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Warmth and legitimacy beliefs contextualize adolescents' negative reactions to parental monitoring



Laura K. LaFleur, Yinan Zhao, Megan M. Zeringue, Robert D. Laird*

Department of Psychology, University of New Orleans, LA, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify conditions under which parents' monitoring behaviors are most strongly linked to adolescents' negative reactions (i.e., feelings of being controlled and invaded). 242 adolescents (49.2% male; *M* age = 15.4 years) residing in the United States of America reported parental monitoring and warmth, and their own feelings of being controlled and invaded and beliefs in the legitimacy of parental authority. Analyses tested whether warmth and legitimacy beliefs moderate and/or suppress the link between parents' monitoring behaviors and adolescents' negative reactions. Monitoring was associated with more negative reactions, controlling for legitimacy beliefs and warmth. More monitoring was associated with more negative reactions only at weaker levels of legitimacy beliefs, and at lower levels of warmth. The link between monitoring and negative reactions is sensitive to the context within which monitoring occurs with the strongest negative reactions found in contexts characterized by low warmth and weak legitimacy beliefs.

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When parents are more knowledgeable about adolescents' activities and whereabouts, adolescents are less likely to engage in misbehavior (e.g., Fletcher, Darling, & Steinberg, 1995; Laird, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003; Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001). For some time, the assumption in the monitoring literature was that parents gained knowledge through asking questions (i.e., solicitation) and by imposing restrictions (i.e., control). However, Stattin and Kerr (2000) demonstrated that asking questions and imposing restrictions are not the primary sources of parental knowledge. Furthermore, parents' efforts to monitor their adolescents by asking questions or imposing rules may evoke feelings among adolescents of being over-controlled (Kakihara, Tilton-Weaver, Kerr, & Stattin, 2010) or having one's privacy invaded (Hawk, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2008). Consistent with Darling and Steinberg's (1993) model in which specific parenting behaviors (e.g., questioning or imposing restrictions) are contextualized by the atmosphere or tone of the parent-adolescent relationship, we tested whether parental warmth and adolescents' legitimacy beliefs moderate and/or suppress the link between parental monitoring behaviors and adolescents' feelings of being controlled and invaded.

Many studies of parental monitoring assess parental knowledge rather than the monitoring behaviors assumed to provide the knowledge, and Stattin and Kerr (2000) showed that adolescent disclosure of information is a more proximal source of knowledge than are parents' monitoring efforts. The current study focuses primarily on parents' monitoring behaviors, while recognizing that children have to answer parents' questions or comply with parents' restrictions for parental solicitation or

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA, 70148, USA.
 E-mail address: rlaird@uno.edu (R.D. Laird).

control to provide parents with information. In other words, parental actions contribute to gaining knowledge from adolescents, but the parental actions still rely largely on adolescents to provide the information. Thus, parental monitoring is viewed in this study as an ongoing cyclical dyadic process involving parents and children (and to a lesser degree others, see Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004).

A parent may engage in a monitoring behavior such as asking a question (i.e., solicitation) or imposing a restriction (i.e., control), which potentially elicits reactions from the child. Reactions may be behavioral (e.g., answering the question, protesting) or emotional (e.g., feeling controlled or cared for), or a combination of the two. For instance, when an adolescent asks for permission to go out with friends, the parent may respond by asking, “Where are you going?” or “Who are you going to be with?” It is likely that the child experiences an emotional reaction of some type when asked these questions. The parents’ questions may evoke primarily positive reactions among adolescents who perceive parents’ monitoring actions as signifying that parents care about them, whereas the questions may evoke primarily negative emotions among adolescents who perceive parents’ monitoring actions as signifying that the parents do not trust them, or that parents are over-stepping their authority. Adolescents have reported that parental monitoring behaviors can simultaneously make them feel loved and cared for as well as controlled and invaded (Bakken & Brown, 2010). As such, adolescents may experience positive and negative emotions simultaneously when they feel that questioning is both a sign of a caring parent and a potential barrier limiting their freedom and privacy. Adolescents’ emotional reactions, in turn, likely influence how they respond behaviorally to the parents’ questions (i.e., whether they answer the questions truthfully). Although we recognize that positive emotional reactions to monitoring behaviors do occur, in this study we focused specifically on adolescents’ negative reactions to parental monitoring, and sought to determine the contexts in which negative reactions are more likely to be reported.

Two previous studies have linked monitoring with negative reactions from adolescents (Hawk et al., 2008; Kakihara et al., 2010). Kakihara et al. (2010) expected that parental control would reduce feelings of being connected, and increase feelings of being controlled, and that less feelings of being connected and more feelings of being controlled would lead to poorer adjustment outcomes. However, although more control was modestly associated with stronger feelings of being controlled, the link became non-significant after controlling for the parenting context (i.e., parents’ restrictions of children’s choices, and coldness-rejection). The parenting context accounted for the link between control through rules and adolescents’ feelings of being controlled, but analyses did not test the interactions needed to determine whether the parenting context conditioned the link between monitoring behaviors and negative reactions.

Hawk et al. (2008) examined potential links between monitoring and adolescents’ feelings of privacy invasion. When the sample was split into high-quality and low-quality parent-child relationship groups, more control through rules only was associated with more privacy invasion in the high quality parent-child relationship group. Hawk et al. (2008) suggested that adolescents respond negatively to parents’ use of monitoring when parents are highly supportive because parental monitoring violates adolescents’ expectations of parents. However, Laird, Marrero, Melching, and Kuhn (2013) showed that Hawk et al.’s (2008) privacy invasion measure included items measuring feelings of privacy invasion and items measuring parents’ monitoring behaviors. Most importantly, however, Laird et al. (2013) demonstrated that the privacy invasion items and the monitoring behavior items, although modestly correlated with one another, showed substantially different patterns of association with other variables. The monitoring items were significantly and positively associated with parental acceptance whereas the invasion items were significantly and negatively associated with parental acceptance. Therefore, although the Hawk et al. (2008) findings suggest that links between monitoring behavior and adolescents’ negative reactions may be contextualized by the parent-child relationship context, problems with the measurement of privacy invasion casts doubt on the direction of effects.

Darling and Steinberg (1993) proposed that a parenting behavior, such as implementing rules or asking questions, is conditioned by the broader parent-child context in which the behavior is expressed. Consistent with Darling and Steinberg’s (1993) hypothesis, it is possible that the same parenting behavior enacted in different contexts may be associated with stronger or weaker feelings of being controlled or invaded. The current study focuses on parental warmth and adolescents’ legitimacy beliefs as contexts within which monitoring behaviors are experienced.

Parental warmth is characterized by positive evaluation, expression of affection, and the provision of emotional support (Schaefer, 1965). Warmth is the single most important and ubiquitous dimension of parenting (Rohner, 1986). Greater parental warmth, either alone or measured in combination with other dimensions of parenting, has been repeatedly linked to numerous indices of positive behavioral and psychological outcomes during childhood and adolescence (e.g., Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Rohner, 1986; Scaramella, Conger, & Simons, 1999). In terms of links with monitoring and related constructs, more warmth is associated with higher levels of parental knowledge and monitoring (e.g., Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004; Johnson, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011; Keijsers, Frijns, Branje, & Meeus, 2009) and with weaker feelings of privacy invasion and feeling controlled (Kakihara et al., 2010; Laird et al., 2013). There is also evidence in the literature that parental warmth serves as a context that moderates links between parental monitoring and child outcomes. For example, in high warmth families, developmental declines in parental control through rules are linked to decreases in delinquent activities, whereas in low warmth families, developmental declines in parental control are linked to increases in delinquent activities (Keijsers et al., 2009).

Legitimacy beliefs are adolescents’ beliefs regarding the appropriateness and acceptability of parents’ efforts to restrict adolescents’ behavior. Legitimacy beliefs differ as a function of socio-moral domain (see Smetana, 2011). Adolescents endorsing greater legitimacy of parental authority to regulate how adolescents spend their free time report more compliance with parents’ rules (Kuhn, Phan, & Laird, 2014) and fewer behavior problems relative to their same age peers (Darling,

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