



# The unique and interactive effects of parent and school bonds on adolescent delinquency



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## ABSTRACT

Parent and school bonds are protective against delinquency. This study used longitudinal data and multilevel Poisson regression models (MLM) to examine unique and interactive associations of parent and school bonds on youth delinquency in a sample of rural adolescents ( $n = 945$ ; 84% White). We investigated whether youth sex or transitioning to a new middle school moderated the linkages between parent and school bonds and later delinquency. Results indicated reduced delinquency was associated with positive parent and school relationships. Parent and school bonds interacted such that linkages between parent bonding and youth delinquency were stronger when youth also had high school bonding – suggesting an additive effect. However, interactive effects were only found when youth remained in the same school and became nonsignificant if they transitioned to a new school. Findings support prior evidence that parent and school bonds – and their interaction – play a unique role in reducing delinquency.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period when youth are at risk for engaging in risky behaviors, such as delinquency. Unfortunately, for a number of youth, early engagement in delinquency can cement maladaptive trajectories toward future criminal behavior (Tolan, 1987). In conjunction with the social, emotional and physical changes associated with adolescence, environmental shifts (most prominently, the transition into middle school) may introduce additional stress that put youth at risk for academic underperformance, substance use and delinquent behavior (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Positive adult relationships, such as those adolescents form with parents and teachers, may help to buffer against this stress and have been associated with reduced risky behavior, including delinquency (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Ingram, Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, & Bynum, 2007; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Liljeberg, Eklund, Fritz, & Klinteberg, 2011; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Sokol-Katz, Dunham, & Zimmerman, 1997; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Though parent and school bonds have been studied extensively independently of each other, less is known about how these parent and school relationships work together to influence adolescent behavior, whether they affect boys and girls differently and whether they are especially imperative during school transitions. As adolescence is a common time (and middle school a frequent target) for intervention, understanding the influence

and interaction of parent and school bonds on youth delinquency over time is critical for best addressing youth development.

### 1.1. Social control theory

Rooted in social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), considerable research has emphasized the importance of close emotional bonds and has sought to explain how bonds shape adolescents' engagement with delinquent behavior. Relationships with adults socialize adolescents to conform to prosocial norms, reveal expectations for acceptable behavior and serve as a deterrent against delinquency (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Children learn that deviant behaviors can threaten relationships with adults, and adolescents who have formed strong bonds may feel that this risk to their relationships outweighs their interest in delinquent behavior (Wade & Brannigan, 1998). In contrast, youth who do not have strong bonds with adults may fail to learn the value of caring for others and may not understand how conventional behaviors engender social relationships (Conger, 1976). According to social control theory, without a commitment to others and to the behaviors that maintain these commitments, adolescents would have little restraint in pursuing delinquent behaviors (Hirschi, 1969). As proposed by Nye (1958), strong social bonds to at least one adult can be protective for youth development. In this paper, we examine the associations between adolescents' delinquency and their bonds to adults, both at home and at

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school. In particular, we examine the unique and interactive influences of bonding on adolescent adjustment and potential moderators of their influence (i.e., adolescent sex, transition to a new school).

### 1.2. Parent bonding as a protective factor

Highlighted in social control theory, parent-child relationships play a key role in the development and internalization of norms, which may act as deterrents of delinquent behavior. As early as toddlerhood, the strength of children's relationships with their parents is related to their developing conscience: Children become more receptive to socialization toward prosocial intentions when they share a strong bond with sensitive and responsive caregivers (Kochanska, Aksan, Knaack, & Rhines, 2004). Through strong relationships with their parents, children learn that subscribing to conventional behavior norms (e.g., sharing, turn-taking) fosters emotional bonds and conveys concern for others. Children also learn that violating norms communicates a lack of regard for others that can strain important relationships. When strong bonds develop or are maintained between youth and their parents, adolescents may also be more likely to trust their parents and believe that compliance to these norms is in their own best interest (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). As a result, strong parent-child bonds have been linked to lower risk for a number of negative youth outcomes including substance use, academic underachievement and delinquent behavior (Bao, Haas, Chen, & Pi, 2012; Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2000; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger, 1991).

The linkages between parent-child relationships and youth outcomes are significant, even when controlling for other parental characteristics and behaviors. Prior work in delinquency prevention indicates that the emotional component of parent-child relationships may be more strongly linked to youth outcomes than parental monitoring, supervision and control (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Mack, Leiber, Featherstone, & Monserud, 2007) and other consistent correlates of delinquency, like family structure (i.e., parents' marital status) and parent education (Davis-Kean, 2005; Kristensen, Gravseth, & Bjerkedal, 2009; Mack et al., 2007). These findings are also supported by Demuth and Brown (2004) who found that, when all of these factors are studied in concert, strong bonds remain significantly associated with reduced levels of delinquent behavior after controlling for parent monitoring, supervision, education and marital status. Several other studies have produced similar findings (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Ingram et al., 2007; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Sokol-Katz et al., 1997). By controlling for other family and parent-level variables, these studies strengthen the assertion that adolescents' close relationships with parents in and of themselves serve as protective factors against negative outcomes. Bonding is not simply a marker of other adaptive parent characteristics that may affect adolescent outcomes. Thus, children who have strong parent bonds would more likely be socialized toward positive behavior norms and less likely to engage in delinquent behavior, regardless of other family factors.

### 1.3. School bonding as a protective factor

Correspondingly, children can form strong school bonds that deter negative outcomes. As defined by Maddox and Prinz (2003), the construct of school bonding is a broad term that encompasses not only student-teacher bonds but also factors that are unique to the school relationship, specifically school involvement and school commitment. In addition to emotional closeness and respect for teachers, school bonding also encompasses students' sense of pride and belonging in the school. Though operationalizations of school bonding have varied between studies, at its core, the construct reflects the strength of students' relationships with school staff and the degree to which they endorse their school's values (Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Oelsner, Lippold, & Greenberg, 2011). Similar to parent bonding, strong school bonding represents an attachment to an institution that guides

adolescents toward internalizing prosocial norms and behavioral control (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). School climate also focuses on relationships among staff and students; however, it focuses on school-level characteristics of overall school support rather than individual student's relationships. School bonding is a distinct construct because it emphasizes student and teacher feelings of physical and emotional safety, academic and behavioral expectations and the school's emphasis on teaching and learning (Durlak, 2015; Halpin & Croft, 1963).

School bonding - and teacher-student bonding in particular - has been examined as an important factor in children's likelihood to experience a number of maladaptive behaviors, such as academic underachievement, delinquency and substance use - with students who have closer bonds to their schools showing fewer maladaptive behaviors (Liljeberg et al., 2011; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Using longitudinal data, Liljeberg et al. (2011) found that school bonding at age 14 (especially, relationships and security with teachers) was associated with reduced delinquency among adolescents at age 16. Early delinquency has been associated with low school bonding at the entrance of middle school, as well as steeper decreases in school bonding over time (Oelsner et al., 2011).

Interventions to increase school bonding, such as the Child Development Project, have shown promise in reducing delinquent behavior. Battistich, Schaps and Wilson (2004) conducted a follow-up assessment of over 700 students who participated in the Child Development Project, a whole-school elementary-level intervention designed to foster a caring school environment and supportive teacher-student relationships (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000). By middle school, participating students felt more bonded and connected to their schools, showed fewer behavior problems, reported higher academic achievement and lower levels of antisocial behaviors, including delinquency. Such studies indicate that school bonding is both malleable and influential on youth outcomes, supporting the need to examine how school bonding operates in the context of other protective factors, like parent bonding.

### 1.4. Sex differences in school bonding

Importantly, sex differences have been noted regarding school bonding. On average, school bonding is higher among female students than it is among males, although bonding decreases among both sexes each year that they are in middle school (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). A recent study (Liljeberg et al., 2011) found that teacher bonds were associated with reduced delinquency two years later for both boys and girls. However, a comparison of the standardized coefficients shows that this relationship was stronger for males. In qualitative interviews, male students have reported that their masculinity is at odds with high school bonding, and boys may disengage from school as a way to preserve their social status (Morris, 2008). One explanation is that it may be more socially acceptable for female students to bond with teachers, work hard in class and maintain high involvement in school activities. In contrast, male students may face the opposite social pressure to do little to no work, to devalue academic success or to make it appear that academic success is effortless (Cohen, 1998; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012). However, when teachers are able to foster a strong classroom culture, where effort and commitment to school are socially acceptable, boys disproportionately benefit (Legewie & DiPrete, 2012). Given the evidence that boys are more likely than girls to engage in delinquent behavior, the protective benefits of close bonds with adults on reducing delinquency may be particularly pronounced among male youth (Bongers, Koot, Van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2004).

### 1.5. Interactive effects of parent and school bonds

Yet, though theoretical and empirical work exists to support the importance of both parent and school bonding in adolescence, few

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