HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR

MAIRIN AUGUSTINE

TITLE: PARENTING CONTRIBUTIONS TO SELF-REGULATORY OUTCOMES: THE ROLE OF CHILD TEMPERAMENT AND CONTEXTS OF MEASUREMENT

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Areas of Specialization: Individual Development and Family Studies

ABSTRACT

Understanding precursors to children’s development of self-regulation is an important task for researchers wishing to promote many positive socioemotional outcomes in children. The current dissertation project focused on the role of child temperament, parenting, and interactive context on outcomes related to the development of approach-withdrawal tendencies and behavioral self-regulation and conscience. The overarching goal was to contribute to the developmental literature on how parenting interacts with child temperamental characteristics to predict outcomes relevant to child self-regulatory capabilities, specifically, by exploring various
means through which contexts of measurement affect patterns of influence. These patterns were examined in a longitudinal sample of mothers and children who were observed when the child was 12 months, 18 months, and 4.5 years of age.

The goal of the first study was to examine whether mothers’ behavior when introducing infants to low- and high-intensity novel objects (12 months) predicted children’s approach-withdrawal responses in two contexts in toddlerhood (18 months) based on their infants’ early approach to novelty. For high-approach infants, maternal positive affect with a high-intensity novel toy predicted more toddler approach during a low-intensity novel situation. For low-approach infants, maternal stimulation with a low-intensity novel toy predicted less toddler approach during a high-intensity novel situation. Maternal sensitivity did not relate to toddler approach-withdrawal for low- or high-approach infants. Thus, certain maternal behaviors may lead to stronger associations between earlier and later measures of approach-withdrawal, but the effects are tied to contexts of socialization and outcomes.

The goal of the second study was to observe mothers’ and children’s positive affect, responsiveness, and control behavior in two contexts in toddlerhood (18 months), one involving no regulatory structure (free play) and one involving a specific regulatory goal (clean-up). Temperament differences were examined based on inhibited, exuberant, and average approach temperament groups created from a latent profile analysis of toddler affective and behavioral responses to novelty. There were few mean differences in mother and child behavior based on child temperament. However, mothers displayed more control in the structured task compared to the unstructured task, and children displayed less positive affect, less responsiveness, and more attempts to control mother behavior. Additionally, there were several significant relations between child and mother behavior in each task across temperament group, but there were additional relations between child behavior and mother behavior only for the exuberant and/or average approach groups. These results suggest that mother and child behaviors do in fact differ across unstructured and structured contexts, and that mothers of exuberant and average-approach children may potentially adjust their parenting to child responses relatively more than mothers of inhibited children; both of these factors may affect temperament- and context-based contributions of parenting behavior on children’s regulatory development.

The third study examined child temperament group and mother-child interactions during the unstructured and structured tasks in toddlerhood (18 months) as longitudinal predictors of child behavioral self-regulation and conscience at preschool age (4.5 years). Based on past research, it was hypothesized that exuberant children’s regulatory outcomes would be most strongly predicted by parent-child mutual positivity/responsiveness observed in the unstructured context, and inhibited children’s regulatory outcomes would be most strongly predicted by mothers’ control/structuring behavior in the structured context. Contrary to expectations, mother control/structuring behavior in both contexts related to better behavioral self-regulation in the exuberant group. Further, mother control/structuring behavior in free play related to poorer behavioral self-regulation in the average approach group, and mother control/structuring behavior in clean-up related to poorer behavioral self-regulation in the inhibited group. Mother control may provide generally-beneficial self-regulatory guidance to exuberant children, but could serve a disruptive effect for children of other temperament types when displayed in certain contexts.

In conclusion, the results of this dissertation project demonstrated that parent and child behavior varies across interactive contexts, as do temperament-by-parenting interaction patterns predicting children’s regulatory outcomes. Early self-regulatory development thus appears to
involve a complex interplay of temperament and parenting across different interactive contexts. Specific patterns of influence such as those that emerged from these studies may offer meaningful insight to researchers and clinicians about how parent-child relationships promote various regulatory outcomes in children with different temperamental characteristics.