



## Research report

# A prospective study of the impact of child maltreatment and friend support on psychological distress trajectory: From adolescence to emerging adulthood



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Transition into adulthood is a critical developmental period that may be influenced by adverse life events as well as by protective factors. This study aimed at investigating the effect of different forms of child maltreatment experienced prior to age 14 (i.e., sexual abuse, physical abuse and exposure to intimate partner violence), and of friend support at age 14 on the psychological distress trajectory from age 14 to 24.

**Methods:** Participants were 605 adolescents from the general population involved in a 10-year longitudinal study. Psychological distress was evaluated at ages 14, 16, 18 and 24. Child maltreatment prior to 14 years was retrospectively assessed at 14 and 24 years while perception of support from friends was evaluated at age 14.

**Results:** Multilevel growth modeling indicated that psychological distress followed a significant decreasing curvilinear trajectory, with participants reporting fewer distressing psychological symptoms after 18 years. All three forms of child maltreatment, as well as their cumulative effect, predicted more psychological distress over 10 years above and beyond the protective effect of support from friends. Higher support from friends at age 14 was related to lower distress at baseline and over 10 years, beyond the effect of child maltreatment.

**Limitations:** Self-report nature of all measures, attrition, and measures of child maltreatment forms.

**Conclusions:** Psychological distress decreased during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Results also revealed the detrimental impact of child maltreatment and the promotive role of friend support, which underscore the importance of early intervention.

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## 1. Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is one of the life's most critical transitions, involving many contextual and social role changes (Shulenberg et al., 2004). The journey into adulthood is not always smooth; stressful life events and psychosocial experiences can affect emerging adults' ability to adapt to this new phase

in their lives (Burt and Paysnick, 2012; Werner and Smith, 1992). Among these adverse life events, child maltreatment has been identified as linked to negative consequences that can persist into adulthood (Gilbert et al., 2009; Herrenkohl et al., 2013; Norman et al., 2012). A growing body of literature also reveals that a minority of maltreated children will not present with mental health problems, and will therefore adapt positively to young adulthood (Daigneault et al., 2007; Hébert et al., 2014; McGloin and Widom, 2001). In parallel, research has underscored social support as one of the critical factors preventing the development of psychopathology (Chu et al., 2010; Cohen, 2004).

Despite extensive research in this area, there has been a paucity

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of studies on trajectories of change in a same cohort of emerging adults (Galambos et al., 2006). The majority of studies have thus relied on correlational designs to examine factors related to psychological distress. Moreover, studies have usually identified trajectories for symptoms of specific disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression) without considering their overlap or broader categorizations, such as internalizing symptoms (Weeks et al., 2014) or psychological distress (Jokela et al., 2011). For example, results of the few studies using trajectory analyses seem to indicate altogether a normative curvilinear pattern for depressive symptoms, a similar construct to psychological distress, which increase through early and middle adolescence, peak during late adolescence (i.e. at 17–19 years), and decline through adulthood (Elovainio et al., 2012; Galambos et al., 2006; Galambos and Krahn, 2008; Ge et al., 2006). A cubic trajectory was also found for depressive symptoms: a slight decrease from 12 to 14, an increase at age 14 to 17, and a downward trajectory through 21 years (Rawana and Morgan, 2014). Results also indicate that psychological distress is more common among girls in adolescence (Nilsen et al., 2013), and remains so in adulthood (Elovainio et al., 2012; Galambos and Krahn, 2008; Rawana and Morgan, 2014). These results are interesting, but it would be important to also assess changes, if any, in psychological distress across the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Considering the economic and social burden of psychological distress to society (Kessler and Greenberg, 2002; Gibb et al., 2010), it is important to examine factors that may influence its trajectory at a time where adolescents and young adults may be more vulnerable. The current study extends previous work by assessing the impact of child maltreatment and social support on the trajectory of psychological distress over a period of 10 years.

### 1.1. Child maltreatment

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child maltreatment refers to “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (WHO, 1999, p. 15). Results from a recent population survey conducted in Canada with 23,000 adults show that 32% had experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood (Afifi et al., 2014). Child maltreatment is considered a nonspecific risk factor for short- and long-term psychological maladjustment (Gilbert et al., 2009; Maniglio, 2009). It is difficult to disentangle the effects of different forms of maltreatment as each can predict different and/or the same outcomes, some of which can have a stronger impact when studied together with others (Edwards et al., 2003; Fergusson et al., 2008; Richmond et al., 2009). For example, Fergusson et al. (2008) found that child sexual abuse was more consistently associated with increases in risks of later mental health problems than child physical abuse.

Although several studies have documented the heterogeneity in the consequences of child maltreatment, there are clearly gaps in our understanding of its overall impact on the psychological distress trajectory during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. To date, links between child maltreatment and negative outcomes have been studied at one time point, even in longitudinal studies (Fergusson et al., 1996, 2008; Lynskey and Fergusson, 1997). To our knowledge, no study has investigated child maltreatment using growth modeling over long time spans to document changes in youth’s developmental trajectories. As Trickett et al. (2011a) suggested: “We know that for many victims, maybe most, child maltreatment is associated with maladaptive development in adolescence, but we still know little about how different forms of maltreatment, in different combinations, at

different developmental stages, put in motion these developmental problems” (p. 14). Moreover, less is known about the unique contribution of different forms of child maltreatment on youth mental health above and beyond salient protective factors in adolescence, such as friend support (Colarossi and Eccles, 2003).

### 1.2. Friend support

Extensive research has found social support to be a protective factor for psychological distress in youth and adults (e.g., Chu et al., 2010; Cohen, 2004; Collishaw et al., 2007; Nilsen et al., 2013). Results of Chu et al. (2010) meta-analysis indicate that social support (from family, friends, teacher or others) is negatively associated with psychological distress among youth. Results of recent longitudinal studies also confirmed this effect by showing that social support predicts decreases in psychological distress in adolescence (over 1 year; Colarossi and Eccles, 2003), from adolescence to adulthood (over 4–8 years; Feldman et al., 2004), and in adulthood (over 3–7 years; Galambos et al., 2006; Sperry and Widom, 2013).

Different sources of support may also have different effects on psychological distress (Colarossi and Eccles, 2003; Collishaw et al., 2007; Feldman et al., 2004; Boudreault-Bouchard et al., 2013). In adolescence, studies have highlighted the growing importance of friends (e.g., De Goede et al., 2009), which may be related to the fact that adolescents become increasingly autonomous and individuated from their parents. For example, results of a recent study indicate that low friend support at age 14.5, but not parent or teacher support, predicts increases in depressive symptoms for girls, but not for boys, from early to later adolescence (Nilsen et al., 2013). Adolescents may feel more at ease to confide in their friends than to their parents, as they begin to have romantic and sexual experiences (Arnett, 2014). Moreover, friends may be the only source of support for adolescents who are maltreated by their parents. Indeed, studies with sexually abused youth reveal that adolescents more often rely on friends than parents for support and perceive friend support as positive, yet greater sense of support from friends is not always associated with less distress in this population (Feiring et al., 1998; Regnault et al., 2015).

Although many studies have examined the effect of friends as a source of support, insufficient attention has been given to its long-term effect from adolescence to adulthood. Two longitudinal studies suggest that more friend support at 15–18 years is associated with decreases in depression one year later among adolescents from the general population (Colarossi and Eccles, 2003) and that the adequacy of maltreated adolescents’ friendships predicts their psychological well-being in adulthood (Collishaw et al., 2007). Overall, a growing body of research indicates that friend support is positively related to youth and adult well-being, but questions still remain as to how it relates to psychological distress trajectories over time in a context of child maltreatment.

### 1.3. Study objectives and hypotheses

Now that past longitudinal studies have demonstrated beyond a doubt that child maltreatment and friend support are important risk and protective factors to consider when studying psychological distress, researchers need a better understanding of the timing at which those factors have an impact and their independent effect above and beyond their respective effect. This four wave longitudinal study will thus provide a unique contribution to the literature by examining the impact of three forms of child maltreatment, their cumulative effect, and the effect of friend support on the psychological distress trajectory from 14 to 24 years.

This study aimed to determine (1) the psychological distress

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