

Do Parents Only Have to Avoid Being Nasty, or Should They Even Be Nice?

The Case of Adolescent Substance Use and Deviance

J. Gowert Masche¹, Kristina Persson, and Malin Löfgren

Kristianstad University, Sweden

Poster presented at the SRA Biennial Meeting, Vancouver, Canada, March 8-10, 2012

Theoretical Background

We (believed to) know some things



- If parents use to **regulate** their children's behavior, these abstain from externalizing problem behaviors (Steinberg, 2001).
- But this research was flawed: The common measure of "monitoring" rather reflects confident parent-adolescent communication (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Masche, 2010; Stattin & Kerr, 2000).
- With proper measures, the evidence is mixed. Parent **behavior control** seems to play some role (e.g., Hoeve et al., 2009), but one might say, "It depends," rather than that behavior control as a global parenting style would efficiently prevent externalizing (e.g., Arim et al., 2010).

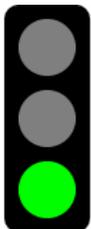
The neglected importance of psychological control



© photo: Niklas Pivic

- Psychological control = invalidating adolescents' feelings, constraining verbal expression, and love withdrawal.
- Psychological control has been regarded as cause of internalizing problems only (Steinberg, 2001), albeit it strongly predicts externalizing (e.g., Arim & Shapka, 2008; Barber, 1996; de Kemp et al., 2006; Hoeve et al., 2009).

And what about being friendly to one's children?



- Mixed findings. Often effects of acceptance and involvement, and the resulting close and trusting parent-adolescent relations,
- but often spurious when controlling for other parenting variables (e.g., Buist et al., 2004; Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2005; Hoeve et al., 2009; Rogers et al., 2003).

Studies comparing **deviance** (rule-breaking, aggression), **alcohol use**, and **drug use** are lacking. Because various facets of parenting and parent-adolescent relations are associated, we will not only test **correlations**, but also **unique effects** of **behavior control**, **psychological control**, and **positive parent-adolescent relations** on deviance, and alcohol and drug use.

¹ Kristianstad University, SE-291 88 Kristianstad, Sweden; gowert.masche@hkr.se; www.hkr.se/gowert-masche.

Methods

Sample

- 143 adolescents attending grade 9 (age 15-16)
- In two Swedish medium-sized cities (Sweden is in Scandinavia, i.e. in Northern Europe).
- 58% male, 44% non-Swedish ethnic background, mostly from Muslim countries.
- Participants filled out questionnaires at school.

Parent Measures

Separate scales for father and mother correlated highly (corrected for attenuation: .76–.94) and were thus combined.



Behavior control: 5 items such as “Do you need to have your parents' permission to stay out late on a weekday evening?” (from Kerr & Stattin, 2000). $\alpha = .85/.87$ for mother/father, resp.



Psychological control: 8 items, “Is less friendly with me if I do not see things her/his way” (from Barber et al., 2005). $\alpha = .81/.80$ for mother/father, resp.



Parent-adolescent relations: 12 items, “I get along very well with my mom/dad” (modified after Masche & Barber, 2001; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). $\alpha = .82$ for both mother and father.

Problem Behavior Measures



Alcohol use: 16 items, addressing frequency and quantity of use and psychosocial consequences such as relationship problems, damages, violence (mostly from Hvitfeldt & Gripe, 2010). $\alpha = .88$.



Drug use: 17 items, addressing use of various drugs and same psychosocial consequences. $\alpha = .89$. Further 10 items deleted because they were constantly zero.



Deviance: 15 items, “Have you shoplifted?” (mostly from Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). $\alpha = .89$.

Results

How are parents related to adolescent problem behaviors?

The following figures show that...

- **Behavior control** was not associated with any of these problem behaviors.
- **Psychological control** went along with higher alcohol use, drug use, and deviance.
- **Positive parent-adolescent relations** were related to low alcohol use and low deviance.
- Not shown: Gender and ethnic differences did not reach significance but went in the expected direction: more problems in males and in immigrants, except for alcohol use; larger gender differences in immigrants. Gender, ethnicity, and their interaction were statistically controlled for in the next analysis.

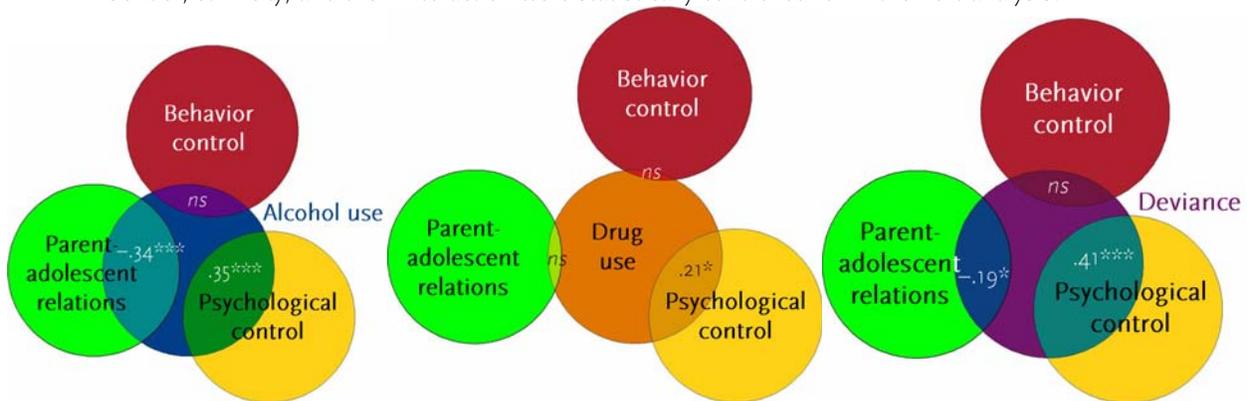
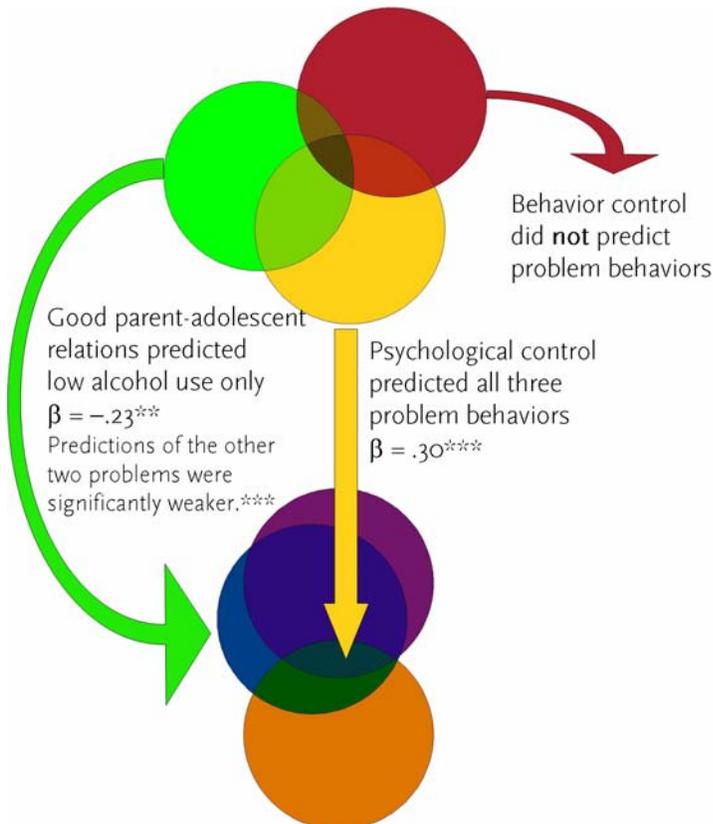


Fig. 1. Association of parents with alcohol use, drug use, and deviance, resp. Associations with drug use were weaker because drug use generally was low (floor effect).

Parent variables are closely related.

What are their unique associations with problem behaviors?



How did the authors calculate this? Regression models were fitted in LISREL, and all regression coefficients could be set invariant for all problem behaviors without loss of fit. Only the regression of alcohol use on parent-adolescent relations differed.

Conclusions

Parental control useless as a general parenting style



- This study adds to the evidence against propagating general behavior control as a means against externalizing problems in adolescents.
- That does not exclude the possibility that adolescents need and expect guidance in specific issues and situations (Arim et al., 2010; Cook et al., 2009).

Psychological control most closely associated with all investigated forms of externalizing problems



- Probably, part of this association is because parents react to adolescents' behaviors
- But psychological control also leads to externalizing (e.g., de Kemp et al., 2006).

Taken together, new thinking is needed: Families are not the U.S. Army. We must not think of adolescents as needing drill and control. Hurting their individuality does not only cause internalizing problems, but also makes them behave irresponsibly.

Does a good relationship not matter?



- A good relationship goes hand in hand with avoiding being nasty, i.e. avoiding psychological control.
- Psychological control is the stronger influence and thus positive relationships are spurious.
- But low alcohol use was uniquely associated with positive relationships, despite a high overlap between alcohol use and deviance, on which positive relations had a much smaller effect.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to show the specific association between positive parent-adolescent relations and low alcohol use.