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Parenting Practices and the Development of Internalizing/Externalizing Problems in Adolescence

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Abstract

This chapter examines the existing relationship between different types of parental practices and the development of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in adolescence. Parental involvement and parenting styles are defined and analyzed as possible parameters of adolescent problems, including bullying and victimization. Special emphasis is given to the distinction between behavioral and psychological parental control. Furthermore, issues such as parent-adolescent conflict, locus of control, and parental values are discussed as correlates of these problems, since prior research has identified them as either risk or protective factors for child and adolescent social and emotional adaptation.

Keywords: externalizing/internalizing behaviors, parental control, parent-adolescent conflict, parenting styles, locus of control

1. Introduction

In adolescence, a number of physical, behavioral, and cognitive changes take place, which can be an overwhelming experience for both the young person and other individuals from his close social environment. One notable change during the adolescent period is the increase in the prevalence of externalizing and internalizing problems [1]. In differentiating between externalizing and internalizing behaviors, one should acknowledge that the former is overt, whereas the latter is covert. Externalizing behaviors are evident in children's outward behavior, where the child acts negatively on the surrounding environment, and include rule-breaking actions, aggression, and delinquency. Such behaviors are problematic for society because the adverse effects of externalizing behaviors are not only immediate but long-term as well, and they have a negative effect both on the individual and on the public. For instance, longitudinal research

shows that adolescent externalizing behaviors are a major risk factor for a number of negative outcomes, such as juvenile delinquency, and future crime and violence [2], as well as decreased educational and occupational attainment in adulthood [3]. Moreover, low attainment may act as a mediator in the relationship between adolescent delinquency and depression in young adulthood [4].

On the other hand, internalizing behaviors refer to behavior problems that are inner-directed and over-controlled [5]. As such, they affect the individual's psychological world. Symptoms include social isolation, withdrawal, anxiety, and depression [5, 6]. Nevertheless, as internalizing behavior problems are covert, and thus, do not disrupt the external environment, they often go unnoticed. Despite that internalizing symptoms are a widespread problem among the teenage population. For example, it is estimated that approximately 15–35% of individuals experience depressive symptoms during adolescence [7]. Furthermore, internalizing problems constitute a risk factor for numerous negative outcomes. Higher levels of adolescent depressive symptoms are associated with less positive adjustment in adulthood [7], lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy [8], externalizing behavior engagement [9], poor academic achievement, greater risk for suicidal behaviors or ideation during adolescence, and increased risk of attempted suicide, and completed suicide in adulthood [10].

Given the short-term and long-term consequences that follow the experiences of externalizing or internalizing behaviors, researchers have recognized the importance of understanding the nature of these behaviors. Researchers examining the parameters of these malfunctioning behaviors emphasize the significance of interpersonal factors. Parental behavior is, perhaps, the most influential factor in terms of the development of externalizing and internalizing behaviors of the child. The concept of parental importance has been well documented since Freud suggested that the infant's emotional tie to the mother provides the foundation for all other later relationships [11]. For more than half a century, research has consistently supported the significance of parenting for child and adolescent psychopathology. Prior research has offered theoretical and empirical evidence regarding the ways that parents induce certain behaviors from their offsprings [12–17].

Within the parenting domain, the majority of research has focused solely on the role of the mother [18]. Even though mothers have traditionally been considered as the primary caregivers for their children [19], currently this is changing. Both parents are now increasingly more involved in the raising of their children, using child-rearing practices and building relationships with them. Thus, it is essential not to underestimate the importance of both parents for the behavioral and psychosocial development of their children. The few studies that exist on the father figure indicate that paternal behaviors are equally significant in children's and adolescent's adjustment [20, 21]. For example, according to Flouri and Buchanan, father involvement (i.e., a father who reads to his child, or shows interest in his child's education) is positively associated with the child's psychological well-being [22] and negatively associated with his being in trouble with the police [23]. Nevertheless, even though empirical interest in the father-child relationship is growing, fathers are still underrepresented in studies of child development [24]. In a recent meta-analysis, the authors concluded that less than 20% of the studies focused on the parenting behavior of fathers, even though the effect of specific paternal parenting behaviors was larger than maternal parenting behaviors [13].

As mentioned above, previous research has demonstrated that dysfunctional families tend to include young members who exhibit a variety of psychopathologies [13, 25, 26]. These disturbances include interaction problems among family members [27].

2. Parental involvement

In the examination of externalizing and internalizing behaviors, an important factor to consider is parental involvement. The literature regarding parental involvement has identified numerous features, which can be grouped within the two main categories of home and school activities [28]. For example, parental involvement enacted at school includes contacting the school personnel, attending PTO meetings, and volunteering for school fun-day activities. Similarly, parental involvement enacted at home includes discussing school activities with the child, having clear expectations, and consistent home rules regarding, for instance, the time spent studying and checking homework [28]. Thus, parental involvement constitutes an integral part of the child's behavioral and psychosocial well-being.

Even though maternal involvement is more frequently examined [18] because of the special role that is usually given to mothers in child care, a number of studies have looked at the paternal role as well [22, 23, 29]. A longitudinal study conducted by the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at Oxford, United Kingdom, has provided empirical support for the protective role fathers have on child well-being. Among the different findings, most noteworthy are the following: (1) there was an association between father involvement and positive parent-child relationships, (2) father involvement was associated with less likelihood that the child would be in trouble with the police in the future, and (3) there was a strong association between father involvement and children's later educational attainment. Overall, research so far has shown convincingly that parental involvement is associated with positive psychological adjustment, happiness, and less bullying or antisocial behavior on the part of the child [30].

3. Parental styles

The construct known as "parenting style" was originally described by Baumrind [31]. Parenting styles are based on two dimensions: (1) demandingness and (2) responsiveness. The first dimension refers to having high expectations, setting behavioral boundaries, and applying rules and regulations, including monitoring child behavior. The second refers to responding to the child's emotional and other needs, being available to talk with, and support the child and generally provide for a safe environment in which to learn and develop. The combination of the two dimensions defines the four types of parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Authoritative parenting style (demanding and responsive) presents a consistent and flexible parental behavior. In contrast, authoritarian parents (demanding but not responsive) consider punishment as a means to achieve control over their children. Permissive parents (responsive but not demanding) exercise low to no control over their children. Finally, neglectful parents are neither responsive to their child's needs nor demanding in regard to their child's behavior and actions.

Many empirical studies have consistently found authoritative parenting to be related to adaptive behaviors, whereas, in contrast, both the authoritarian parenting style and the permissive parenting style are uniquely and significantly positively related to externalizing symptomatology [32–34]. Furthermore, links have also been reported between parenting styles and psychosocial adjustment; for example, parenting styles were found to be related to well-being in adolescence [35]. In this study results, authoritative parenting was related to higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction and to lower depression [35]. Furthermore, parenting styles are identified as either risk or protective factors for a number of negative outcomes including bullying and victimization experiences at school [36].

4. Parental control: behavioral and psychological

Parenting practices refer to the behaviors that a parent employs in raising a child. They can take the form of either behavioral or psychological control. Even though the two dimensions are incorporated into the umbrella term “parent control,” the two labels elucidate the important distinction between parental control of adolescent behavior and parental control of the adolescent's psychological world [37]. In other words, psychological control has to do with the relative degree of emotional autonomy that the parent allows [38]. This form of control centers on regulation of thoughts, emotions, opinions, and feelings. It communicates to the child or adolescent that all these are unacceptable for an adolescent to have [39]. In contrast, behavioral control has to do with the level of monitoring and limit setting that the parent uses [38]. It involves behavior regulation but without negating the adolescent's own ideas, feelings, or intrinsic value [40].

As behavioral control is concerned with behavior regulation, supervision, and management, it is thought to serve a positive socializing function. As research shows, behavioral undercontrol has been directly linked with externalizing behaviors such as substance use, antisocial behavior, delinquency, and sexual precocity [12, 16, 40–42]. In their study using adolescents and their mothers as participants, Pettit et al. [16] reported that monitoring was (negatively) related to delinquent behavior. Also, Hoeve et al. [13] obtained similar results in their meta-analysis; poor parental monitoring (either be active monitoring by parents, parental knowledge or child disclosure) was relatively strongly linked to delinquency. One might ask how are low behavioral control and externalizing behaviors associated. As Barber [40] points out, one explanation may be that uncontrolled environments, where no limit-setting exists, do not foster self-regulation in children, often leaving them more susceptible in contravening social norms and rules.

A study by Symeou [43] aimed to explore the impact of parental control on adolescent's expression of externalizing and internalizing behaviors. The results of the study demonstrated lack of a relationship between behavioral control and either externalizing or internalizing behaviors. She argues that the participants' age should be taken into consideration in trying to interpret these results. The majority of research that has established a predictive relationship between behavioral control and externalizing or internalizing behaviors was conducted with children, preadolescents, or young adolescents [12, 16, 40–42]. Within those age-groups, behavioral control is critical in enabling children to learn that social interactions are governed

by conventions that must be followed in order to become competent members of society [40]. To this end, it was reasonable for predictive associations to be found in previous research. Nonetheless, the adolescent participants in Symeou's study were in their middle-to-late adolescent years [43], and, according to researchers, there is a significant decline in limit-setting and monitoring across adolescence [44]. As Barber et al. [37] argue, this decline is sensible; parents begin to reduce, or at least alter, some of the specific limits they set as they attempt to grant legitimate autonomy to their adolescents. Therefore, it possible that behavioral control may no longer be important, as those adolescents should—by then—know which places to visit, peers to socialize with, and in general, which behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable.

Associations between parental rearing practices and internalizing behaviors have also been evidenced. Higher psychological control has been traditionally related to internalizing behaviors, such as depression, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem [16]. Plunkett et al. [10] found a direct positive path from parental psychological control to depressed mood for adolescent boys. Links between psychological control and internalizing behaviors have been found both cross-sectionally and longitudinally [39]. Given that during adolescence, youngsters strive for independence and autonomy, these findings are not surprising. As Barber [40] argues that adolescents who experience psychological control may see their parents as being nonresponsive to their emotional and psychological needs, and this discourages them from trusting their own uniqueness and their ideas. A nonresponsive environment makes it difficult for a young person to develop a positive self-perception for numerous reasons, such as the implied derogation of the person, and the limited opportunities to develop a sense of personal efficacy.

Despite the fact that psychological control has more prominent associations with internalized symptomatology, there is also some evidence to suggest that experiences of psychological control may be associated with externalizing symptoms as well [13, 40, 42]. For example, in the meta-analysis conducted by Hoeve et al. [13] found that psychological control was at least as important as behavioral control in predicting increased levels of delinquent behaviors. As Mills and Rubin [42] explain, the harsh discipline associated with childhood aggression often involves psychological control tactics, something that could lead to aggression by arousing anger. Hence, psychological control may be as important in the development of externalizing behaviors as it is in the development of internalizing symptomatology. Mills and Rubin [42] also reported links between excessive behavioral control and the development of internalizing behaviors. For example, mothers of socially withdrawn children appeared to be behaviorally overcontrolling. Likewise, Symeou [43] found that both mother psychological control and father psychological control positively predict externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Considering that in adolescence the youth strive for increased autonomy and independence, it was not surprising that a predictive association between psychological control and externalizing and internalizing behaviors was found.

5. Parent-adolescent conflict

In addition to child-rearing practices, the parent-child relationship is of great importance for the child's and adolescent's socialization process. The quality of the parent-child relational

bond affects children's emotional development, and behavioral and social growth [45]. For adolescence, one parenting domain that reflects important aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship is conflict [46]. Parent-adolescent conflict refers to a parent-youth dyadic relationship characterized by negativity, such as conflict and hostility [25]. This involves negative arguing and dispute, an evident dislike of the child by the parent, and aggressive problem-solving strategies [47]. According to Smetana, during adolescence, parent-adolescent conflict is more likely to include negative verbal exchanges instead of negative physical exchanges [48], with the primary reasons being about routine activities, such as homework, academic performance, curfews, and watching television [49, 50], as well as about chores, appearance, politeness, finances [51], and more infrequently about autonomy and independence, parent control, and personal ethical beliefs [50]. In terms of the frequency or intensity of the parent-adolescent conflict interactions, in their meta-analysis, Laursen et al. [52] found that whereas conflict frequency decreased over the course of adolescence, conflict intensity intensified reaching its peak in middle-to-late adolescence.

Parent-child conflict is often found to be a predictor of adolescent externalizing symptomatology [26, 27, 53]. Eichelsheim et al. found that the negative quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, characterized by recurring discord and negative arguments between the parent and the adolescent, was strongly related to the adolescents' levels of aggression, concluding that the negative and coercive interaction patterns in the parent-adolescent relationship seem to sprawl directly into adolescent interpersonal aggression [25].

Furthermore, a positive association between dyadic hostility and youth internalizing problems has been reported. This association may exist as the critical aspect of hostility might corrode self-esteem and contribute to internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety [54]. Nevertheless, research has produced ambiguous findings. For example, adolescents' internalizing psychopathology such as major depression disorder (MDD) was associated with high levels of parent-youth conflict [27]. Similarly, Symeou found evidence that both mother-adolescent conflict and father-adolescent conflict were predictive of externalizing and internalizing behaviors [43]. It seems that higher parent-adolescent conflict is related to greater exhibition of negative outward behavior, such as aggressiveness and delinquent acts, and internalizing symptomatology. Conversely, the opposite effect was found in other studies wherein dyadic hostility was not associated with youth internalizing symptoms [53].

One important drawback in this research is the fact that, traditionally, the emphasis has been on the most obvious path; in other words, how parental qualities predict or relate to children outcomes. In the literature, there are only but a few studies that explore the reverse association. That is, whether it is the child's psychosocial problems that influence the development of parent-child conflict. Ignoring such transactional associations, though, creates a gap in the understanding of child development. As Dodge and Pettit argue, in symbiotic models of development, influences tend to become reciprocal over time [55]. In support of this view, Zadeh et al. [26] identified reciprocal associations among maternal behavior and child externalizing behaviors from ages 10 to 15, with evidence of a recursive feedback loop over time. That is, negative maternal behavior had an influence on child's exhibition of externalizing symptoms from Time 1 to Time 2 and the child's externalizing

behavior at Time2 could predict a change in maternal behavior from Time 2 to Time 3 [26]. Along and same lines, Georgiou and Fanti provided further evidence that the influence between parents and children is bidirectional in nature [56]. They found that mother-child conflict at age 7 affected the child's behavioral problems at age 9, but also that the existence of the child's behavioral problems at age 7 affected the intensity of mother-child conflict at age 9. These researchers concluded that the child's conflict with the mother and the child's externalizing problems reinforce each other over time.

6. Parenting and child locus of control

Locus of control refers to the distinction made by individuals about who or what controls the outcome of events in their lives, discriminating between internal factors and external factors. Individuals with an internal locus of control perceive that the outcomes of one's behaviors are attributed to the influences of forces within one's control; in other words, they believe that *they* can control their lives, and so, they are responsible for their abilities, decisions, and actions. On the other hand, individuals with an external locus of control believe that their life is controlled by forces outside their own control, such as luck, chance, powerful other people or fate [57].

In relation to research on parenting practices, the existing evidence suggests that such practices are associated with either internal or external orientation of control in children and adolescents. For example, internal locus of control was found in children who were exposed to authoritative parenting styles, where authoritative parents value autonomy, consistency, discipline, and reinforcement of positive behaviors [58]. In contrast, Glasgow et al. [59] noted that nonauthoritative parenting styles (such as authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful) are associated with external locus of control, which is, in turn, associated with lower educational attainment. Relevant to this, Marsiglia et al. [60] found that children of parents with a permissive parenting style developed an external sense of control. Similarly, authoritarian parenting style and permissive parenting style have also been linked to external locus of control [61]. In other words, parenting styles that emphasize overcontrol or overprotection contribute to the children's perception that their behavior and the outcomes of their behavior are determined by factors such as lack, fate, or powerful others.

Georgiou et al. examined the mediating role of locus of control in the relationship between parenting styles and bullying and victimization experiences in school. Their findings showed that: (1) internal locus of control was a partial mediator in the relationship between authoritarian parenting style and bullying or victimization experiences, and (2) internal locus of control fully mediated the relationship between authoritative parenting and exhibition of bullying behaviors [62].

More specifically, regarding the first finding, authoritarian parenting is predictive of lower internal locus of control. Then, lower orientation of control predicts significantly higher victimization and higher bullying. Hence, growing up with an authoritarian parent increases the children's external locus orientation, resulting in them believing that their behaviors and experiences

are influenced by external forces and are, thus, outside of their control. Increased external locus then predicts more bullying experiences; one reason for this may be that these children learn to attribute their own behaviors to the control of others. This corresponds with previous research findings suggesting that bullies tend to blame the victim for their bullying behaviors rather than blaming themselves [63]. Furthermore, increased external locus of control predicts higher victimization experiences; this may be because children who believe that they are not in control of their own lives may be considered as easier targets to bullies [62].

The reason why authoritative parenting predicts less bullying and victimization experiences may probably be because of its effect on children's locus of control. An authoritative parenting style is characterized by autonomy, but also by limit-setting. This contributes in the children's understanding that they are responsible for what happens in their life, and not upon a complexity of other, external forces.

7. Parental values and child externalizing problems

Familial factors have been identified as important in determining whether a child will display externalizing behaviors or experience internalizing symptoms. Bullying behavior (a form of externalizing behavior) and victimization are also determined by the attitudes and values that are developed early in one's life. Although this seems sensible, morality is subjective and culturally defined. Consequently, what is considered right and what is considered wrong may differ from individual to individual. Thus, when considering antisocial activity it is, also, very important to examine the relative contribution of cultural values as it is to examine parental factors.

According to Sivadas et al. [64], the main expressions of the cultural orientation are the individualism and collectivism constructs. As Triandis [65] argued that the individualism/collectivism construct refers to a cultural syndrome wherein individualists have an independent self-image and prioritize individual goals and preferences, whereas collectivists tend to view themselves as interdependent with other people in the society and to emphasize group goals and norms.

Furthermore, vertical and horizontal dimensions have also been proposed. The horizontal/vertical distinction highlights important differences in the way that individuals perceive the self. Essentially, horizontal societies consider equality of great significance, and consider themselves as having the same status as others in society. In contrast, individuals in vertical societies place themselves and the members of the culture in a hierarchy and accept inequality [65, 66]. When the horizontal and vertical dimensions are combined with the individualism and constructivism constructs, four cultural orientations are produced: (1) horizontal individualism (= seeing oneself as unique and distinct from groups, but also seeing individuals as equal in terms of worth, dignity, and rights), (2) vertical individualism (= tendency to compete with others and to embrace self-assertion; personal aims may be to others' aims), (3) horizontal collectivism (= conceptualizing one's self as similar to the others; embracing common goals with others, sociability and interdependence), and (4) vertical collectivism (= seeing the self as

subordinated to in-group norms and directives of figures with high authority status, valuing submission, respect and in-group cohesion) [67].

Within the literature, there are only but a very few studies that have examined either the relationships between cultural values and externalizing behaviors (i.e., bullying involvement), or the interrelations with parenting dimensions. For example, studies have shown a greater likelihood of bullying incidents in collectivistic cultures [68]. Similarly, Hussein provided additional supportive evidence that individuals in collectivistic cultures may be more disposed to experiences of bullying [69]. This may come as a result of the authoritarian parenting, which is more evident in collectivistic cultures and strongly associated with the involvement in bullying.

When examining the interrelations between parenting styles, cultural values, and experiences of bullying behaviors, Georgiou et al. demonstrated that: (1) the vertical dimensions of both individualism and collectivism were related to bullying and victimization, and to victimization, respectively; and (2) cultural values and specifically the vertical dimensions were functioning as mediators in the relationship between parenting and bullying [32]. For the first finding, the authors propose that characteristic elements of vertical individualism such as competitiveness [70] and authoritarianism [71], as well as those of vertical collectivism such as authority ranking, and obedience may be the ones that contribute in individuals acting aggressively toward peers. Thus, it may not be the close connection to the in-group that promotes bullying behaviors, but instead, it may be the high power distance (i.e., vertical orientation) that differentiates the self, according to social status, age, or gender [67] that prompts individuals to perpetrate aggressive acts [32]. Furthermore, the study showed that authoritarian parenting style (which is characterized by high demandingness and low responsiveness) impacted on increased bullying behaviors, functioning through the vertical dimensions of both individualism and collectivism, both of which highlight on inequality between the self and others. As a possible explanation for this finding, the authors propose that authoritarian parents—who are demanding and rigid but not responsive or supportive, and who can also be characterized as being competitive and to have low-to-no respect for egalitarian values—tend to pass on vertical individualistic cultural values to their offsprings. Hence, an environment of evident power imbalance is likely to bring about aggressive behavior toward school-mates.

8. Summary and conclusions

Research outlined in this chapter demonstrates convincingly that parenting practices are highly associated with the child and adolescent problems, both externalizing and internalizing ones. Consequently, the quantity and quality of parental involvement in the child's life, as well as what is known as parental styles, that is the perceptions that children hold about their parents rearing practices, can serve as either risk or protective factors for child and adolescent development. Parental control, distinguished as behavioral or psychological, is also associated with these problems, as is parent-adolescent conflict. Finally, two factors have been identified as mediators between parental practices and adolescent problematic behavior: these are locus of control and family cultural values.

However, it would be a mistake to continue looking at the parent-adolescent relationship as if it were a one-way street. In other words, see it as an influence parents have on their children. The current trend is to conceptualize parenting as a joint accomplishment between parents and their children [72]. Studies with a transactional emphasis repeatedly show that children are active contributors to interact with their parents [56]. Even though parents have the power to enforce compliance in children, differences in children's behavior can lead to differences in parental responses [73]. A fair conclusion that can be drawn based on recent research findings is that parents and children coconstruct their relationship [74].

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