



The influence of parental monitoring and parent–adolescent communication on Bahamian adolescent risk involvement: A three-year longitudinal examination

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ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that parental monitoring can best be conceptualized and measured through the domains of parental knowledge, youth disclosure, parental solicitation, and parental control. Using longitudinal data on 913 grade-six Bahamian students followed over a period of three years, we examined the unique and independent roles of these domains of parental monitoring and parent–adolescent communication in relation to adolescent involvement in delinquency, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors. The results obtained with mixed-effects models indicate that parental knowledge, youth disclosure, and parental control are negatively associated with both delinquency and substance use. Open parent–adolescent communication was associated with decreased sexual risk behavior, whereas problematic parent–adolescent communication was associated with increased sexual risk behavior. The results obtained with path models indicate that youth disclosure is a significant longitudinal predictor of reduced adolescent delinquency and that parental control during early adolescence predicted reduced substance use in middle adolescence. The findings suggest that parental knowledge, youth disclosure and parental control differ in their impacts on substance use, delinquency and sexual risk behaviors. Problematic parent–adolescent communication is consistently associated with increases in all three types of adolescent risk behaviors. Future parental monitoring interventions should focus on enhancing parents' interpersonal communication skills and emphasize the differences in and importance of the unique components of parental monitoring.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a dynamic period during which dramatic physical, cognitive, and social developments occur. During the middle adolescence phase, youth undergo substantial physical maturation, but their cognitive development may lag (Steinberg, 2005). This developmental gap creates a period during middle adolescence of heightened vulnerability to risk-taking and problem behaviors (Steinberg, 2004, 2005). Compounding the developmental gap, adolescents, given their limited exposure to a range of life experiences, may lack essential skills relevant to decision-making and the ability to understand the consequences of risky behaviors (Oldershaw et al., 2009; Overman et al., 2004). As a result, they may

become involved in a wide range of high-risk behaviors, including substance use, delinquency, and unprotected sex (McMorris, Hemphill, Toumbourou, Catalano, & Patton, 2007; Steinberg, 2004). Parents have an opportunity to play an important role in preventing their youth from engaging in risky behavior during this critical period of early to middle adolescence by providing constructive parental monitoring and effective parent–youth communication (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, & Schindler, 2009; DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Cobb, et al., 2001).

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have examined the relationship between parental monitoring and adolescent problem behaviors and have documented the consistent link between higher levels of parental monitoring and lower levels of problem behaviors, including delinquency (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Pettit, Laird, Bates, Dodge, & Criss, 2001), substance use (Barnes, Reifman, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2000), and risky sexual behaviors (Crosby et al., 2002; DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Sionean, et al., 2001). However, the association between parental monitoring

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and problem behavior has been brought into question by several studies that have observed that the measures of parental monitoring commonly used in the literature assess parents' knowledge about their adolescents' whereabouts and activities rather than active monitoring efforts by parents (e.g., checking with neighbors about the location and/or activities of a child and establishing and enforcing rules about the child's activities) (Crouter & Head, 2002; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). These studies suggest that many of the existing measures of "parental monitoring" do not adequately capture the construct and identify a need for additional measures and refinement of components of parental monitoring. In reexamining the role of parental monitoring in problem behavior prevention, Stattin and Kerr (2000); Kerr and Stattin (2000) categorized potential sources of parents' knowledge of their adolescent's activities, such as youth disclosure (voluntary disclosure by youth of information about their activities to parents), parental solicitation (parents asking for information from the youth and the youth's friends), and parental control (parents setting rules that require youth to provide information).

Several recent studies have attempted to examine the contribution of youth disclosure, parental solicitation and parental control to adolescent risk involvement. These studies have yielded inconsistent findings (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). Kerr and Stattin (2000) found in a cross-sectional study that youth disclosure was the strongest predictor of delinquent behavior. The finding that parental solicitation and control are not predictive of delinquent behaviors was reinforced in a recent longitudinal study (Kerr et al., 2010). These findings are supported by those of several recent studies that found that youth disclosure, but not parental solicitation or control, predicted delinquent behavior (Keijsers et al., 2010) and alcohol use (Stavrinides, Georgiou, & Demetriou, 2010). In contrast, Fletcher et al. (2004) found that parental control was a strong predictor of decreased adolescent substance use. Laird, Marrero, and Sentse (2010) reported that adolescents' perceptions of greater parental solicitation are strongly associated with lower levels of delinquent behavior among adolescents who spend more time unsupervised. In contrast, Kiesner, Dishion, Poulin, and Pastore (2009) found that high levels of parental solicitation are associated with *increases* in later youth delinquent behavior.

Another protective family factor that has been studied frequently in adolescent risk behavior research is parent–adolescent communication. Each of the components of parental monitoring may operate in the broader context of parent–adolescent communication (Low, Snyder, & Shortt, 2012). Healthy parent–adolescent communication provides an environment in which adolescents are comfortable sharing information about their activities with their parents (Kopko & Dunifon, 2010). Cottrell et al. (2007) found that open parent–child communication is positively associated with a general measure of "parental monitoring." Research on adolescent problem behaviors has identified open communication between parents and their adolescents as a protective factor, whereas problem communication has been identified as a risk factor for adolescent risk behavior (e.g., drug use and unprotected sex) (Stanton et al., 2002; Yu et al., 2006). Studies have demonstrated that parent–adolescent communication about sex (especially communication before the onset of youth sexual activity) promotes healthy sexual development and decreases adolescent involvement in sexual risk behaviors (Atienzo, Walker, Campero, Lamadrid-Figueroa, & Gutiérrez, 2009; DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby, Cobb, et al., 2001). However, a study of rural adolescents indicated that there was no direct relation between the frequency of general communication and adolescent sexual risk behaviors (Huebner & Howell, 2003).

The importance of parental monitoring and communication to adolescent risk behavior is related to the nature and relationship of

various risk behaviors. Would we expect parental monitoring and communication to impact the three categories of risk behaviors in a similar manner? Arguing in favor of such a relationship is the robust evidence that delinquency, substance use and/or sexual risk behavior constitute a "problem behavior syndrome" with common causes and influences underlying all three behavioral categories (Jessor & Jessor, 1977). Further supporting this perspective, delinquency has been shown to predict the subsequent early initiation of sexual activity (Capaldi, Crosby, & Stoolmiller, 1996) and sexual risk behaviors, including unprotected sex and multiple sex partners (Devine, Long, & Forehand, 1993; Elliot & Morse, 1989). Delinquency and substance use often co-occur among adolescents, and both have been prospectively related to adolescent pregnancy (Scaramella, Conger, Simons, & Whitbeck, 1998). However, empirical evidence suggests that different behaviors may respond differently to monitoring and communication. Although sexual risk behaviors are correlated with delinquency and substance use among adolescents, the three problem behaviors may follow different developmental trajectories over time, and there is some question as to whether one problem behavior necessarily leads to another (Mason & Windle, 2002). Some evidence suggests that sexual risk develops independently of other problem behaviors (Ensminger, 1990; Stanton et al., 1993). One study that examined the relationship between specific components of monitoring and various adolescent problem behaviors found that parental control predicted reduced substance use but not adolescent delinquency, while parental knowledge predicted both problem behaviors (Fletcher et al., 2004).

A number of studies have consistently found that youth disclosure is an important predictor of delinquent behavior (Keijsers et al., 2010; Kerr et al., 2010). In contrast, findings regarding the effects of parental solicitation and control on adolescent risk behavior are mixed (Laird et al., 2010). Few studies have addressed the facilitating role of parent–youth communication in effective monitoring (Low et al., 2012), and most have focused on delinquent behavior, without considering substance use and sexual risk behaviors (Kerr et al., 2010; Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003; Stavrinides, 2011). Finally, a majority of the existing studies focusing on parental monitoring have been cross sectional (Huang, Murphy, & Hser, 2011) and thus have lacked the perspective that longitudinal studies afford.

Accordingly, this study uses four waves of data from a three-year longitudinal study to investigate the components of "parental monitoring" (parental knowledge, youth disclosure, parental solicitation, and parental control) and parent–adolescent communication (open and problematic communication). We simultaneously examined the unique and independent roles of each of these constructs in relation to adolescents' involvement in the discrete risk activities of delinquency, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors. Specifically, we first examined the associations of parental knowledge, youth disclosure, parental solicitation, and parental control with adolescent risk involvement (delinquency, substance use and sexual risk behaviors) through early to middle adolescence, before and after controlling for parent–adolescent communication. We then examined longitudinal relationships between the four components of "parental monitoring" in early adolescence, open and problematic parent–adolescent communication, and adolescent risk involvement in middle adolescence.

Methods

Study site

A decade ago, the adult HIV seroprevalence in the Bahamas was 5%. This rate has been reduced, by a coordinated national effort, to

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