



Empirical research

Parent's psychological flexibility: Associations with parenting and child psychosocial well-being



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2015

Received in revised form

17 February 2016

Accepted 5 March 2016

Keywords:

Psychological flexibility

Parenting

Youth internalizing

Youth externalizing

ABSTRACT

Recent research has started to examine psychological flexibility both in normative samples and within the family context. The current study aimed to extend this research by testing a model examining associations between general psychological flexibility, psychological flexibility specific to the parenting role, adaptive parenting practices, and child internalizing and externalizing problems across three developmental stages. Participants ($N=615$; 55% female) were parents of children in young childhood (3–7 years; $n=210$), middle childhood (8–12 years; $n=200$), and adolescence (13–17 years; $n=205$). Parents reported on their general psychological flexibility, parenting-specific psychological flexibility, parenting practices, and their child's or adolescent's internalizing and/or externalizing problems. Findings were consistent across child age groups and demonstrated that higher levels of parenting-specific psychological flexibility were indirectly related to lower levels of youth internalizing and externalizing problems through adaptive parenting practices. Implications for promotion of well-being within the family context among normative samples are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the past several years, there has been a strong focus on investigating the relationship between psychological flexibility and psychosocial outcomes. Psychological flexibility refers to the ability of an individual to accept aversive emotional experiences in the moment while maintaining engagement in value-based behaviors (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Not surprisingly, greater psychological flexibility is related to a host of positive outcomes, including higher quality of life, greater emotional well-being, and more adaptive psychological functioning (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Hayes et al., 2006). Alternatively, lower levels of psychological flexibility are associated with greater emotional reactivity (Sloan, 2004) and increased psychopathology (Tull, Gratz, Salters, & Roemer, 2004).

To date, a large portion of research investigating the effects of psychological flexibility has focused on individual outcomes (Hayes et al., 2006). However, there is some evidence to suggest that individual psychological flexibility further affects the broader systems to which the individual belongs. Specifically, research

examining individual psychological flexibility within the family context has found a connection between a parent's psychological flexibility and their child's psychological outcomes (e.g., Cheron, Ehrenreich, & Pincus, 2009; Williams, Ciarrochi, & Heaven, 2012). However, the mechanisms underlying the relation between parental psychological flexibility and child outcomes remain unclear. Identifying these mechanisms is imperative to informing intervention efforts for effective parenting, with implications for understanding specific parenting factors predictive of healthy child development. For example, psychological flexibility may promote consistent positive parenting practice through parental acceptance of aversive cognitive/affective experiences, so that parental response in moments of stress may remain rooted in family parenting values and in the best interest of the child, rather than thwarted by experiential avoidance. Therefore, the current study tested a hypothesized model predicting the pathway between a parent's psychological flexibility and their child's internalizing and externalizing problems. More specifically, we examined whether greater levels of general psychological flexibility led to greater psychological flexibility within the parenting role, whether greater parenting-specific psychological flexibility was further associated with implementation of more adaptive parenting practices, and finally whether greater parenting-specific psychological flexibility was directly or indirectly associated with more adaptive child psychological outcomes (see Fig. 1).

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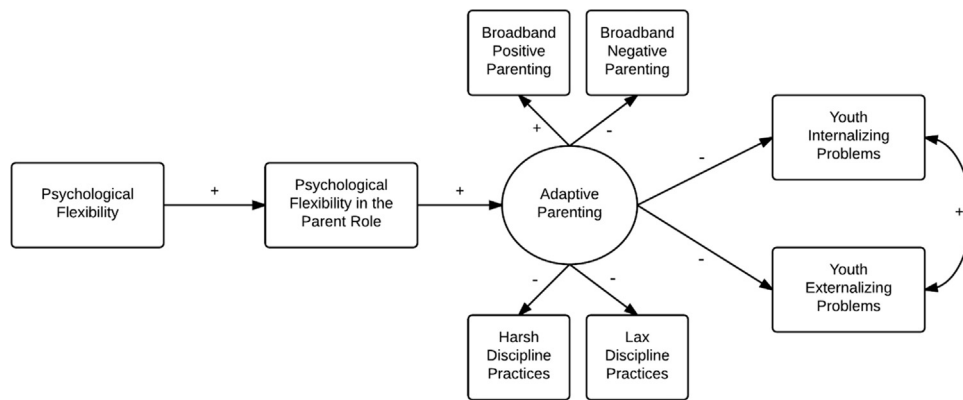


Fig. 1. Theoretical model delineating the indirect influence of parent psychological flexibility on parenting and youth psychosocial well-being.

In the first step of the model, we examined the relation between a parent's general psychological flexibility and their parenting-specific psychological flexibility. These domains of psychological flexibility are considered related (Cheron et al., 2009), yet distinct, as psychological flexibility is theorized to be a context-dependent process (Gloster, Hummel, Lyudmirskaya, Hauke, & Sonntag, 2012), which can vary by an individual's values within the specific context (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Within the parenting role, the meaning of psychological flexibility specifically refers to a parent's ability to accept negative thoughts, emotions, and impulses spurred by parenting stress. One prior study has demonstrated greater general psychological flexibility to be related to greater psychological flexibility in parenting (Cheron et al., 2009). As such, we hypothesized that the same positive relations would hold in the current model.

In the next step of the model, we examined the relation between parenting psychological flexibility and adaptive parenting practices. Although fewer studies have investigated this association, preliminary research has provided evidence that increased parenting psychological flexibility is related to greater use of positive parenting strategies (Burke & Moore, 2014). The presence of this association is likely due to the idea that individuals who demonstrate greater psychological flexibility in the parenting role are better able to maintain present moment and nonjudgmental awareness of their internal experiences allowing them to engage in behaviors (i.e., parenting practices) consistent with their familial and parenting values. For example, when confronted with difficult parenting situations (e.g., child noncompliance), parents with greater psychological flexibility are likely better able to tolerate their negative thoughts (e.g., "My child never listens to me"), emotions (e.g., anger at child), and impulses (e.g., desire to yell). This ability to hold acceptance of these experiences by nonjudgmental observation in the moment, when interacting with the child, is thought to promote adaptive, value-driven parental practices, including the use of positive parenting practices (Burke & Moore, 2014; Moyer & Sandoz, 2015). Given this existing evidence, we hypothesized that greater parenting psychological flexibility would be related to more adaptive parenting practices in the current study.

In the final stage of the model, we tested the extension of psychological flexibility into parenting practices, and in turn, to child outcomes, hypothesizing that adaptive parenting practices would lead to more positive child outcomes, specifically focusing on internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This model tested whether adaptive parenting practices may be a mediating mechanism linking greater parenting-specific psychological flexibility and more positive child outcomes. An extensive body of evidence demonstrates that more positive parenting practices are related to better child outcomes, including increased child empathy, positive

affect, and social outcomes (e.g., Davidov & Grusec, 2006). In contrast, poorer parenting practices, such as harsh discipline, are related to negative child outcomes, including aggressive behavior, poor social behaviors (Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992), and anxiety (Rodriguez, 2003). Given these relations, we hypothesized that adaptive parenting practices would serve as a mediator for parenting psychological flexibility on child outcomes, whereby greater adaptive parenting practices would be related to decreased child internalizing and externalizing problems.

2. A developmental perspective

Existing psychological flexibility research has demonstrated the importance of this construct to the parenting context for youth across a variety of ages (e.g., Burke & Moore, 2014; Coyne, McHugh, & Martinez, 2011; McCracken & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2011; Moyer & Sandoz, 2015; Whittingham, Sanders, McKinlay, & Boyd, 2014). However, many of the aforementioned studies examining the effects on child outcomes have primarily drawn conclusions based on samples with limited child age ranges, or wide age spans, thus precluding comparison of possible stable versus variable effects across developmental stages. Alternatively, the current study acknowledges the possibility of salient differences in these effects across developmental stages. Therefore, the current study incorporated a developmental perspective by recruiting three subsamples (young childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence) in order to more accurately explore associations between parent psychological flexibility and child psychological outcomes within and across developmental age ranges, whereby increasing the utility of findings. By examining the proposed model among three age groups, important differences between parent characteristics and child psychological outcomes can be better understood, with implications for promoting psychological flexibility and child well-being by developmental cohort.

3. The current study

We tested a model predicting the indirect pathways between a parent's general psychological flexibility to child outcomes through parenting flexibility and/or adaptive parenting practices. We hypothesized that greater general psychological flexibility would lead to greater parenting psychological flexibility, which would be associated with more adaptive parenting practices, and in turn, decreased child behavior problems. Further, we hypothesized that parent's general psychological flexibility would be indirectly, rather than directly, associated with adaptive parenting practices through parenting-specific psychological flexibility, and

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