

## Protective and compensatory factors mitigating the influence of deviant friends on delinquent behaviours during early adolescence

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### Abstract

This study examined factors that could moderate or compensate the link between exposure to deviant friends and delinquent behaviours in a sample of 265 early adolescents. The putative moderating or compensatory factors referred to the behavioural domain (i.e. novelty seeking, harm avoidance), the biological domain (i.e. physical maturation), the sociofamily domain (i.e. sociofamily adversity, parental practices), the school domain (i.e. academic performance), and the social domain (i.e. peer acceptance). A series of regression analyses showed that novelty seeking and puberty status moderated the link between friends' self-reported delinquency and participants' self-reported delinquency. In addition, all the factors except peer acceptance also had main effects that, cumulatively, reduced the association between friends' delinquency and self-rated delinquency through compensatory main effects. These results are discussed in light of the differential roles of moderating and of compensatory factors.

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### **Protective and compensatory factors mitigating the influence of deviant friends on delinquent behaviours during early adolescence**

In recent years there has been growing research into the impact of deviant peer affiliations on adjustment in young people (for reviews see, Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Kandel, 1986; Vitaro, Tremblay, & Bukowski, 2001). This research has found that young people who affiliate with delinquent or substance-using peers are at increased risks of crime (Elliott & Menard, 1996; Farrington, Ohlin, & Wilson, 1986; Fergusson & Horwood, 1996), substance use (Kandel, 1978), and mental health problems (Brendgen, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 2000; Fergusson, Beautrais, & Horwood, 2003). In part, at least, these associations appear to reflect the fact that, through a number of processes, deviant peer affiliations act to increase risks of behavioural difficulties and, particularly, externalizing behaviours in young people. Specifically, it may be suggested that as a result of processes of social imitation, peer pressure, and social facilitation young people who affiliate with deviant peers show an increase in various forms of risk-taking behaviours that in turn leads to increased rates of crime, substance use, and mental health problems in this group (Fergusson, Wanner, Vitaro, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2003).

Although linkages between deviant peer affiliations and the behavioural adjustment of young people have been well established, it is not the case that all young people who affiliate with deviant peer groups develop subsequent behavioural difficulties (Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997). Such findings raise the important question: what are the factors that distinguish between those young people who succumb to the influence of deviant peer groups and those who prove to be resistant to this influence?

There are potentially two almost interchangeable explanations of the factors and processes that determine individual responses to peer group affiliations.

- (a) *Vulnerability*: First, it may be suggested that those who succumb to peer group influences do so because they have pre-existing vulnerabilities to problem behaviour, with peer group affiliations acting to shape and refine these vulnerabilities. This explanation is consistent with findings that suggest that those who most often enter or form deviant peer groups tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been exposed to childhood or family adversity, and often show early onset conduct problems and difficulties (Brendgen, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1998; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991). Given this evidence it may be proposed that the processes leading to deviant peer group formation tend to select individuals who are vulnerable to later problem behaviours with peer affiliations acting to further encourage such behaviours. Under this explanation, differences between those who succumb to deviant peer group influences and those who are resistant to such influences reflect differences in pre-existing levels of vulnerability to later problem behaviours.
- (b) *Protection*: An alternative explanation of differences in responses to peer group affiliations is that these differences may reflect the fact that those who do not succumb to peer group affiliations are characterized by the presence of factors that protect them from responding to negative peer group influences. For example, it may be proposed that young people characterized by factors such as strong parental attachment, strong attachment to school, etc. may be relatively protected from deviant peer group influences (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). Under this explanation, differences in responses to deviant peer affiliations

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