ABSTRACT

Maltreated children are reported to have deficits in social behavior, ranging from aggression to depression. Past research indicates that such deficits may be fostered by maladaptive social-cognitive processes, such as how children think about interpersonal conflict. This study considers the hypothesis that, in adolescence, maltreatment may be associated with disruptions in the ability to think about interpersonal conflict. Further, it explores the effects of parent gender and different types of punishment. Adolescents reported their aggressive behavior at age 16, and were assessed longitudinally for changes in their skills at interpersonal negotiation. Parents were asked how often they had used certain behaviors with the teen during conflict. Results were that fathers’, but not mothers’, verbal and physical maltreatment were related to smaller gains in adolescents’ negotiation strategies over time. Since adolescence is a period of rapid cognitive development, our study suggests that certain types of punishment may be especially detrimental to how adolescents think about negotiating interpersonal conflict.
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the social deficits of children who have experienced maltreatment. Maltreated children are seen to be more aggressive, less positive and socially competent, and less interactive with peers and adults (e.g., Iverson and Segal, 1992). It is likely that such deficits may be fostered by maladaptive social-cognitive processes, such as how children think about interpersonal conflict (Hart et al., 1993; Selman, 1980). This study considers the hypothesis that, in adolescence, maltreatment may be associated with disruptions in the ability to learn to think about interpersonal conflict in mature ways. However, aggressive parental behavior is closely associated with adolescents’ aggressive behavior (Dodge et al., 1997), and characterizes the lowest level of negotiation strategies (Selman, 1980). Thus, we wanted to measure the effect of parental punishment on social-cognitive development beyond that which may simply result in adolescents’ overt aggression. This study also was conceived to include two understudied areas in maltreatment research: the effects of parent gender (Haskett et al., 1996) and different types of punishment (Crittenden et al., 1994).
SUBJECTS

Data were collected as part of a longitudinal study on a socioeconomically diverse sample of moderately at-risk adolescents (N=128). Measures were administered when adolescents were 16 and 18 years old (see Table 1).

MEASURES

❖ Conflict Tactics Scale

Both mothers and fathers were given a version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1988). It asked how often they had engaged in certain behaviors with the teen during conflict. A 4-point scale, from “never” to “many times,” was used. The verbal maltreatment scale was a sum of their scores on six items. The physical maltreatment scale was a sum of their scores on eleven items, which were weighted by seriousness (See Table 2). This approach was developed by Straus (1988), and assumes that some behaviors are more traumatic than others.
MEASURES, continued

❖ Youth Self Report

Adolescents were given the Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 1991). They were asked to rate how well a variety of behaviors applied to them, on a scale of “0 = not true,” “1 = somewhat or sometimes true,” and “2 = very or often true.” For this study, only the severely aggressive behavior scale was used. This scale was composed of 6 items, such as getting in fights and destroying others’ property.

❖ Adolescent Problem Inventory

Adolescents’ mean levels of interpersonal negotiation, at ages 16 and 18, were coded from their responses to vignettes. These were taken from the boys’ and girls’ versions of the Adolescent Problem Inventory (Freedman et al., 1978; Gaffney & McFall, 1981). The vignettes posed a disequilibrium of the needs of self and other (e.g., your father is angry at you for coming home after curfew). Responses were coded on a 4-point scale (0 = least sophisticated: impulsive, self-protective to 3 = most sophisticated: mutual solutions, oriented towards cooperation) (Selman, 1986).
RESULTS

Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations for all variables in this study.

Table 4 provides simple correlations between dependent and independent variables.

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to predict interpersonal negotiation strategies at 18 separately from fathers’ verbal and physical maltreatment at 16. This was done after accounting for stability of negotiation strategies and demographic factors. Greater frequency of both fathers’ verbal and physical maltreatment were associated with lower levels of negotiation strategies over time ($ = -.29, p < .05; $ = -.41, p < .01$, respectively). Fathers’ verbal maltreatment accounted for 8% of the variance, and physical maltreatment accounted for 15% of the variance in predicting changes in negotiation strategies (See Tables 5 and 6).
RESULTS, continued

- Aggressive behavior at 16 was then entered into the models above. Again, greater frequency of both fathers’ verbal and physical maltreatment were associated with lower levels of negotiation strategies over time ($r = -.31, p < .05; r = -.38, p < .01$, respectively). Fathers’ verbal maltreatment accounted for 9% of the variance, and physical maltreatment accounted for 13% of the variance in predicting changes in negotiation strategies (See Tables 5 and 6).

- Hierarchical regression analyses were used to predict interpersonal negotiation strategies at 18 separately from mothers’ verbal and physical maltreatment at 16. This was done after accounting for stability of negotiation strategies and demographic factors. Results were not significant.
CONCLUSIONS

- Fathers’ use of verbal and physical maltreatment may have a negative impact on adolescents’ learning to negotiate interpersonal conflict over time.

- This was found to be true even after accounting for the extent to which adolescents may learn to use aggression as a means to resolve conflict.

- Since the variance explained by verbal and physical maltreatment differed, this underscores the need to consider the effects of verbal and physical maltreatment separately.

- Furthermore, these results indicate that it is a serious oversight to fail to include fathers in research on maltreatment.

- Since adolescence is a period of rapid cognitive development, these results suggest that certain types of punishment at this time may be especially detrimental to how adolescents learn to think about negotiating interpersonal conflict.
REFERENCES


