



## Research article

# The interplay of gender, parental behaviors, and child maltreatment in relation to psychopathic traits

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## ABSTRACT

Many studies have reported an effect of childhood maltreatment and parenting behavior with the future development of psychopathic traits. However, there is a limited amount of research on parenting behavior and adult psychopathic traits as possible identifiers of childhood maltreatment. The aim of this study is three-fold (1) identify specific parenting behaviors and adult psychopathic traits that predict forms of childhood maltreatment, (2) explore gender differences, and (3) expand on other studies on psychopathy by focusing on a representative sample of the community. There are significant associations between recalled childhood maltreatment and parenting behavior, and psychopathic traits. Parental rejection was the most recurrent predictor of childhood maltreatment with a significant positive relation to almost all its forms. Paternal overprotection was positively associated with sexual abuse, while the opposite was true for maternal overprotection. Psychopathic traits displayed in adulthood were also strong indicators of childhood maltreatment; females with high levels of boldness were more likely to have experienced sexual abuse in childhood, and those high in disinhibition were more likely to have experienced physical neglect and sexual abuse. While males were generally higher in terms of psychopathic traits, females reported more childhood abuse and negative parental behaviors. These findings provide support for using parenting behavior and psychopathic traits as markers of childhood maltreatment.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Childhood maltreatment

Epidemiological studies exploring childhood maltreatment have faced several obstacles to properly assess its prevalence, namely weaknesses in the various methodologies used to record it (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). For instance Edwards, Holden, Felitti, and Anda, (2003) found that 21.6% of adults report having been victims of sexual abuse in childhood but numbers vary from 3% to 36% depending on the study and the sample (Scher, Forde, McQuaid, & Stein, 2004). However, prevalence of childhood maltreatment is understood to be high, with physical abuse and neglect, as well as emotional abuse being the most commonly reported forms of maltreatment (Scher et al., 2004).

Childhood maltreatment involves abuse and/or neglect perpetuated by an adult on a minor. Five types of maltreatment have been identified: (1) emotional abuse, (2) physical abuse, (3) emotional neglect, (4) physical neglect, and (5) sexual abuse. Emotional abuse

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and physical abuse are defined as harm caused by an adult on a child. The former being a verbal attack that may result in humiliation and decreased sense of worth, and the latter a physical attack resulting in bodily harm. Emotional neglect and physical neglect are defined as failures to attend to a child's emotional (e.g. love, support) or physical needs (e.g. shelter, food) respectively. Sexual abuse refers to any sexual contact between an adult and an underage child (Bernstein et al., 2003). People who report these types of abuse are likely to exhibit long-term effects that carry on into adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

Victims of childhood maltreatment are four times more likely than controls to develop personality disorders later in life (Johnson, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, & Bernstein, 1999). Different types of abuse have different effects in later development. For instance, psychopathic personality disorders (e.g. antisocial, sadistic traits etc.) are mostly associated with physical and emotional abuse, as well as neglect (Bernstein, Stein, & Handelsman, 1998).

Additionally, studies have pointed to variances in the type of psychopathic traits developed in relation to the type of maltreatment experienced in childhood. For example, in a sample of male sexual offenders, sexual abuse was related to all aspects of psychopathy. On the other hand, physical abuse and neglect in childhood were only related to disinhibition (Graham, Kimonis, Wasserman, & Kline, 2012). Similarly, research on a sample of undergraduate students found an association between self-reported childhood maltreatment and disinhibition and meanness, but not with boldness (Watts, Donahue, Lilienfeld, & Litzman, 2017).

### 1.2. Psychopathy

Psychopathy is a multidimensional personality disorder characterized by a lack of empathy, guilt, and behavioral inhibition, combined with high levels of superficial charm, deceitfulness, egoism, and fearlessness (Berg et al., 2013; Hart, Cox, & Hare, 1995). Contrary to popular belief, psychopathy is not a strong predictor of later violence in adulthood (Berg et al., 2013).

Several models have been conceptualized to better understand psychopathy, such as the Triarchic model of psychopathy (Patrick, Fowles, & Krueger, 2009). The model is divided in three dimensions: meanness, disinhibition, and boldness. Meanness denotes a lack of empathy, low socialization and attachment, an absence of guilt, and a general mean attitude towards others. Disinhibition relates to the inability to control one's impulses, which in turn creates an inability to weigh the consequences of one's actions. Together, these two traits encompass the maladaptive component of psychopathy. In contrast, boldness deals with traits such as fearlessness, social dominance, stress immunity, and thrill seeking. These characteristics are understood as adaptive (Patrick, 2010).

There is a long-standing debate over the nature of psychopathy, whether it is innate or acquired. Most evidence suggests that it is an interplay between genetic make-up and environment (Hicks et al., 2012). Several studies have explored childhood maltreatment as an environmental factor contributing to the later development of psychopathy (Gao, Raine, Chan, Venables, & Mednick, 2013; Graham et al., 2012; Watts et al., 2017).

Psychopathy is a personality trait that is best understood through a continuum, meaning that some elements of psychopathy will be found to some degree in most individuals (Berg et al., 2013). Furthermore, at the exception of a recent study by Watts et al. (2017) most studies on the subject have focused mainly on samples composed of participants with a history of problems, either mental (i.e. institutionalized), or conduct problems (i.e. drugs, or criminal past) (Bernstein et al., 1998; Graham et al., 2012; Kimonis, Cross, Howard, & Donoghue, 2013).

### 1.3. Parenting behavior

Early exposure to dysfunctional family environments has a significant influence in a child's personality and increases the likelihood of them developing psychopathic traits (Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Saltaris, 2002). For instance, undergraduates who reported lower parental bonding (i.e. maternal care, paternal overprotection), physical abuse, and being separated from their parents as a child also reported greater levels of psychopathic traits (Gao et al., 2013). Likewise, male adolescent offenders who reported low maternal care were also more likely to display callous-unemotional traits characteristic of psychopathy (Kimonis et al., 2013).

Additionally, childhood maltreatment and parental behavior have different effects on children depending on their gender. In fact, while male juvenile offenders showed a significant positive relation between victimization and violence and the development of psychopathic traits, female juveniles were more likely to develop those traits if they came from a dysfunctional family background, such as changing foster homes (Krischer & Sevecke, 2008).

Parenting behavior is composed of three factors, namely rejection, overprotection, and emotional warmth. Each factor is studied separately for the mother and the father. Rejection is when a parent belittles the child in front of others, when the child is over punished and often without justification. Over protection is characterized by an overbearing parent who constantly worries about the child, demanding to know where s/he is at all times and limiting their actions. Lastly, emotional warmth is characterized by nurturing. Parents who are emotionally warm provide emotional support and encouragement, as well as a stimulating environment for their child to grow in (Arrindell et al., 1999).

### 1.4. Gender

There is a debate over gender differences in childhood abuse reports. Some studies found that males were more likely to report childhood abuse (Watts et al., 2017) while others found higher reported abuse among females (Láng & Lénárd, 2015).

In addition, the vast majority of studies in the field of psychopathy were performed exclusively in male samples, leading to a lack of information regarding gender differences (Cale & Lilienfeld, 2002). Although multiple studies reported significantly higher psychopathy scores in males than females (Durand & Plata, 2017; Durand, 2018; Hicks et al., 2012; Lee & Salekin, 2010; Lilienfeld &

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