

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence

The influence of social relationships and school engagement on academic achievement in maltreated adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Maltreatment
Academic achievement
Parent relationships
Peer relationships
Academic engagement

ABSTRACT

Adolescents who have experienced maltreatment face many developmental and educational challenges compared with their non-maltreated peers. Research demonstrates the importance of social relationships in academic achievement among non-maltreated youth, and suggests the influence of parent and peer relationships for academic success in maltreated youth as well, including the potential benefit of school engagement. Data for the study comes from the first wave of the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II), a nationally-representative sample of children involved in Child Protective Services in the United States. The study finds that maltreated adolescents' perceptions of relationship quality with both parents and peers significantly predict academic achievement. In addition, results demonstrate a mediating effect of school engagement between parent and peer variables and some academic achievement outcomes.

1. Introduction

In 2016, approximately 3.5 million children were investigated for maltreatment by Child Protective Services (CPS) in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018). Among the potential consequences of maltreatment are deficits in social and cognitive development, which may manifest in difficulties relating with family and friends, problems with substance abuse or delinquency, and poor academic outcomes (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Maclean, Taylor, & O'Donnell, 2015; Meyerson, Long, Miranda, & Marx, 2002; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Despite the concerning statistics, there are pathways by which children and youth who experience maltreatment may have better outcomes. Support from caregivers, good peer relationships, and being engaged at school offer some protective benefits for maltreated children and youth (Coohey, Renner, Hua, Zhang, & Whitney, 2011; Haskett, Nears, Ward, & McPherson, 2006).

The bioecological model of development provides a guiding framework for understanding how adolescents' social relationships may impact their academic outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Within this theory, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggest that people's individual characteristics help determine how they react to their social environment, which influences proximal development through ways individuals interact with their microsystem. As well, the person and context have an interrelated effect on development, including the environment and activities of the person, which relate to ways that social relationships influence school engagement and achievement (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Maltreatment adds an additional aspect of atypical or psychopathological developmental context to the bioecological model. Consequences of maltreatment influence all layers of the developmental framework, creating differences that may not be consistent among individuals or over time (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

Among non-maltreated children, parents and peers often positively impact academic achievement, including school engagement

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(Estell & Perdue, 2013; Im, Hughes, & West, 2016; Jeynes, 2003, 2011; Wentzel, Russell, & Baker, 2016). Comparisons of non-maltreated and maltreated children suggest differences in perceptions of social relationships and how they may affect the two groups' academic outcomes (Barnett, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991). Healthy social relationships may be especially important for positive academic outcomes among maltreated children (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Many of these factors are less understood than in studies with non-maltreated participants.

1.1. The context of maltreatment

We define child maltreatment as any abuse or neglect allegation resulting in a completed formal Child Protective Service (CPS) investigation (Dowd et al., 2013). Maltreatment includes both substantiated cases, or those in which allegations were found to be true when investigated, and unsubstantiated cases, in which investigation did not find sufficient evidence of maltreatment (Dowd et al., 2013). Inclusion of both types of cases may be appropriate when considering consequences and effects of maltreatment, based on findings and suggestions from prior research (Hussey et al., 2005; Leiter, Myers, & Zingraff, 1994; Troc  , Knoke, Fallon, & MacLaurin, 2009).

Many individual differences exist in each child's maltreatment-related context (Cicchetti, 2015). Among these are differences across ages and genders that lead to distinct experiences for each child (Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Sunday et al., 2008). As well, chronicity or length of time of ongoing maltreatment, type or types of maltreatment, and number of and time spent in placements outside the biological home lead to variations in children's experiences (Cicchetti, 2015). It is difficult to account for every potential maltreatment-related factor, yet awareness of the complexity of the consequences of maltreatment on development can be important when developing and analyzing results of research (Cicchetti, 2015).

Negative developmental outcomes may continue well past the incidence of initial victimization for children who experience maltreatment (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). Long-term consequences of maltreatment may include influences on social skills, connection to peers, and relationships with family (Flynn, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2014; Merritt & Snyder, 2015). As well, maltreated children and adolescents often have academic deficits that can be linked to unstable home lives and lack of positive relationships with significant adults (Coohey et al., 2011; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fr  chette, 2015).

1.2. Developmental changes in adolescent social relationships

The role of relationships with parents and peers develops and changes with the growing autonomy of adolescence (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Considerable research shows that parents remain a significant source of support for their adolescent children, although the nature of parental support may change over the course of the teen years (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Parents remain significant sources of support, but friends grow in importance during adolescence, and peers may be as or more influential than parents, especially for older youth (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010; Clark-Lempers, Lempers, & Ho, 1991; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). The role of peer support may become particularly crucial if relationships with parents are more than usually challenging (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Hartup, 1989; Larson & Ham, 1993).

Among adolescents who experience maltreatment, supportive relationships with parents and peers may be both especially beneficial and very challenging, due to potential upheaval in home life, difficulties with behavior and social adjustment, and attachment issues (Haskett et al., 2006; Lim & Lee, 2016; Negri  , James, & Trickett, 2015). Age and gender may have differential effects on how maltreated youth relate with both parents and peers (Ellis & Wolfe, 2009; Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2008). Parent relationships differ among maltreated adolescent males and females, which may also be influenced by factors such as gender of a parent perpetrator and perceptions of discipline by the adolescents (Meyerson, Long, Miranda, Robert, & Marx, 2002; Sunday et al., 2008). Younger and older maltreated children have different types of issues relating to peers, with research suggesting that younger children more likely overinflate their social abilities and older children underdate theirs (Barnett et al., 1996). As well, peer influences may differ by gender (Coohey, 2010; Lee, Herrenkohl, Jung, Skinner, & Klika, 2015; Negri   & Trickett, 2012).

1.3. Social relationships and academic achievement

Previous research highlights connections between social relationships, school engagement, and academic achievement (Levy-Tossman, Kaplan, & Assor, 2007; Rice et al., 2013; Shin & Ryan, 2014; V  ronneau & Dishion, 2011). Among these associations are influence by parents and peers on a variety of academic outcomes, including engagement with school and achievement. Relationships with parents and peers impact academic achievement, although some studies indicate that peers and parents may each have greater influence on different aspects of school competence (Rice et al., 2013; Wentzel et al., 2016). Family structure and conflict may affect adolescents' perceptions of parent and peer relationships, which may be important in determining the influence these relationships have on academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003, 2011).

Maltreatment may differently affect the way parents and peers influence educational outcomes (Cicchetti, 2015). Children who have been maltreated are at greater risk for both internalizing and externalizing behaviors, which may relate to increased difficulty with social functioning (Alink, Cicchetti, Kim, & Rogosch, 2012; Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Friendships may be less well understood by children who have been maltreated, leading to lower friendship quality and unstable patterns of relating (Howe & Parke, 2001; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991). Still, for maltreated children, positive relationships with peers may act as a protective factor against poor academic outcomes (Merritt & Snyder, 2015; Pears, Kim, Fisher, & Yoerger, 2013). Additionally, studies examining parent relationships and academic outcomes among maltreated children and youth suggest that healthy relationships with parents or

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