

Preschool Irritability: Longitudinal Associations With Psychiatric Disorders at Age 6 and Parental Psychopathology

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Objective: There is increasing scientific and clinical attention to chronic irritability in youth. However, little is known about the predictive validity and clinical significance of chronic irritability during early childhood. This prospective, longitudinal study examined associations of chronic irritability with psychiatric disorders and parental psychopathology in a large community sample of preschoolers. **Method:** Four hundred sixty-two preschool-age children were assessed at 3 and 6 years of age. Child psychopathology was assessed at baseline (3 years) and follow-up (6 years) using a diagnostic interview, the Preschool Age Psychiatric Assessment, with parents. Items from the Preschool Age Psychiatric Assessment were used to create a dimensional measurement of chronic irritability. Parental psychopathology was assessed with a diagnostic interview at baseline. **Results:** Chronic irritability was concurrently associated with a wide range of psychiatric disorders and functional impairment at 3 and 6 years of age. Irritability at 3 years predicted depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and functional impairment at 6 years after controlling for baseline disorders. Irritability also was associated with parental depression and anxiety. **Conclusions:** Findings underscore the central role of irritability in early-emerging mental health problems. They are consistent with longitudinal studies in older youth indicating that chronic irritability predicts later depression and anxiety and support the importance of early detection and interventions targeting preschool irritability. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2013;52(12):1304–1313. **Key Words:** irritability, longitudinal, mood dysregulation, preschool

In recent years, there has been growing clinical and scientific interest in youth irritability.¹ The importance of irritability in child psychiatry has long been reflected in the psychiatric nosology, where it is a criterion for several emotional and behavioral disorders, including major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD; *DSM-5*).² In addition, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, a condition characterized by recurrent temper outbursts and severe and chronic irritability, has recently been added to the *DSM-5* for childhood and adolescent disorders.² Despite its inclusion as a symptom of multiple disorders and the cornerstone of disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, youth irritability remains largely understudied.³ Surprisingly, little is known about the phenomenology of irritability across the lifespan or its associations with psychopathology

and family history, which could inform the understanding of genetics and pathophysiology.^{1,3}

Irritability has been defined as a mood of easy annoyance and touchiness characterized by anger and temper outbursts.¹ Recent investigations of youth irritability have indicated that chronic irritability, characterized by increased reactivity to negative emotional stimuli and irritability, anger, and/or sadness that is noticeable to others and present most of the time, is a common and impairing symptom in children and adolescents^{1,3}; prevalence estimates have ranged from 3.3% to 5.0% in epidemiologic samples.^{4,5} In addition, a few recent studies have documented associations between irritability and risk for later psychopathology. Studies using prospective, community-based designs have found that school-age children and adolescents evidencing chronic irritability are at increased risk for emotional

disorders, specifically depressive and anxiety disorders, in early^{4,6} and later⁷ adulthood. Moreover, youth irritability has been associated with significant impairment even in the absence of psychiatric disorders⁵ and has predicted lower income and less educational attainment in a 20-year follow-up.⁷

Longitudinal data showing that chronic irritability predicts depression and anxiety are consistent with findings that the irritability dimension of ODD differentially predicts depressive and anxiety disorders, whereas the headstrong/hurtful dimension is more strongly associated with behavioral disorders and delinquency.⁸⁻¹⁰ Facets of irritability also have been associated with externalizing behaviors.^{4,6,7,11} Thus, examining predictive associations between irritability and psychopathology may shed light on the comorbidity between internalizing and externalizing disorders and possibly the developmental link between ODD in youth and depression in adulthood.¹²

Although these studies provide compelling evidence linking irritability to a poor long-term course, significant gaps in the literature persist. Existing studies have focused on school-age children through adolescence and adulthood; little work has examined chronic irritability during early childhood. Irritability is a key facet of temperamental negative affect (e.g., anger, frustration), which emerges early in life^{13,14} and is linked to later psychopathology.^{11,15} Studying irritability as children progress through the preschool years may provide a clearer picture of the developmental course, continuity, and predictive validity of chronic irritability and help determine whether the pattern of irritability-psychopathology associations is similar to studies of older youths and adults. In addition, although periods of irritability are common in early childhood, more frequent bouts of irritability appear to hold clinical utility in identifying high-risk children.¹⁶ Thus, there is a pressing need to explore irritability-psychopathology associations at this stage of development to improve early identification and intervention efforts.

Given the importance of prospective, community-based designs to study irritability,^{4,6,7} data from a large, community sample of preschoolers followed longitudinally from 3 to 6 years of age were used to extend previous studies by examining the predictive validity and clinical significance of chronic irritability in early childhood.

The first aim was to examine whether chronic irritability at 3 years predicts *DSM-IV* disorders and functional impairment at 6 years in unadjusted models and in models adjusting for disorders at baseline. The adjusted models tested whether irritability at 3 years predicts the emergence of new psychiatric diagnoses at 6 years over and above homotypic and heterotypic continuity.¹⁷ In addition, cross-sectional associations between irritability and *DSM-IV* disorders and functional impairment at 3 and 6 years of age were examined. Based on prior work in older youth, the authors hypothesized that although symptoms of chronic irritability would demonstrate wide-ranging cross-sectional associations, irritability at 3 years of age would prospectively predict depression and anxiety at 6 years, given research demonstrating that chronic youth irritability shows strong associations with emotional disorders.⁷⁻¹⁰ The authors also hypothesized that irritability would prospectively predict ODD, because evidence suggests that irritability has pronounced associations with emotional and behavioral problems in youths.^{4,6,7,10} Moreover, the authors hypothesized that chronic irritability at 3 years of age would predict greater functional impairment at 6 years, even after accounting for psychiatric disorders at baseline and follow-up.

Because associations between irritability and psychopathology may be due to the inclusion of irritability as a criterion for several disorders or the stability of irritability over time, a series of parallel analyses was conducted using irritability at 3 years to predict nonoverlapping dimensional symptom scales of depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and ODD at 6 years. The scales were created by excluding irritability items from the symptom scales to confirm the authors' findings on the unique predictive associations of irritability with psychiatric disorders at 6 years of age.

The second aim was to examine the relation between children's irritability and parental history of depressive, anxiety, and substance use disorders. In light of research documenting longitudinal associations between irritability and risk for future depression and anxiety^{4,6,7} and a twin study supporting a genetic association between irritability and depression,¹⁰ the authors hypothesized that chronic irritability would be linked with a family history of depression and anxiety.

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