



Research article

Externalizing behaviors of Ukrainian children: The role of parenting[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the association of positive and negative parenting with child externalizing problems. Quantitative data were collected during face-to-face interviews with 320 parents of children 9–16 years of age (50% males) in 11 communities in Eastern, Southern, and Central Ukraine. The study estimated the relationship between parenting practices and child externalizing behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, and attention problems. Results revealed that positive parenting, child monitoring, and avoidance of corporal punishment were associated with fewer child externalizing symptoms. Results also indicated that child male gender and single parenting had significant and positive association with child externalizing behaviors. This study extends international psychosocial knowledge on children and families. These findings can be used to design programs and foster dialogs about the role of family and social environments in the development of externalizing disorder among researchers, representatives of governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and mass media that work with child abuse prevention in Ukraine.

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Introduction

Ukraine is the largest country in Europe that has recently experienced a number of political and military crises involving violence and aggression. Yet, the peer-reviewed literature on psychosocial aspects of violence and aggression in Ukraine is remarkably limited. As very little information is available on the developmental aspects of externalizing behavior as well as factors that increase the risk of these behaviors in Ukrainian sociocultural context, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between child externalizing problems and parenting in Ukraine.

In the Western samples, approximately 5% of youth were found to engage in severe externalizing behaviors, including violence, life-course-persistent offending, conduct disorder, property damage, and disproportionate substance abuse (Vaughn, Salas-Wright, DeLisi, & Maynard, 2014). Although the rate of severe externalizing behaviors appears to be nugatory, these behaviors result in disproportionately large societal costs (Craig, Schumann, Petrunka, Khan, & Peters, 2011). However, the percentage of children with severe externalizing problems remains unknown in Ukraine.

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Research on Child Externalizing Problems in Ukraine

To date, only one cross-sectional study estimated risk factors for conduct problems in a sample of 10- to 12-year-old Ukrainian children with depressive symptoms (Drabick, Beauchaine, Gadow, Carlson, & Bromet, 2006). Data for that study were collected in 1997 and included mother reports for Child Behavior Checklist Aggressive Behavior Scale (Achenbach, 1991) for 544 schoolchildren from Kyiv, Ukraine. One half of the sample included mothers of children evacuated from Chernobyl zone affected by radiation in 1986 and the other half mothers of sex-matched classmates of these children. Drabick and colleagues reported that boys were more aggressive than girls. The risk of aggression was higher for children with higher emotional lability and attention problems whose mothers reported lower scores on understanding child's problems and worries, comforting and talking with and showing affection for the child. In addition, for girls only, higher maternal depression and lower marital satisfaction were related to elevated conduct problems. One of the strengths of this study was that it uncovered the importance of maternal communication for the development of child aggression and depression. However, the study focused on children within a limited age range and only included participants from one region of Ukraine. These limitations call for additional investigation of behavior problems among children living in other regions of Ukraine, particularly in the Southern and Eastern oblasts that traditionally have a higher percentage of Russian-speaking people than children in Kyiv and, thus, may be different with respect to sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, further studies are required to understand a broader spectrum of externalizing problems that includes both aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

Theories Linking Parenting and Child Externalizing Problems

One unexpected result of Drabick et al. (2006) was the lack of association between maternal parenting techniques and child aggression. This finding is inconsistent with strong theoretical and empirical evidence relating parenting and child externalizing behaviors. According to the social learning theory, children learn aggressive behaviors as a result of interaction with others in their immediate environment, caregivers in particular (Bandura, 1973; Bandura & Walters, 1959). Parenting provides the environmental framework for children's psychosocial growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), and child aggressive behaviors develop in interactions with parents through a coercive reinforcement process (Dishion & Patterson, 2006; Patterson, 1982). Vygotsky's social development theory applied in Ukraine recognizes social and cultural influences of different contexts on the child's functioning and development (Vygotskiy & Cole, 1978). According to Vygotsky, children's learning and development occurs due to social interaction with the specific sociocultural environment. Vygotsky believes that children first encounter new functions interpsychologically and then intrapsychologically. The child learns from a more knowledgeable other (MKO), often a parent, through guidance (scaffolding) in what Vygotsky called a "zone of proximal development" (ZPD; p. 86), representing a learning space for tasks that still require mastering. Young children can learn culturally and contextually appropriate social and emotional skills in the ZPD and then translate them into other contexts. For example, children can learn about violence through parental spanking and then use violence in relation with peers.

Relationship between Parenting and Child Externalizing Problems

In light of these theories, parenting can be assumed to be a primary context that shapes children's behaviors. Indeed, evidence suggests that parenting aspects such as consistency, positive parenting, involvement with the child, monitoring and supervision, physical punishment, and non-corporal punishment discipline are directly related to the development of children's readiness to meet social and emotional challenges (Frick, Christian, & Wootton, 1999). For example, in a U.S. study, children's externalizing behavior problems were positively related with inconsistent discipline as reported by mothers from the Southeastern and Midwestern states (Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Mercer, 2010).

The risk of externalizing behavior problems was also higher for the U.S., mostly White, children whose parents reported higher use of inconsistent discipline (Stanger, Dumenci, Kamon, & Burstein, 2004). Similarly, inconsistent discipline was associated with increased disruptive behaviors in a sample of 373 Australian children (Duncombe, Havighurst, Holland, & Frankling, 2012). Moreover, when targeted by intervention, reduction in the use of inconsistent discipline led to a decrease in child conduct problems in the U.S. randomized clinical trial (Jouriles et al., 2009).

In addition to consistent discipline, positive parenting helps in forming children's security and competence (Webster-Stratton, 2012). In a longitudinal study with mostly European Americans, parental warmth with 5–10-year-old children predicted children's effortful control 24 months later and subsequently predicted decreased externalizing psychopathology when these children reached an adolescent age (Eisenberg et al., 2005). The strong inverse relationship between positive parenting and child externalizing behavior was supported in a more recent longitudinal study with predominantly White U.S. children (Boeldt et al., 2012). Parents' praise and warmth were among the protective factors helping 426 children in the U.S. Head Start schools develop social competence, stay focused, listen to others, collaborate, and stay calm (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1998). In addition, the U.S. researchers found that lower child externalizing behaviors were reported among Latino immigrant families that used praise (Holtrop, McNeil Smith, & Scott, 2014). In a study with 233 Caucasian children from 12 counties in Georgia, U.S.A., higher paternal support was related to lower child externalizing behaviors (Harper, Brown, Arias, & Brody, 2006).

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