermore, detained girls were shown to differ substantially from boys in the rates of certain types of maltreatment: while sexual abuse is more prevalent in detained girls, boys more often report experiences with physical abuse (Coleman & Stewart, 2010; King et al., 2011). In addition, general and clinical population studies indicate that females are more sensitive than males to developing internalizing problems as a result of adversity, whereas males more often develop externalizing problems (Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Keyes et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; MacMillan & Munn, 2001; Maschi, Hatcher, Schwalbe, & Rosato, 2008). Given these gender differences in mental health problems, maltreatment and their interrelatedness, the current study was also designed to compare detained girls and boys. Such studies are required in order to be able to develop gender sensitive interventions (Ford, Chapman, Connor, & Cruise, 2012).

The overall aim of the present study was to examine gender differences in emotional maltreatment and related mental health problems among detained boys and girls. Specifically, we aimed to study the incremental contribution of emotional maltreatment to in- and externalizing mental health problems, over and above physical and sexual abuse and physical neglect. It was hypothesized that girls would report more maltreatment experiences and mental health problems than boys. Next, it was expected that maltreatment types would be more strongly connected with internalizing problems than with externalizing problems in girls, whereas the reverse would be true for boys (i.e., their maltreatment levels would be more strongly connected with externalizing than internalizing problems) (Edwards et al., 2003; Keyes et al., 2012; King et al., 2011; MacMillan & Munn, 2001; Maschi et al., 2008). In addition, we expected emotional maltreatment to have an incremental contribution over and above the influence of physical and sexual abuse and physical neglect, to internalizing and externalizing mental health problems.

1. Methods

1.1. Sample

In two consecutive studies between 2005 and 2007 (boy study) and between 2008 and 2011 (girl study), 304 boys and 240 girls were respectively recruited from Juvenile Detention Centers (JDCs) in Flanders, Belgium. A detailed description of both samples can be retrieved from prior publications (Colins, Bijttebier, Broekaert, & Andershed, 2014; Colins, Vermeiren, Schuyten, & Broekaert, 2009). Youngsters are referred to a JDC by a juvenile judge when charged with a criminal offense or because of an urgent problematic educational situation (e.g., truancy, running away, aggression, prostitution). Placement in a JDC is considered to be the most severe measure a juvenile judge can impose. Of the 544 recruited adolescents, 48 could not

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