Child Temperament as a Moderator for the Outcomes of Corporal Punishment: A Sibling Comparison Analysis

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Introduction

- While numerous studies have suggested that corporal punishment (CP) is associated with adverse developmental outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016), the conclusions that can be drawn from these studies have been challenged due to uncontrolled confounding variables (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002; Ferguson, 2013; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005).
- Sociodemographic and genetic factors may have influenced both the use of CP and the development of behavior problems in childhood and adolescence.
- Past studies have not always accounted for individual differences (e.g., temperament, personality) among children who receive CP.
- Furthermore, it is necessary to study outcomes of CP within the context of individual differences among children while also controlling for extraneous genetic and environmental confounds.
- Studies have suggested that children with difficult temperaments are differentially susceptible to CP rearing influences compared to their peers (Belsky et al., 2007).

Research Questions

- Do children who receive CP exhibit higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors compared to children who do not receive CP?
- Among children who receive CP, do children with difficult temperaments show higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors compared to children with moderate temperaments?
- Do these associations hold when controlling for genetic and environmental factors (i.e., comparing biological siblings)?

Methods

- We examined data collected from 11,508 biological children born to a nationally representative group of women who participated in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.
- Multilevel modeling as implemented in Mplus 7.31 was used to estimate population and within-family associations comparing biological siblings.

Measures

- A shortened version of the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) was used to assess mothers’ use of corporal punishment.
- Child fussy temperament was measured during children’s first two years of life by maternal reports using items from the Infant Behavior Questionnaire (IBQ; Rothbart, 1981).

Results

Table 1  Unstandardized coefficients from sibling comparison model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>Outcome Variables</th>
<th>Corporal Punishment (CP)</th>
<th>Temperament (T)</th>
<th>CP x T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td></td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.012*</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Behaviors</td>
<td></td>
<td>.025***</td>
<td>.016**</td>
<td>-.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Behaviors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delinquency</td>
<td></td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>-.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.192**</td>
<td>-.324**</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Results (Cont.)

- Siblings who received higher levels of CP were significantly more likely to exhibit externalizing problem behaviors between the ages of 4 and 9 and were significantly less likely to report symptoms of depression in adolescence.
- Siblings who were reported as exhibiting higher levels of fussy temperament during infancy were significantly more likely to exhibit internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors between the ages of 4 and 9 and were significantly less likely to report symptoms of depression in adolescence.
- No CP x Temperament interactions were found to be significant, suggesting that temperament is not a moderator for the outcomes of CP.

Conclusions & Future Directions

- These results suggest that CP may be associated with higher levels of externalizing problem behaviors even when controlling for genetic and environmental factors.
- Further research is necessary in order to understand the specific variables responsible for the association between CP and problem behaviors.

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