



The prospective relationship between child personality and perceived parenting: Mediation by parental sense of competence



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the prospective relationship between childhood Big Five personality characteristics and perceived parenting in adolescence. In addition, we investigated whether this relationship was mediated by parental sense of competence, and whether associations were different for mothers and fathers. For 274 children, teachers reported on children's Big Five personality characteristics at Time 1, mothers and fathers reported on their sense of competence at Time 2, and the children (who had now become adolescents) rated their parents' warmth, overreactivity and psychological control at Time 3. Mediation analysis revealed both direct and indirect effects. No differences in associations were found for perceived parenting of mothers and fathers. This study demonstrates that child personality in late childhood is significantly related to perceived parental warmth, overreactivity and psychological control in adolescence. In addition, parental sense of competence mediates the relationship between child conscientiousness and perceived parental warmth, overreactivity and psychological control.

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1. Introduction

The role of parenting in the socialization process of children has been widely studied (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberger, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Although much is known about the importance of parenting in this process, less attention has been paid to factors that might determine how parents come to rely on particular parenting behaviors; the determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). This study aims to increase knowledge on these determinants by examining the relationship between child personality characteristics and perceived parenting behaviors. Moreover, in an attempt to explain this relationship, we examine to what extent parental competence mediates this relationship.

1.1. Child personality and parenting behaviors

In his parenting process model, Belsky (1984) proposed that parenting is influenced by three general sources: parents' personal psychological resources, children's characteristics, and contextual sources of stress and support. Ample empirical evidence has

provided support for this model (for an overview, see Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). The present study focuses on specific parts of children's characteristics and parents' psychological resources which, to our knowledge, have not yet been examined in the same study: child personality and parental sense of competence.

Personality can be described along five dimensions, which have traditionally been labeled as extraversion, agreeableness (labeled benevolence in children), conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience (labeled imagination in children) (Shiner & Caspi, 2003). With regard to parenting behaviors, three global, relatively independent dimensions can be distinguished; support (responsiveness and connectedness to the child), behavioral control (regulation of the child's behavior through firm and consistent discipline) and psychological control (control of the child's behavior through psychological means such as love withdrawal and guilt induction) (Prinzie, Stams, Deković, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009). Although determinants of these parenting behaviors have been studied (e.g., de Haan, Prinzie, & Deković, 2012), there is a very limited body of research examining determinants of all three parenting behaviors in the same study. Of these three dimensions, psychological control has been mostly neglected (Barber, 1996).

Child Big Five characteristics have been related to parental warmth and overreactivity in previous studies. For example,

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benevolence has been related to more parental warmth and less overreactive parenting (de Haan et al., 2012), and harsh discipline (O'Connor & Dvorak, 2001; Prinzie et al., 2004). Compared to these studies on parental warmth and overreactivity, research on predictors of parental psychological control is limited to behavior problems (Laird, 2011). Given that psychological control has negative consequences for children, such as internalizing problems (Barber, 1996), it is important to investigate determinants of this parenting behavior. This study aims to increase knowledge on determinants of parenting by examining its long-term associations with children's Big Five personality characteristics, using a comprehensive assessment of parenting, including warmth, overreactivity and psychological control.

1.2. Mediation by parental sense of competence

Although some studies have indicated links between child personality and parenting behavior, these studies do not make clear *why* child personality is related to parenting (de Haan et al., 2012). In the present study we propose that parental sense of competence is a mechanism that can explain this relationship. Grounded in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, parental sense of competence is the belief of parents that they can effectively manage parenting tasks (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). Similar to parenting behavior, predictors of parental sense of competence remain understudied (Jones & Prinz, 2005). In the few studies that have examined determinants of parental sense of competence, the focus has mainly been on parental characteristics, such as parent personality (de Haan, Prinzie, & Deković, 2009) or parental depression (Gross, Sambrook, & Fogg, 1999). Rather than examining factors within the parent that relate to parental sense of competence, this study investigates how child personality determines parental sense of competence. Dependent on their personality, some children may be easier to handle than others. For instance, children who are less benevolent and conscientious may be noncompliant, and demand more from parents in terms of skills to effectively deal with their behavior. This may in turn result in a lower sense of competence for these parents than for parents of very agreeable and conscientious children. To our knowledge, there are no studies that focus specifically on how child Big Five personality is related to parental sense of competence. However, several studies have examined other child characteristics. For example, mothers of school-aged children, who perceived their children to be less emotional and more sociable, reported higher parental sense of competence (Coleman & Karraker, 2000). Related to personality, evidence suggests that parents of more temperamentally "difficult" infants and toddlers generally have a lower parental sense of competence (e.g., Troutman, Moran, Arndt, Johnson, & Chmielewski, 2012). However, research concerning personality characteristics of older children is lacking.

In addition to being determined by child characteristics, parental sense of competence has in turn emerged as a critical determinant of parenting behavior (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). Some evidence indicates that higher parental sense of competence is associated with parents expressing warmth towards their children (Bogenschneider, Small, & Tsay, 1997), whereas lower parental sense of competence has been associated with the use of overreactive discipline (Gross et al., 1999) and psychological control (Bogenschneider et al., 1997). However, much of the research on this topic involves cross-sectional designs (Jones & Prinz, 2005). As a result, there is little evidence on prospective relationships with parenting.

1.3. Present study

We examined the prospective relationship between child personality and perceived parenting five years later. In addition, we investigated whether parental sense of competence mediated this relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized positive prospective associations of children's extraversion, benevolence, conscientiousness, and imagination, with warm parenting five years later (de Haan et al., 2012) whereas higher extraversion, and lower benevolence and conscientiousness were expected to relate to more perceived overreactive parenting (de Haan et al., 2012; O'Connor & Dvorak, 2001). Because of inconsistent findings, no specific hypotheses regarding emotional stability and psychological control were formulated. Additionally, we hypothesized that higher scores on benevolence, conscientiousness and emotional stability would be associated with higher parental sense of competence two years later (Jones & Prinz, 2005), and that parental sense of competence would in turn be associated with more warmth and less overreactive parenting and psychological control two years later (e.g., Bogenschneider et al., 1997). Finally, the moderating effect of parental gender was explored. Analyses concerning the moderating role of parental gender were exploratory, due to a lack of research on father's sense of competence.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study is part of a larger project: "The Flemish Study on Parenting, Personality, and Development" (FSPPD), in which a proportional stratified sample of elementary-school-aged children was randomly selected. To answer our questions, we used data from the fourth (2004; T1), fifth (2007; T2), and sixth (2009; T3) wave, as in those waves the data on the measures of interest were available. To avoid the problem of shared method variance, teachers rated children's personality at T1, both parents rated their sense of parental competence at T2, and adolescents reported on perceived parenting at T3, by rating their mothers' and fathers' warmth, overreactivity and psychological control. Teacher ratings of child personality were used because teachers are familiar with a broad range of children and have greater expertise regarding normative development (Goldberg, 2001). Teachers see children in different situations (e.g., highly structured, large peer groups) that are particularly challenging in the light of personality characteristics (e.g., Saudino, Ronald, & Plomin, 2005). Research has shown that children's personality characteristics can be validly reported by teachers (Prinzie & Deković, 2008). We selected children who were 11 or 12 years old at T1, since these children made the transition to adolescence in the period under study. The selection based on age resulted in a sample of 274 target children (51.1% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 11$ years, 10 months at T1), their parents and teachers (T1: 274 teachers, T2: 209 mothers, 195 fathers, T3: children's ratings of mothers' ($n = 194$) and fathers' ($n = 190$) parenting). All parents were of Belgian nationality. Regarding socioeconomic status (SES), 46.4% of families were in the lower class, 28.8% in the middle class, and 19.7% in the upper class. Of 5.1%, no information on SES was available.

Data were missing completely at random, as indicated by Little's MCAR test ($\chi^2/df = 1.08$). Therefore, missing data were imputed using expectation maximization, which is a highly efficient way to use available data under the assumption that data are missing at random (Schafer & Graham, 2002).

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