



Parent and peer pathways linking childhood experiences of abuse with marijuana use in adolescence and adulthood



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The mechanisms linking child maltreatment with later marijuana use are uncertain
- This longitudinal study tested parent and peer social developmental mechanisms
- Preschool abuse and sexual abuse were negatively related to parental attachment
- Parental attachment was negatively related, in turn, to peer marijuana use
- Peer marijuana use predicted adolescent and, in turn, adult marijuana use

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The social developmental processes by which child maltreatment increases risk for marijuana use are understudied. This study examined hypothesized parent and peer pathways linking preschool abuse and sexual abuse with adolescent and adult marijuana use.

Methods: Analyses used data from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study. Measures included child abuse (physical abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence, and neglect) in preschool, sexual abuse up to age 18, adolescent (average age = 18 years) parental attachment and peer marijuana approval/use, as well as adolescent and adult (average age = 36 years) marijuana use.

Results: Confirming elevated risk due to child maltreatment, path analysis showed that sexual abuse was positively related to adolescent marijuana use, whereas preschool abuse was positively related to adult marijuana use. In support of mediation, it was found that both forms of maltreatment were negatively related to parental attachment, which was negatively related, in turn, to having peers who use and approve of marijuana use. Peer marijuana approval/use was a strong positive predictor of adolescent marijuana use, which was a strong positive predictor, in turn, of adult marijuana use.

Conclusions: Results support social developmental theories that hypothesize a sequence of events leading from child maltreatment experiences to lower levels of parental attachment and, in turn, higher levels of involvement with pro-marijuana peers and, ultimately, to both adolescent and adult marijuana use. This sequence of events suggests developmentally-timed intervention activities designed to prevent maltreatment as well as the initiation and progression of marijuana use among vulnerable individuals.

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1. Introduction

Rates of marijuana use in youth are high. In the United States, 6.5% of 8th graders and 21.2% of 12th graders report marijuana use within the past week (Miech, Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2015). These rates are particularly elevated among youth who have experienced child abuse or neglect (Dubowitz et al., 2016). The harmful

effects of regular, heavy use of marijuana are well documented (Fergusson, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2002; Hall, 2015; Volkow, Baler, Compton, & Weiss, 2014). With the possibility of even greater access to marijuana in the growing number of states where it has become legalized (Mason et al., 2016), it is important to understand processes that relate to the adoption and maintenance of marijuana use, particularly among maltreated youth. However, research has not yet revealed the social developmental mechanisms by which exposure to child maltreatment might lead to marijuana involvement in adolescence and adulthood. The current study addresses this gap by testing parent and

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peer pathways leading from child physical abuse and neglect as well as sexual abuse to adolescent and adult marijuana use.

Child maltreatment is associated with the use of multiple substances in adolescence (Dembo et al., 1992; Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997; Moran, Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004) and adulthood (Horan & Widom, 2015; Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010; Lo & Cheng, 2007). Hovdestad, Tonmyr, Wekerle, and Thornton (2011) recommend that research in this area examine multiple types of maltreatment. Dubowitz et al. (2016) reported statistically significant bivariate predictive associations of child physical and sexual abuse with marijuana use in a prospective study of adolescents. Only sexual abuse retained a statistically significant association with marijuana use in analyses that adjusted for study site, participant sex, and race/ethnicity. Dubowitz et al. (2016) concluded that “Future research should focus on better understanding the mechanisms by which physical and sexual abuse influence youth adolescent risk taking behaviors in general and marijuana use in particular” (p. 7). Few such mediation tests have been conducted.

Oshri, Rogosch, Burnette, and Cicchetti (2011) examined personality functioning (ego undercontrol and ego resiliency) as well as psychopathology (externalizing and internalizing problems) as mediators of the link between child maltreatment and cannabis use disorder symptoms in adolescence. Results provided support for a personality functioning – externalizing pathway, but not for a personality functioning – internalizing pathway. Additional studies have similarly examined individual characteristics (e.g., depression) as mediating mechanisms in the association of child maltreatment with marijuana and other substance use (Horan & Widom, 2015; Lansford et al., 2010; Lo & Cheng, 2007).

Informative as these studies have been, their focus on individual characteristics leaves the potential parenting and peer socialization processes linking child maltreatment with marijuana use largely unexamined. However, social developmental theories suggest that such processes are important considerations. These types of theories were classified by Petraitis, Flay, and Miller (1995) as falling within the social/interpersonal sphere, and commonly draw from social control and social learning principles. Social control theory focuses on the socializing influence of the family in childhood and adolescence, particularly the protective effect of parental involvement and attachment on deviant behaviors (Hirschi, 1969). Chen, Storr, and Anthony (2005) found that parental involvement in the elementary and middle school years shields youth from experimenting with marijuana. Conversely, Kandel and colleagues (Kandel, 1980; Kandel, Kessler, & Margulies, 1978) found that poor parent-child interactions lead to increased marijuana use, possibly by promoting association with deviant peers (Van Ryzin, Fosco, & Dishion, 2012).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) emphasizes deviant peers who may influence an adolescent's own deviant behavior (Dorius, Bahr, Hoffmann, & Harmon, 2004). According to Burgess and Akers (1966), individuals learn deviant behavior by observing and modeling their social contacts. Adolescents become increasingly influenced by their peers, and youth who have peers that use marijuana are more likely to use it themselves (D'Amico & McCarthy, 2006; Johnson & Marcos, 1987; Marcos, Bahr, & Johnson, 1986; Poulin, Kiesner, Pedersen, & Dishion, 2011). When adolescents feel that their friends approve of drugs, they are exposed to both psychological encouragement and observable behavior to model (Dorius et al., 2004). Accordingly, research shows that peers' favorable attitudes toward substance use and their own substance involvement are robust, proximal predictors of adolescent substance use (Kandel et al., 1978; Mason & Windle, 2001; Oetting & Beauvais, 1987; Van Ryzin et al., 2012), including marijuana initiation (Kosterman, Hawkins, Guo, Catalano, & Abbott, 2000).

Prior studies have examined the simultaneous parent and peer influences on adolescent substance use (e.g., Aseltine, 1995). Several such studies found that when peer influences were added to a model that included family variables, the family influences were reduced (Bahr & Hoffmann, 2005; Bares, Delva, Grogan-Kaylor, & Andrade, 2011). However, there is also evidence that parents exert an influence on their

adolescent children through peer interactions as a mediating process; for example, van Ryzin et al. (2012) found that family factors, such as relationship quality, indirectly predicted adolescent substance use through reduced deviant peer associations.

Parent and peer predictors of adolescent problem behavior outcomes, including substance use, are influenced by earlier child maltreatment. Sousa et al. (2011) found that children exposed to abusive parenting and domestic abuse had lower levels of attachment to their parents. Lower attachment, in turn, led to a greater number of antisocial behaviors among adolescents. By contrast, Allen, Chango, Szewedo, Schadt, and Marston (2012) found that teens who received a high level of support from their mothers were less likely to be swayed by their friends' level of substance use.

Although it is plausible that parent and peer socialization processes may operate as mediators linking child maltreatment with subsequent marijuana use, this remains to be tested. Dubowitz et al. (2016) reported that positive associations between child maltreatment indicators and marijuana use behaviors generally became statistically non-significant after adding peer marijuana use to the analyses. This finding is consistent with the possibility of peer mediation, but a more direct test of the longitudinal links between child maltreatment and marijuana use through peer as well as parent factors is needed.

Relatively few studies have examined the progression of marijuana or other substance use from adolescence into adulthood (e.g., Lansford et al., 2010; Mason & Spoth, 2012). Yet, the factors affecting continued marijuana use may be different from those that affect the initiation of use (Kandel, 1980). Studying alcohol progression, Mason and Spoth (2012) found that early adolescent peer deviance predicted alcohol use in middle adolescence, but not alcohol abuse in early adulthood. Findings from studies such as this suggest the need for long-term longitudinal investigations of marijuana use outcomes (e.g., initial use, maintenance) over adolescence and into the adult years.

Of course, child maltreatment often occurs within a broader context characterized by additional family stressors that can influence parent and peer pathways leading toward problem outcomes. According to family process models (e.g., Conger et al., 1992), socioeconomic disadvantage has an indirect effect on a child's adjustment through parenting difficulties, since parents who are faced with economic problems are likely to experience disrupted family management and diminished marital as well as parent-child relationship quality. This highlights the need for studies of the consequences of child maltreatment for marijuana use that address socioeconomic disadvantage in the family of origin as an important background predictor. Guided by social developmental theories, this study uses longitudinal data to test the proposed model in Fig. 1. It is hypothesized that child abuse and sexual abuse will be associated with lower parental attachment, which will predict, in turn, higher levels of peer as well as adolescent and adult marijuana use, controlling for socioeconomic status as well as gender.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Data are from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, a prospective study of the causes and consequences of child maltreatment, which began in the 1970s with a sample of 457 children in 297 families (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Wu, 1991). Some of the families were recruited from child welfare agency abuse and neglect caseloads. Others were recruited from several group settings (i.e., Head Start, day care, and nursery programs) in the same two-county area to serve as the comparison sample. This dataset spans a 30-year period, covering four developmental periods: early- and middle-childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The first, “preschool” wave occurred in 1976 to 1977 when children were 18 months to 6 years old. A second “school-age” wave occurred in 1980 to 1982. Ten years later, in 1990 to 1992, was the “adolescence” wave, when children were on average 18 years old. Most recently, data

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