The Influence of Mothers' Behavior and Adolescents' Models of Attachment on Adolescent Problem Behavior

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Abstract

This study examines teens' models of maternal attachment as a mediating factor between mothers' observed negative behaviors during an interaction and adolescent problem behaviors. Ninth and tenth graders and their mothers participated in a revealed differences task in which they discussed a recent family issue about which they disagreed; teenagers completed measures of teen-mother attachment and self-reported delinquency. Mothers' negative behaviors during the interaction were linked to teens' viewing mothers more negatively, and teens' negative views were, in turn, strongly predictive of deviant behavior. Results are consistent with an attachment theory model in which adolescents with insecure models of attachment are more likely to express their developmental striving for autonomy through antisocial behavior.
Attachment and Problem Behavior

Introduction

Extensive research findings have indicated the importance of poor parenting as a precursor to adolescent delinquency (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). However, little research exists delineating pathways through which specific parental behaviors affect adolescent outcomes. Recent work suggests that attachment theory may help explain how poor parenting can contribute to the development of adolescent deviance (Allen, Aber, and Leadbeater, 1990).

Research has indicated various aspects of poor parenting which are related to deviant behavior in childhood and adolescence. Patterson's work, for instance, indicates that harsh disciplinary practices and inconsistent monitoring behavior influences the development of problem behaviors (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Further, parental rejection and inattention have also been related to deviant behavior in adolescence (Hetherington, Stouwie, & Ridberg, 1971). Conversely, parental sensitivity and positive affective bonds within the family have been linked both to greater social competence and to the formation of secure attachments (Alessandri & Wozniak, 1989; Ainsworth, 1985).

A central premise of attachment theory is that children form internal working models of themselves in relationships which are based on their history of interactions with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1980). Research in attachment theory suggests that a lack of responsiveness and accessibility on the part of the caregiver during infancy and early childhood leads to the formation of an insecure attachment relationship between the child and the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1985). The internal working model which forms along with the attachment relationship is thought to be relatively stable, influencing the child's behavior both in and outside of the context of the attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1980). Thus, when considering the nature of the relationship between parental behavior and adolescent outcomes, it seems logical to examine the attachment relationship as a potential link between the two.

Past research has found connections between insecure attachment styles and a variety of
negative outcomes in early childhood. For example, insecure attachment has been related to heightened aggressiveness, non-compliance, behavior problems, and difficulty with social competence in pre-school and school age children (Belsky, 1988; Sroufe, 1983). Although there has been little research examining insecure attachment in adolescence, one study did find that adolescents with insecure attachment styles were rated as more hostile by their peers (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). The research which relates attachment style to problem behaviors in younger age groups, then, provides further support for the proposed relationship between insecure attachment and delinquency in adolescence.

In this study we are interested in examining more closely the association between maternal behaviors which undermine the mother-teen relationship, teens' views of the attachment relationship, and delinquent behavior. In examining these two areas, we predict the following:

1) maternal behaviors undermining the mother-teen relationship will be negatively related to the way in which adolescents perceive the attachment relationship, and
2) adolescents' views of attachment will be negatively related to their self-reported delinquency.

Methods

Sixty-nine adolescents and their mothers were included in the present sample. Ninth and tenth graders (mean age 16.0 years, 52% female) were recruited through two local public school systems, and they were selected for risk factors including low grades, multiple absences, suspensions, and grade retention. Twenty-four percent of the adolescents were African American, 1% was Native American and the remainder were white. Thirty-seven percent of the teens lived in two-parent families, and the median family income was $25,000.

Quality of parenting was assessed using an observational measure examining ways that mothers help or hinder adolescents in their developmental striving to establish autonomy while maintaining a sense of relatedness in their interactions. Mothers' behaviors were observed in a revealed differences
task in which mothers and adolescents discussed a family issue about which they disagreed.

These videotaped interactions were coded using a reliable coding system which examines speeches that promote or inhibit autonomy and relatedness (Allen, Hauser, Borman, Worrell, & Bell, 1993). Specific maternal behaviors which were rated as undermining the relationship included: those behaviors which were hostile towards the adolescent or critical of him/her and those which interrupted or ignored the adolescent. This measure of autonomy and relatedness has previously predicted changes in adolescent ego development and self-esteem (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, in press), and has been related to several measures of adolescents' negative affect (Allen, Hauser, Eickhalt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1993).

Teens' self-reported views of the quality of adolescent-mother attachment were assessed using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) and the Mother-Father-Peer scale (Epstein, 1983). In addition, teens' reports of mothers' parenting style were obtained using the Child Report of Parenting Behavior Inventory (CRPBI) (Steinberg, Emlen, & Mounts, 1990). Also, mothers' reports of monitoring and control were measured using the Assessment of Child Monitoring and Control questionnaire (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

A well-validated self-report measure was used to measure the number of delinquent acts in the last six months (Elliot & Ageton, 1980). In addition, peer ratings of teens' social acceptance was obtained using a modified version of the Adolescent Self-Perception Profile (Harter, 1982).

**Results**

Overall, results supported the idea that teens' attachment models may provide an important mediating link between poor parenting behaviors and adolescent delinquency. First, maternal behaviors undermining relatedness in observed interactions were linked, as predicted, to adolescents' ratings of their attachment relationships with their mothers. Specifically, mothers' negative behaviors were related to teens' rating them as less trustworthy on the IPPA ($r=-.31$, $p<.01$) and as less accepting on the
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CRPBI ($r = -.28$, $p < .05$). Teens' perceptions of their mothers' parenting were, in turn, strongly related to delinquency. Teens who rated their mothers as less trustworthy also reported more delinquent behavior ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$), as did teens who rated their mothers as less accepting ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$). (See Figure 1).

An additional finding which was not predicted was a direct correlation between mothers' behaviors and teens' delinquency. Specifically, mothers' who exhibited more interrupting and/or ignoring types of behaviors had teens who reported less delinquent activity ($r = -.26$, $p < .05$). (See Figure 2a). However, this relationship between mothers' interruptions and adolescents' delinquency was largely accounted for by mothers' monitoring and control. When mothers' report of their amount of control over their teens' character was included in a regression model predicting delinquency, mothers' interruptions ceased to be a significant predictor ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .09$). (See Figure 2b). In addition, the correlation between mothers' interruptions and adolescents' self-reported delinquency was not significant once mothers' control was accounted for ($r = -.19$, $p = .12$).

In exploring this finding further, it was discovered that mothers' interrupting and/or ignoring behaviors were also negatively related to teens' ratings of mothers' acceptance on the MFP ($r = -.27$, $p < .05$). There was also a trend for these behaviors to be related to peers rating the teens as less socially accepted ($r = -.22$, $p < .10$). (See Figure 3).

Discussion

These analyses suggest a pathway through which negative maternal behaviors may influence adolescent deviance. As attachment theory would predict, adolescents' maternal attachment models were linked to mothers' behaviors. Mothers who exhibited more hostile, critical behaviors, and/or more interrupting, ignoring behaviors during the revealed differences task had teenagers who reported them as less trustworthy and less accepting. Although both of these constructs were measured concurrently, these findings support the idea that models of attachment relationships are influenced by parental
behavior.

Adolescents' views of the attachment relationship were also strongly related to their self-reports of delinquent activity. Teens who rated their mothers as less trustworthy and as less accepting also reported having committed more delinquent acts in the last six months. This finding is consistent with earlier research which has linked insecure attachment styles with problem behaviors in younger age groups.

An additional relationship was found between mothers' behaviors and adolescent deviance in that mothers who exhibited more interrupting and/or ignoring behaviors had teens who reported less delinquency. However, this relationship was largely accounted for by mothers' monitoring and controlling behaviors, which have been related to lower levels of delinquency in past research (Patterson, 1986). Thus, an implication of this finding is that the interrupting behaviors observed in the mothers are one behavioral manifestation of monitoring and controlling.

This does not necessarily imply, however, that such behaviors on the part of the mother should be interpreted as entirely positive. It seems that, like the hostile/critical behaviors, the interrupting/ignoring behaviors also served to undermine the mother-teen relationship. This interpretation was supported by the negative relationship between mothers' interrupting and teens' ratings of how accepting their mothers were. Further, there was some indication that this type of behavior on the part of the mother had a negative impact on other areas of the adolescents' lives -- the presence of interrupting behaviors in mothers was somewhat related to peers rating the teens as less socially accepted.

Taken together, these findings indicate patterns which may help explain the connection between poor parenting and negative outcomes. Parental behaviors which undermine the relationship with the teenager may contribute to a lack of security in teens' models of attachment, which, in turn, may be influential in the development of problem behaviors. The relationship between interrupting, monitoring,
and delinquency indicates, however, that there can be additional pathways between parental behavior and adolescent deviance. This finding combined with the link found between mothers’ interruptions and unfavorable peer ratings of social acceptance also implies that the same parental behaviors may influence both positive and negative outcomes in teenagers.

Two limitations of this study are important to note: one is that the information concerning models of attachment was measured using self-report questionnaires, and the second is that the results were based on cross-sectional data. Information from attachment interviews with this sample is currently being coded, and the hypotheses presented in this paper will be re-tested utilizing this new information. In addition, a longitudinal follow up of this sample is planned, which will help to answer questions about direction of effects.

A final point to consider is that the negative maternal behaviors examined here occurred within a context of a revealed differences task, which is designed to highlight the adolescents' developmental task of establishing autonomy while maintaining the maternal relationship. Consistent with both attachment theory and work on autonomy and relatedness, these results indicate that adolescents with insecure models of attachment may be more likely to express their developmental striving for autonomy through antisocial behavior (Allen et al., 1990).
References


