



A longitudinal study of self-control at the transition to secondary school: Considering the role of pubertal status and parenting

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ABSTRACT

Higher self-control in children and adolescents is associated with a range of positive outcomes in adulthood. However, little is known about the naturalistic development of self-control during early adolescence and the factors that affect this. We examined the role of puberty and parenting style as theoretically important influences on stability and change in self-control. A longitudinal (3 waves), multiple-informant dataset of children entering early adolescence ($M = 11$ years) was used to explore longitudinal change in self-control using latent growth curve modelling. Children's self-control declined during the one-year study period and declines were associated with children's behavioural and social functioning. Associations with self-control were found for pubertal status and parental warmth and hostility, but not for parental discipline. The findings suggest that during early adolescence, when children make the transition to secondary school, self-control declines. This is particularly the case for those experiencing puberty earlier than their peers. Parent warmth influences the trajectory of self-control during this period.

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Adolescence is an important period for exercising self-control, with research suggesting that many of the adverse long-term effects of low childhood self-control are mediated by poor choices made in adolescence (Moffitt et al., 2011; Steinberg, 2007). Self-control involves the ability to control attention, thoughts, impulses and emotions and to direct behaviour towards long-term goals (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). It is a strength that allows people to delay immediate gratification, consider consequences and take deliberate, considered action. Elucidating factors that influence childhood self-control and that could potentially be targeted in interventions is an important research aim, particularly in light of recent research that has identified childhood self-control as an important factor in later health and wealth outcomes (Israel et al., 2014; Moffitt, 2015). Self-control emerges as a trait early in childhood and shows modest stability in pre-school children (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994). Nevertheless, as with other personality traits (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), naturalistic changes in self-control do occur (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2011) and commentators have highlighted the importance of understanding what factors promote naturalistic improvements in self-control (Duckworth, 2011).

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One potentially important factor is puberty. Theoretical models view puberty, and adolescence more generally, as a period characterised by vulnerability to reduced self-regulation and increased risk-taking, thought to be due to the combination of an immature cognitive control system operating alongside a hyper-sensitive reward system (Ernst, Pine, & Hardin, 2006; Steinberg, 2005; Van Leijenhorst et al., 2010). In particular, changes to the limbic system which are initiated by a surge in gonadal hormones associated with the onset of puberty are believed to play a role in the increases in reward seeking observed during adolescence (Crone, 2009; Nelson, Leibenluft, McClure, & Pine, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2008). This includes an increased sensitivity to anticipated, received and uncertain rewards as well as the capacity to experience threat signals as exciting and stimulating (Spielberg, Olino, Forbes, & Dahl, 2014; Van Leijenhorst et al., 2010). Empirical research into risk-seeking and theoretical work on self-regulation during adolescence therefore indicates children's pubertal development may exert effects on their capacity for self-regulation. To date, however, there is little data demonstrating an empirical link between pubertal status and specific measures of self-control (van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2014). Taken together, these findings emphasise the importance of understanding the developmental course of self-control during early adolescence and of considering the effects of puberty on self-control in young people.

Early adolescence also coincides with important events such as children's transition from primary to secondary schooling (e.g., from elementary to middle school in the US school system). How well children adapt to their new school has potentially important ramifications for their future functioning (Felner, Ginter, & Primavera, 1982; Rutter, 1989; Seidman & French, 2004; West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010) and self-control is likely to be an important strength that assists adaptation to the new school environment and social structures where greater academic independence and organisation is expected and relationships with peers and teachers change (Bowes et al., 2013; Eccles et al., 1993). While it is well-established that there are advantages of high self-control during early adolescence, a number of basic developmental questions merit examination. First, there is little empirical evidence describing the normal development of self-control over time, particularly in samples of similarly-aged children. Second, there is still relatively little data assessing to what extent naturalistic changes in self-control are associated with children's functional outcomes such as symptoms of psychopathology, social functioning and school attainment.

A second potentially important factor influencing self-control is parenting. Self-control is thought to develop through transactions between individual characteristics and the family environment, where good self-regulation promotes positive parent–child relationships which in turn contribute to good self-control (Wills & Dishion, 2004). Both theory and evidence point to parenting characteristics such as parental warmth and non-punitive control being associated with greater competencies in children (e.g., Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Spera, 2005), however, a number of important issues have still to be addressed. First, whilst a number of studies have shown cross-sectional associations between adolescent self-control and various parenting characteristics (e.g., Brody & Ge, 2001; Finkenauer, Engels, & Baumeister, 2005; Lengua, 2008), evidence of longitudinal associations tends to come from studies of younger children and research has not yet considered the relative association of different aspects of parenting, such as affect and discipline (Belsky, Fearon, & Bell, 2007; Cecil, Barker, Jaffee, & Viding, 2012). Second, some existing research, such as that on the General Theory of Crime, aggregates behavioural problems and self-control making specific conclusions about self-control difficult (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and where self-control has been studied specifically only a handful of previous studies have controlled for behavioural problems. This is important because behavioural problems are known to be associated with parenting and impairments in aspects of self-control are common features of behavioural problems (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2013; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, White, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996).

Previous research on the relations between parenting and longitudinal change in self-control during early adolescence are less consistent than that focusing on childhood (Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011). For example, a longitudinal study found positive parenting characteristics (warmth and expressivity) were related to longitudinal change in children's self-control when children aged 7–12 years were followed up two years later at ages 9 to 14, but this pattern was not repeated when children were followed-up again a further two years later at ages 11 to 16 (Eisenberg et al., 2005). These findings underscore the potential importance of considering the broader developmental context when assessing associations between parenting and self-control. The earliest external changes associated with puberty are apparent at an average age of 11 in both boys and girls in many developed countries (Parent et al., 2003; Patton & Viner, 2007) therefore it is possible that the onset of puberty may account for some of the inconsistencies in the literature to date. Thus, there is evidence that relations between parenting and self-control during adolescence are less consistent than those in childhood and it therefore may be important to consider the moderating role of puberty.

In the current study, we examined the relations between multiple well-defined parenting dimensions and longitudinal change in children's self-control, including both negative (hostility and inconsistent discipline) and positive (warmth and inductive reasoning) aspects of parents' affect and discipline. We also examined whether individual differences in pubertal status (individual differences in pubertal development at baseline) and pubertal tempo (the speed of pubertal development) were associated with longitudinal change in children's self-control (Ellis, Shirtcliff, Boyce, Deardorff, & Essex, 2011). Next, because it has been claimed that adolescence is characterised by changes to children's relationships with their parents (e.g., increased autonomy and parent–child conflict; Larson & Richards, 1991; Steinberg & Morris, 2001) and existing findings indicate that the effects of parenting on children's self-control decrease as children approach adolescence, we examined whether individual differences in pubertal status moderate the relationship between parenting and self-control. This study was conducted during children's transition from primary to secondary school as this ecological transition coincides with the average onset of puberty. We analysed latent growth in children's self-control using a three-wave longitudinal, multiple-

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