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Research article

School readiness of maltreated preschoolers and later school achievement: The role of emotion regulation, language, and context

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ABSTRACT

Guided by bio-ecological theory, this study aimed to: (1) identify heterogeneity in the developmental patterns of emotion regulation for maltreated preschool-aged children; (2) examine the role of gender, language, placement instability, cognitive stimulation, and emotional support on patterns of stability and change of emotion regulation over time; and (3) elucidate the role of emotion regulation/dysregulation patterns on later academic achievement. This study utilized data from the first cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being. Results using LCA and LTA models indicated stability and change in emotionally regulated vs. emotionally dysregulated latent classes across 4, 5, and 6 ½ years of age. Placement instability significantly increased the likelihood of being classified as emotionally dysregulated at wave 1. Moreover, children classified as emotionally dysregulated by age 6 ½ scored significantly lower than children who were classified as emotionally regulated on measures of reading and math achievement by age 10. Based on these findings, placement stability at first contact with CPS should be promoted in order to prevent cascading negative effects on emotion regulation. Additionally, children who are more emotionally dysregulated by the time they transition to formal schooling should receive increased socioemotional and socioemotional learning supports.

1. Introduction

Academic achievement in the early school years is important for the long-term educational well-being of children with an early history of maltreatment. Unfortunately, the gap in academic achievement between this group of vulnerable children and their non-maltreated counterparts is increasing (Stone, 2007). By elementary and high school, many of these children often fall behind their non-maltreated peers in measures of academic performance. These include relatively low scores on standardized tests (Coohey, Renner, Hua, Zhang, & Whitney, 2011; Crozier & Barth, 2005), below average grades (Slade & Wissow, 2007), maladaptive behaviors in the classroom (Zima et al., 2000), increased chances of grade level retention (Stone, 2007), and increased rates of absenteeism (Leiter, 2007; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009).

Poor academic outcomes have been associated with several individual-level and context-level factors for non-maltreated children. Specifically, emotion regulation and language at the individual level (Cristofaro & Tamis-LaMonda, 2011; Kim, Nordling, Yoon,

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Boldt, & Kochanska, 2013) and quality of the parent-child relationship at the context level (Cristofaro & Tamis-LaMonda, 2011; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark, & Howes, 2010), have been implicated in predicting academic performance. Emotion regulation and language are important school readiness domains that develop during early childhood (Kagan et al., 1995; Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). The ability to regulate emotion, in particular, is important for children's socioemotional functioning and learning in school, and to successfully navigate the transition from preschool to formal schooling during the early elementary school years and beyond (Cristofaro & Tamis-LaMonda, 2011; McWayne, Hahs-Vaughn, Cheung, & Wright, 2012; Mistry et al., 2010).

Emotion regulation can be understood as a system of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of functioning that enables effortful control or modulation of emotions and behaviors, which facilitates the interaction between an individual and his or her environment in order to attain specific goals (Blair & Raver, 2012; Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Thompson, 1994). As such, emotion regulation is a requisite skill for success in the academic setting in that children modulate their dominant response in favor of attending to class content, interacting appropriately with peers and teachers, and managing frustration with challenging materials. Indeed, Pears, Fisher, Bruce, Kim, and Yoerger (2010) found that inhibitory control (a cognitive component of emotion regulation) at preschool fully mediated the effects of early maltreatment on academic competence at school age. The ability to regulate emotions can also support school adjustment and learning, particularly when intense emotions are managed and attentional resources are focused on the task at hand (Raver et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, children with a history of maltreatment often display dysregulated emotional responses across the home and school settings. For example, maltreated children exhibit attentional bias for negative stimuli, making it difficult to disengage from highly emotional distractions in order to focus on academic tasks (Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). Additionally, maltreated children exhibit overuse of certain behavioral responses as regulatory mechanisms. These include externalizing or internalizing behaviors (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010).

The ability to comprehend and express language is central to academic success as it is the main vehicle by which class content is communicated. Additionally, it is through verbal instructions that information can be encoded into long-term memory and retrieved for later use. The ability to verbally communicate is also important for peer interactions in the school setting, as well as to communicate with adults (e.g., teachers, caregivers, school counselors). Additionally, for children and adults, language can serve as a means to communicate how they feel and thus serves a regulatory function. Unfortunately, maltreated children often exhibit compromised receptive and expressive language abilities (Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004). More specifically, early maltreatment has been shown to predict less advanced vocabulary and lower production of language (Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004), as well as decreased phonological awareness, which places maltreated children at risk for learning and behavioral problems (Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011). These core developmental processes of emotion regulation and language appear to work in tandem to influence children's academic outcomes (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007). More specifically, these processes appear to be interrelated in that compromised functioning in the language and emotional domains may have negative cascading effects on the other domains such as peer relationships and self-regulation (Cole, Armstrong, & Pemberton, 2010).

According to bio-ecological theory, proximal interactions need to occur on a regular and consistent manner between the child and a consistent caregiver in order to promote change and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Decreasing the duration that children have to interact with their parents or caregivers severely limits children's exposure to consistent quality caregiving, which is needed in order to promote the development of emotion regulation and language. In fact, it has been shown that increased instability in a child's home or placement is associated with negative developmental outcomes such as language, cognitive functioning, and behavior problems for these vulnerable group of children (Jones Harden, 2004).

Unfortunately, several gaps still exist in understanding the interrelatedness of these core developmental processes, context, and later academic achievement. First, there are relatively few studies that examine longitudinal patterns of emotion regulation from preschool to the transition to formal schooling, particularly using a person-centered framework. Second, understanding of context-level factors such as placement stability and caregiver/parent relationship on changes in developmental patterns is limited. Finally, even fewer studies have looked at the development of emotion regulation over time for maltreated children since first contact with CPS at preschool, and how this impacts later school achievement.

Guided by bio-ecological theory, this study attempted to answer the following research questions in order to address the gaps outlined above. First, is there heterogeneity in young maltreated children's display of emotion regulation and do they exhibit stability and change in these developmental patterns across time? Second, to what extent do emotion regulation class memberships differ by gender, language, placement stability, caregiver emotional support, and caregiver cognitive stimulation? Finally, for children who came into contact with CPS during the preschool period, how do stability and change in patterns of emotion regulation affect later math and reading achievement?

2. Method

Research questions for this study were answered using the first cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW I), which was the first nationally representative, longitudinal survey of children and families who were investigated by Child Protective Services (CPS) in the United States. The CPS sample included 5501 children who were the subject of child abuse or neglect investigations at the time of sampling (October 1999–December 2000) and followed across 5 waves of data collection.

The preschool subsample was extracted from the full data, yielding a final sample of 834 preschool-aged (i.e., 3–5 years old) children from baseline. This was the final sample for subsequent analyses across waves 1, 3, 4, and 5. The mean and standard deviation of the children's ages were as follows: wave 1 ($M = 3.96$ years, $SD = 0.81$), wave 3 ($M = 5.25$ years old, $SD = 0.94$), wave 4 ($M = 6.56$ years old, $SD = 0.95$), and wave 5 ($M = 10.21$ years old, $SD = 1.45$). Table 1 presents a summary of the children's

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