



Longitudinal relations between parental media monitoring and adolescent aggression, prosocial behavior, and externalizing problems



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ABSTRACT

The current study examined longitudinal relations between parental media monitoring and adolescent behavior, and explored indirect effects via sympathy and self-regulation. A sample of adolescents and their mothers from Northwestern and Mountain West cities in the USA participated in a study at three time points, approximately one year apart ($N = 681$; M age of child at Time 3 = 13.33, $SD = 1.06$; 51% female; 73% European American, 9% African American, 17% Multi-ethnic). Though findings varied by reporter, results suggested that restrictive and active media monitoring were indirectly associated with adolescents' prosocial behavior, aggression, and externalizing behavior, with restrictive monitoring being somewhat maladaptive and active monitoring adaptive. The discussion focuses on the need to examine multiple aspects of media monitoring, and highlights implications of findings for parents.

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Adolescents have been described as living in a “media saturated world”, with screen time increasing as technology advances and becomes increasingly more accessible and portable (Bleakley, Vaala, Jordan, & Romer, 2014; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The amount of time adolescents spend with media may put some pressure on parents to monitor the media in their home. An overabundance of media time, as well as exposure to violent content, is related to a number of potentially negative social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes in children and adolescents. However research shows that parents can mitigate some of these harmful effects, both in terms of limiting media use and discussing media content with their children (e.g., Gentile, Reimer, Nathanson, Walsh, & Eisenmann, 2014; Nathanson, 2001, 2002; Nikken & Jansz, 2006). Though parental media monitoring may be important in our understanding of media effects, the long-term impact of such strategies on adolescents' positive and negative outcomes is relatively unknown, especially during adolescence. An understanding of effective media monitoring strategies may provide parents with the skills necessary to help their adolescents navigate a media saturated world in ways that positively impact adolescent behavioral outcomes such as prosocial behavior, aggression, and externalizing behavior.

Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary behavior intended to help others (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006), and is linked with positive outcomes in adolescence, including academic achievement (Wentzel, 1993), high self-esteem (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000), and positive relationships with peers (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004).

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Conversely, aggression is defined as behavior intended to harm others who do not wish to be harmed (Coyne, Nelson, & Underwood, 2010) and is related to negative outcomes in adolescence, including academic failure (Brennan, Shaw, Dishion, & Wilson, 2012) and peer rejection (Fite, Hendrickson, Rubens, Gabrielli, & Evans, 2013). Externalizing behaviors are defined as difficulties in an adolescent's external world, and can include problems such as cheating, lying, substance use, and delinquent behavior. These behaviors collectively represent both positive and negative outcomes across adolescence, and have been shown to be influenced by adolescents' exposure to media (Anderson et al., 2010; Prot et al., 2014). Accordingly, the current study aimed to examine the effectiveness of different forms of parental media monitoring on adolescent outcomes, including prosocial behavior, aggression, and externalizing behavior.

Media influences

The average American adolescent is now exposed to over seven hours of media content each day, and the culture has shifted from a "media rich" to a "media saturated" environment (Bleakley et al., 2014; Brown & Bobkowsky, 2011). The pattern does not only pertain to American adolescents, but to adolescents all over the world, including Germany (Bleckmann & Mößle, 2014), Portugal (Jago et al., 2012) and England (Atkin, Corder, & van Sluijs, 2013). Both the amount of time and the content viewed are important in understanding the influence of media on adolescents' behavior and attitudes towards themselves and others (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Coyne, Linder, Nelson, & Gentile, 2012; Gentile et al., 2009; Roberts, Henriksen, & Foehr, 2009; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). For example, time spent with media is associated with lower academic performance (Cummings & Vandewater, 2007), attention problems (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, & McCarty, 2004; Mistry, Minkovitz, Strobino, & Borzekowski, 2007), and less sleep (Cain & Gradisar, 2010; Olds, Ridley, & Dollman, 2006). In terms of content, media effects can be both positive and negative. For example, a few studies have found that exposure to prosocial behavior in media is related to prosocial thoughts and behavior (i.e. helping, sympathy, or altruism) and decreased aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (e.g., Greitemeyer, 2009; Mares & Woodard, 2005; Prot et al., 2014). Conversely, other research has examined negative effects of media content, including effects on aggression (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Coyne, Stockdale, & Nelson, 2012), risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Ward & Friedman, 2006; Wright, Malamuth, & Donnerstein, 2012), and substance use (Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2004; Salkin, 2007). One strategy that has been effective at strengthening the positive effects of media while mitigating harmful media effects involves parental media monitoring.

Parental media monitoring

The general aim of parental media monitoring is to decrease children's exposure to the media (in terms of time with negative content) and to help children critically examine the content they do view. These two strategies are respectively termed restrictive and active media monitoring.¹ According to Rasmussen (2013) the field of parental media monitoring would benefit from using a more specified theoretical approach. In the current study, we focus on general parenting theories (including self-determination theory), and communication/persuasion based theories (inoculation theory) to examine both restrictive and active media monitoring. Parental media monitoring is an example of behavior that encompasses both the parenting and the communication fields, while focusing on the individual child. It is hoped that we can gain a richer understanding of the impact of parental media monitoring by using parenting, individual, and communication theories to frame the current study. A combination of these theoretical approaches may explain why certain monitoring strategies may be more effective than others, especially when viewed in a longitudinal context.

Restrictive media monitoring

Restrictive media monitoring involves limiting the amount of time children spend on media such as playing video games or surfing the web, as well as setting specific rules on what types of content can be viewed. Restrictive media monitoring is the most common parental approach (Rideout et al., 2010; Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013) and is influential in reducing negative outcomes from media consumption during childhood (e.g., Nathanson, 1999), although a few studies report inconsistent results (e.g., Collier et al., in review; Vandewater, Park, Huang, & Wartella, 2005). Restrictive media monitoring has been associated with lower likelihood of early sexual activity (Fisher et al., 2009), lower levels of aggressive behavior (Nathanson, 1999) and higher levels of physical activity in adolescence (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2007). However, restrictive media monitoring may have unintended results, especially for teenagers. For example, Nathanson (2002) found that when parents restrict media content, adolescents are more likely to view the prohibited content at a friend's house. This may be

¹ In the research literature, these strategies have been called various terms including restrictive and active monitoring (Nathanson, 1999), as well as general proactive parenting terms including cocooning and pre-arming (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). We use the term "parental media monitoring" in the current paper, as opposed to "parental mediation of media", for a number of reasons. First, the strategies parents use to monitor the media fit well in a more general discussion of parental monitoring. Parents monitor many adolescent behaviors, including friends, substance use, schoolwork, etc. Media represents just one of many activities that parents may monitor in their adolescent's life. Additionally, we do not expect parental media monitoring to mediate relationships between media use and adolescent outcomes, whereas the term "mediation" may be confusing to the reader as it may infer a statistical mediation. Instead, we expect parental monitoring of media to protect against negative media effects or even prevent effects from occurring in the first place.

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