

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN BEHAVIORALLY DISORDERED AND «NORMAL» ADOLESCENTS

Dejana Tasić, Aleksandar Budjanovac and Milko Mejovšek

University of Zagreb

On the sample of 274 eight grade pupils of both sexes (aged 14) the differences in perception of parent-child communication between behaviorally disordered (N=140) and "normal" (N=134) adolescents were examined. The shortened and partially modified version of Behavior Disorders Questionnaire for the assessment of the behavior disorders and Communication Questionnaire were administered, both constructed on the Department of Behavior Disorders. The study showed that behaviorally disordered adolescents mainly differ from their non-disturbed peers by the general intrafamily context - openness, support and mutual respect. Also, it has been shown that the two subsamples experience differences in relationship with both parents; behaviorally disordered adolescents who manifest externalised disorders experience poorer relationship with both parents.

Influjo de la comunicación entre los padres y los hijos sobre los adolescentes que padecen trastornos de conducta. En la muestra de 274 alumnos de ambos sexos se examinaron las diferencias de percepción en la comunicación entre los padres y los hijos y su influjo a los adolescentes padeciendo de los trastornos conductuales (N=140) y los adolescentes "normales" (N=134). La versión reducida y parcialmente modificada del Cuestionario de trastornos conductuales para la valoración de los mismos y el Cuestionario de comunicación fueron administrados, los dos construidos a base de Departamento de trastornos conductuales. El ensayo ha mostrado que los adolescentes padeciendo de los trastornos de conducta se diferencian considerablemente de sus coétanos carente de los mismos trastornos en el general contexto interfamiliar - franqueza, apoyo, respeto mutal. Se ha mostrado también que las dos sub-muestras experimentan las diferencias en cuanto a la relación con ambos padres; los adolescentes padeciendo de los trastornos conductuales que reflejan una experiencia de los trastornos externos tienen relaciones de baja calidad con sus padres.

There is a very close connection between delinquent behavior and other forms of deviant behavior in children and adolescents

(White et al., 1990; Moffitt, 1993; Caspi et al., 1995). Criminal acts are frequently consequential of numerous difficulties in socialisation process. These difficulties generate various forms of behaviors potentially dangerous to child development and to his/her environment. Besides, children and adolescents, unlike adults, are subjects of intensi-

Correspondencia: Milko Mejovšek, Ph. D.
Faculty of Defectology
University of Zagreb
10 000 Zagreb, Kušlanova 59a (Croatia)

ve bio-psycho-social changes, whose dynamism offers considerable opportunities for socialisation; at the same time, they are subjected to influences that can direct their behavior in asocial, and antisocial direction.

Modes of communication that children/adolescents learn and develop in their family, undoubtedly have great impact on relationships in later life-course.

Intrafamily relationships are of great importance for prevention of behavior disorders as well as for their development (Marquis, 1992).

McCrae and Costa (1988) examined the relationship between adult's assessment of their own personality traits (according to the "big five" theory) and the relationship with parents during childhood. The separate analyses were made for mothers and fathers, regarding the sex and the age of the subjects. Results showed that children raised up in loving atmosphere grow up to be well adjusted, open toward others, tolerant, co-operative, and creative. The highest correlation was observed with the neuroticism scale. The correlations were similar for mothers and fathers. However, the correlations were relatively low; therefore, authors concluded that parental influence in forming of personality is low, compared with the influence of the hereditary factors.

Studying effect of family atmosphere on later criminal conduct, McCord (1979) found significant effect of parenting on later child's behavior. Family atmosphere showed even better than juveniles' criminal records in prediction of later criminal conduct. Items describing parenting accounted for 30% variance in prediction of sentencing for stealing and homicide. The best predictors were parental control, maternal love and conflicts between parents.

Loeber and Dishion (1993) found that severe, non-consistent discipline and poor control predicted later delinquency even better than the socio-economic status. Henry et

al. (1993) found that antisocial and "normal" children differ primarily in parental disagreement about parenting a five-year child, and in numerous changes of child's caretakers. The conflicts between parents, child neglect and abuse are correlated with the child's aggressiveness. If the child lives in extremely unfavourable family circumstances, there is a high probability for him/her to become a serious delinquent (McCord et al., 1963; Farrington, 1978, 1991).

The comparison between the children who were loved by their parents on one side and abused, neglected and rejected children on the other, shows that latter have significantly less favourable family circumstances, which especially refers to parent aggressiveness (McCord, 1983).

The children exposed to parental verbal and physical aggression show higher level of aggressiveness and greater inclination to delinquent behavior than children exposed only to verbal aggression (Vissing et al., 1991).

In search for a cause of child's aggressive behavior, some authors especially emphasise the importance of family interactions (Patterson, 1976; Patterson et. al., 1984). Patterson (1976) maintains that family is a complex system in which child plays the role of the "victim" but also the one of the "architect" in building of aggressive patterns and disturbances of the family interactions.

Dumas et al. (1992) concluded that mothers of aggressive children are more aversive and authoritative than mothers of "normally" developed children. Further analysis showed that the mothers of aggressive children choose inconsistent and punitive patterns of communication. A good parent-child relationship diminishes the effect of developmental crisis and benefits the child's positive mental development (Cohn et al., 1992).

Rankin and Kern (1994) confirmed the hypothesis about moderate, yet consistent

relation between family attachment and juvenile delinquency; children equally attached to both parents showed significantly lower risk of later delinquent behavior than children attached only to one parent. Lyon et al. (1992) found an influence of insufficient parental control and poor family relationship on adolescents joining the juvenile gangs; Elliot et al. (1985) showed the relation between family disturbances and adolescents' delinquent activities.

Deficient interpersonal relationships between family members are a crucial factor in juvenile alcohol abuse (Foxcroft et al., 1994).

A meta-analysis conducted by Denton and Kampfe (1994) showed that drug abusing adolescents most frequently report poor family relationships. They described their family environment as hostile; it lacks understanding, love, cohesion and cooperativeness. They also experience their parents as indifferent persons who care only about their own problems. The family communication is disturbed, rigid and unclear, without confidence, acceptance and understanding. On the other side, the addicts' parents report a lack of self-confidence in the matters of upbringing; they feel that parent role demands too much self-sacrifice and self-denial.

The disturbed, "clinical" families with addicted or delinquent adolescent show lesser capability of problem solving, more defensive (including threats, punishment, control and domination) and less supportive communication (including the exchange of information and empathy).

A disturbed mother-adolescent relationship is characterised by insufficiencies in problem-solving skills, a greater proportion of "difficult" behavior and a less positive communication. In general, these findings suggest that adolescents' problem behavior correlates positively with the aversive verbal behavior, and negatively with positive

and functional parent behavior. However, the causality in this relationships remains unclear (Krinsley and Bry, 1992).

The importance of one belonging to his/her family considerably influences later life-course in many ways, independently of other family members experiences (Chubb and Fertmann, 1992). Many researchers found affective quality of family relationships during adolescence related with the measures of adolescent's psychosocial competence (Bell et al., 1985; Grotevant and Cooper, 1985; Papini et al., 1989). These studies support the hypothesis by which the level of emotional involvement of children and parents (or other caretakers) reliably predicts adolescents' problem behavior. The insecure relationship with caretakers during childhood also emerged as an important risk factor for later development of maladaptive behaviors (Cohn et al., 1992). If there is a high level of emotional closeness between family members, adolescents show a high level of self-confidence.

LeCroy (1988) found that the level of intimacy between father and adolescent predicts appropriate behavior of adolescents better than the level of intimacy between mother and adolescent.

When planning some shared activity, mothers of behaviorally disturbed adolescents more often react "negatively" on "negative" behavior of their children than mothers from control sample. Behaviorally disturbed adolescents are also more oriented to negativities of their mothers than adolescents from the control sample (Krinsley and Bry, 1992).

Depressive parents, comparing to non-depressive parents, showed significantly lower level of satisfaction with marriage quality, parent-child relationships and global family functioning (Kaslow et al., 1992).

The aim of present study was to analyse the differences between behaviorally disordered and "normal" adolescents in their per-

ception of parent-child communication. Although there is little doubt about tendencies of the correlation, it is important to find out more about their specific contents.

Our general hypothesis was that behaviorally disturbed adolescents experience insufficient and more difficult communication with their parents than their “normal” peers.

Material and methods

The research was carried out on a sample of pupils of both sexes attending eight grades in 33 randomly selected schools in Zagreb area. In every school, we examined the pupils of one eight grade class, which was also randomly selected. The total of pupils examined was 1023 (513 girls and 510 boys, aged 14). However, only 968 subjects who lived with both parents were examined in this study.

To achieve a clearer distinction in communication space, we considered only the subjects whose standardised scores were placed on both ends of the first principal component of Behavior Disorders Questionnaire. The first subsample ($N_1 = 134$) comprised the subjects who scored lower than -1 standard deviation; the second subsample ($N_2 = 140$) comprised the subjects who scored higher than +1 standard deviation. The subjects from N_1 subsample, therefore, rarely manifested behavior disorders, while the subjects from N_2 subsample often manifested behavior disorders.

For the assessment of the behavior disorders we used the shortened and partially modified version of Behavior Disorders Questionnaire (see Table 2), constructed on Department of Behavior Disorders, Faculty of Defectology. The Questionnaire comprises the behavior forms whose frequent occurrence can eventually lead to deviant and delinquent way of life. Cronbach-alpha reliability coefficient of Questionnaire is .85.

Communication Questionnaire (see table 3) was also constructed on the same Department. For the purposes of this study, the shortened version was used (32 items, out of 60).

All items were ordinal 5-point Likert scales. In Communication Questionnaire we measured subjects’ agreement with each particular statement. The Behavior Disorders Questionnaire is a self-report scale; it measures frequency of 27 behavior disorders. The lowest result on scale marks disagreement with the statement, or absence of behavior disorders.

The first principal component of Behavior Disorders Questionnaire was extracted by the method of Hotelling’s principal component analysis (Cooley and Lohnes, 1971). Differences between two groups were analysed using one-way variance analysis (program SPSSWIN).

Results

Table 1 and 2 show the results of principal component analysis. Only the first principal component was considered. It was defined mainly by the items that refer to external behavior disorders: negligence (laziness), lack of interests (boredom), obtrusiveness, untidiness, indiscipline during classes, defiance, lying, verbal and physical aggression (cursing and arguments, fights), smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, unjustified skipping classes and whole school days, mingling with asocial persons, vagrancy and stealing. Therefore, our two subsamples differ primarily in manifestation of external behavior disorders.

FAC	Lambda	L/T
FAC ₁	5.6933	0.211
Trace: 27.0000; Criteria value: 1.0000		

Table 2
Structure of first principal component (STR₁)

Variable	STR ₁
Nail biting	.271
Tics	.278
Stammering	.183
Timidity	.050
Seclusiveness	.005
Depression	.184
Plaintiveness	.167
Negligence (laziness)	.577
Lack of interests (boredom)	.525
Absentmindedness	.373
Spoiledness	.226
Obrusiveness	.468
Untidiness	.461
Indiscipline during classes	.628
Defiance	.578
Lying	.638
Verbal aggression (cursing and arguments)	.674
Physical aggression	.517
Smoking	.516
Drinking alcoholic beverages	.539
Taking drugs	.302
Unjustified skipping classes	.626
Unjustified skipping whole school days	.502
Running from home	.372
Mingling with asocial persons	.576
Vagrancy	.532
Stealing	.560

Table 3 shows the results of one-way variance analysis. M_1 and S_1 are the means and standard deviations of the first subsample (subjects who did not report external behavior disorders); M_2 and S_2 are the means and standard deviations of the second subsample (subjects who did report external behavior disorders).

Results in Table 3 show that subjects without behavior disorders experience the communication with their parents as possessing higher quality. As much as 23 items

showed statistically significant difference between the two subsamples. The interesting exception from the main trend are items 17 - 18 ("I believe I can tell my mother/father what I feel and think about things.") that appear to indicate the level of openness in parent-child relationship. The statistically significant difference was achieved only when item was related to father - behaviorally disturbed adolescents reported more open relationship. However, we could suppose that the subjects actually thought this statement referred to quarrelling with their fathers. It is also possible that subjects understood that the term "some things" meant something indecent, forbidden, (like sex, for example). It could explain our finding - the behaviorally disturbed adolescents scored higher on this item because they are more direct and defiant in conversation with their fathers, and also, more likely are ready to talk about "forbidden" themes.

The results on items 24 ("It's difficult to talk with my father about anything."), 28 ("I talk with my father about my feelings."), and 30 ("I talk with my father about my friends.") could confirm our hypothesis - the behaviorally disturbed adolescents have difficulties in conversation with their fathers.

Further, items 15 - 16 ("When I do something wrong, my mother/father punishes me.") also slightly differs from the general trend; differences were found only in relation to one parent. These results imply that punishment coming from the mother does not distinguish adolescents, and, also, that fathers more often punish behaviorally disturbed subjects. The father's role in punishing children is obviously more important than the mother's. In our culture it is expected from father to be more rigorous, but it seems that exaggerated severity can result in behavioral disorders.

On the other side, the statement "My mother/father liked to play with me." differs our subsamples only when it refers to mother (mothers played less often with beha-

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN BEHAVIORALLY DISORDERED AND «NORMAL» ADOLESCENTS

Table 3
Variance analysis of items in communication set (N₁ and N₂)

Variable	M ₁	S ₁	M ₂	S ₂	F-RATIO	P
1. When I do something wrong, my mother cries.	2.89	1.46	3.19	1.44	2.867	.0745
2. When I do something wrong, my father cries.	2.73	1.48	2.96	1.49	1.582	.1772
3. I talk with my mother about my problems.	4.13	1.24	2.84	2.35	63.117	.0000
4. I talk with my father about my problems.	3.46	1.41	2.51	1.45	30.456	.0000
5. My mother treats me as equal family member.	4.72	.71	4.11	1.17	26.932	.0000
6. My father treats me as equal family member.	4.67	.76	4.03	1.25	25.411	.0000
7. When I discuss important matters with my mother, the talk ends up with a fight.	1.63	1.14	2.68	1.58	39.081	.0000
8. When I discuss important matters with my father, the talk ends up with a fight.	1.64	1.21	2.28	1.44	15.572	.0001
9. When I do something wrong, my mother beats me.	1.42	.96	1.45	1.00	.073	.8969
10. When I do something wrong, my father beats me.	1.48	.99	1.68	1.25	2.161	.1181
11. When I do something wrong, my mother talks with me about my behavior.	4.36	.96	4.08	1.08	5.102	.0195
12. When I do something wrong, my father talks with me about my behavior.	4.33	1.05	3.68	1.33	20.054	.0000
13. When I do something wrong, my mother explains to me my mistake.	4.49	.94	3.91	1.33	17.180	.0000
14. When I do something wrong, my father explains to me my mistake.	4.32	1.07	3.78	1.34	13.243	.0003
15. When I do something wrong, my mother punishes me.	2.35	1.37	2.55	1.45	1.371	.2075
16. When I do something wrong, my father punishes me.	2.30	1.36	2.66	1.45	4.422	.0029
17. I believe I can tell my mother what I feel and think about things.	2.79	1.61	3.10	1.61	2.508	.0939
18. I believe I can tell my father what I feel and think about things.	2.80	1.56	3.31	1.53	7.374	.0055
19. I can always count on my mother's help.	4.72	.74	4.32	1.00	13.592	.0002
20. I can always count on my father's help.	4.71	.72	4.27	1.06	15.821	.0001
21. My mother allows me to do anything I want.	2.40	1.31	2.31	1.30	.315	.5698
22. My father allows me to do anything I want.	2.51	1.36	2.36	1.36	0.758	.3470
23. It's difficult to talk with my mother about anything.	1.94	1.29	2.43	1.41	9.178	.0021
24. It's difficult to talk with my father about anything.	2.10	1.23	2.55	1.44	7.587	.0049
25. My mother liked to play with me.	4.01	1.23	3.79	1.42	7.694	.0046
26. My father liked to play with me.	4.15	1.18	3.92	1.41	2.078	.1250
27. I talk with my mother about my feelings.	4.04	1.21	2.69	1.54	63.923	.0000
28. I talk with my father about my feelings.	3.42	1.38	2.36	1.36	40.299	.0000
29. I talk with my mother about my friends.	4.31	.91	3.63	1.31	24.296	.0000
30. I talk with my father about my friends.	3.87	1.26	3.18	1.48	17.121	.0000
31. When in trouble, members of my family support each other.	4.59	.95	4.06	1.32	14.584	.0001
32. In our family, everyone can freely express his/her opinion.	4.70	.71	4.04	1.33	25.58	.0000

LEGEND:

M₁ and M₂ - arithmetic means of subsamples N₁ and N₂

S₁ and S₂ - standard deviations

P - probability

viably disturbed children). This is probably the consequence of poorly developed, less emotional, “colder” relationship, with mother, which is in concordance with the results of some previous studies (Dumas et al., 1992; Harrist et al., 1994).

Discussion

Our study was based on subject's perception rather than on real family situation. We

are aware of the fact that the perception of the relationships and actual parent-child relations in many cases are not the same. However, the influence of the way of experiencing things on human behavior is probably greater than the influence of reality itself; therefore, it could be more important than reality (King, 1979).

LeCroy (1988) stressed an injustice of levelling the notions 'contact', 'help', and 'intimacy' in family relationships studies,

which manifests itself in the assumption that quantity of interactions is the same as quality, and material exchange is the same as emotional exchange. The results of our study also do not support such hypothesis. Our study showed that behaviorally disordered adolescents mainly differ from their non-disturbed peers by the general intrafamily context - openness, support, and mutual respect. Only a few items that marked some particular parental reactions did not show statistical differences. We suppose, if this context is favourable, then some sporadically negative parental reactions such as physical punishment (9, 10), occasional shouting (1, 2) or permissiveness (21, 22) are not related with the emergence of the behavior disorders.

In general, our results confirmed those of Rankin and Kern (1991) who stressed the importance of adolescent's attachment to

both parents. Our study suggests that two subsamples also experience differences in relationship with both parents (with only 3 exceptions); therefore, we can conclude that behaviorally disordered adolescents who manifest externalised disorders experience poorer relationship with both parents.

The positive relationship with both parents is important for "normal" development; it is a crucial condition for harmonical functioning of family, and, at the same time, the indicator of good relationship between the parents themselves.

Unfortunately, the causality of phenomena remains unclear; we can only suppose that behavior disorders emerge from interaction between child's hereditary predisposition and the unfavourable family environment. This question could probably be answered by means of a long-term study, starting from the child's earliest age.

Referencias

- Bell, N.J., Avery, A.W., Jenkins, D., Feld, J. and Schoenrock, C.J. (1985). Family relationships and social competence during late adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 14 (2), 109-119.
- Caspi, A., Henry, B., McGee, R.O., Moffit, T.E., Silva, P.A. (1995): Temperamental origins of child and adolescent behavior problems: From age three to age fifteen. *Child Development*, 66 (1), 55-68.
- Chubb, N.H. and Fertman, C.I. (1992). Adolescents' perceptions of belonging in their families. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 73 (4), 387-393.
- Cohn, D.A., Cowan, P.A. and Cowan, C.P. (1992). Mothers' and fathers' working models of childhood attachment relationships, parenting styles, and child behavior. *Development and Psychopathology*, 4 (4), 417-431.
- Cooley, W.W. and Lohnes, P.R. (1971). *Multivariate data analysis*. New York: John Wiley.
- Denton, R.E. and Kampfe, C.M. (1994). The relationship between family variables and adolescent substance abuse: A literature review. *Adolescence*, 29 (114), 475-495.
- Dumas, J.E., LaFreniere, P.J., Beaudin, L. and Verlaana, P. (1992). Mother-child interactions in competent and aggressive dyads: implications of relationship stress for behaviour therapy with families. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 21 (1), 3-13.
- Elliott, D.S., Huizinga, D. and Ageton, S.S. (1985). *Explaining delinquency and drug use*, Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Farrington, D.P. (1978). The family backgrounds of aggressive youths. In Hersov, L.A., Berger, M. and Shaffer, D. (eds.), *Aggression and antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 73-93). Oxford: Pergamon.
- Farrington, D.P. (1991). Childhood aggression and adult violence: Early precursors and later-life outcomes. In Peper, D.J., Rubin, K.H. (eds.), *The development and treatment of*

- childhood aggression* (pp. 5-29). Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Foxcroft, D.R., Lowe, G. and May, C. (1994). Adolescent alcohol use and family influences: attributive statements by teenage drinkers. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 1 (1), 63-69.
- Grotevant, H.D. and Cooper, C.R. (1985). Patterns of interaction in family relationships and the development of identity exploration in adolescence. *Child Development*, 56 (4), 415-428.
- Harrist, A.W., Pettit, G.S., Dodge, K.A. and Bates, J.E. (1994). Dyadic synchrony in mother-child interaction. *Family Relations*, 43 (5), 417-424.
- Henry, B., Moffitt, T., Robins, L., Earls, F. and Silva, P. (1993). Early family predictors of child and adolescent antisocial behaviour: Who are the mothers of delinquents?. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 3 (2), 97-118.
- Kaslow, N., Warner, V., John, K. and Brown, R. (1992). Intrainformant agreement and family functioning in depressed and nondepressed parents and their children. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 20 (3), 204-217.
- King, R.G. (1979). *Fundamentals of Human Communication*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co.
- Krinsley, K.E. and Bry, B.H. (1992). Sequential analyses of adolescent, mother and father behaviors in distressed and nondistressed families. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 13 (1), 45-62.
- Le Croy, C.W. (1988). Parent - adolescent intimacy: Impact on adolescent functioning. *Adolescence*, 23 (89), 137-149.
- Loeber, R., Dishion, T. (1983). Early predictors of male delinquency: a review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 94 (1), 68-99.
- Lyon, J., Henggeler, S. and Hall, J.A. (1992). The family relations, peer relations, and criminal activities of Caucasian and hispanic-american gang members. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 20 (5), 439-449.
- Marquis, P. (1992). Family dysfunction as a risk factor in the development of antisocial behavior. *Psychological Reports*, 71 (3), 468-470.
- McCord, J., McCord, W. and Howard, A. (1963). Family interaction as antecedent to the direction of male aggressiveness. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 66 (3), 239-242.
- McCord, J. (1979). Some child-rearing antecedents of criminal behavior in adult men. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37 (9), 1477-1486.
- McCord, J. (1983). A forty year perspective on effects of child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7 (4), 265-270.
- McCrae, R.R. and Costa, P.T. (1988). Recalled parent-child relations and adult personality. *Journal of Personality*, 56 (2), 417-434.
- Moffitt, T.A. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100 (4), 674-701.
- Papini, R.D., Sebbi, A.R. and Clark, S. (1989). Affective quality of family relation and adolescent identity exploration. *Adolescence*, 24 (95), 457-467.
- Patterson, G.R. (1976). The aggressive child: Victim and architect of a coercive system. In Mash, E.J., Hamerlynck, L.A., Handy, L.C. (eds.), *Behavior modification and families* (pp. 267-316). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Patterson, G.R., Dishion, T.J. and Bank, L. (1984). Family interaction: A process model of deviancy training. *Aggressive Behavior*, 10 (4), 253-267.
- Rankin, J.H. and Kern, R. (1994). Parental attachments and delinquency. *Criminology*, 32 (4), 495-515.
- Vissing, Y.M., Straus, M.A., Gelles, R.J. and Harrop, J.W. (1991). Verbal aggression by parents and psychosocial problems of children. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15 (3), 223-238.
- White, J.L., Moffitt, T., Earls, F., Robins, L., Silva, P.A. (1990). How early can we tell? Predictors of childhood conduct disorder and adolescent delinquency. *Criminology*, 28 (4), 507-533.

Aceptado el 19 de mayo de 1997