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Longitudinal Relations of Intrusive Parenting and Effortful Control to Ego-Resiliency During Early Childhood

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Abstract

Longitudinal relations among ego-resiliency, effortful control, and observed intrusive parenting were examined at 18, 30, and 42 months of age (*N*s = 256, 230, and 210) using structural equation modeling. Intrusive parenting at 18 and 30 months negatively predicted effortful control a year later, over and above earlier levels. Effortful control at 30 months mediated the negative relation between 18-month intrusive parenting and ego-resiliency at 42 months when controlling for stability of the variables. Ego-resiliency did not predict effortful control. The findings suggest that intrusive parenting may have a negative effect on children's personality resiliency through its effects on the abilities to regulate attention and behavior.

Keywords

ego-resiliency; effortful control; intrusive parenting; early childhood

A key component of healthy adjustment is psychological flexibility, or the dynamic process by which individuals adapt to fluctuating situational demands, reconfigure mental resources, shift perspectives, and balance competing desires and needs (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). A personality characteristic associated with psychological flexibility is ego-resiliency (ER). ER reflects adaptability to environmental stress and change (Block & Block, 1980). Individuals with high ER are able to adapt to changing circumstances, shift behaviors as needed, and use problem-solving strategies flexibly. A nonresilient individual displays little adaptive flexibility, is disquieted by change, has the tendency to perseverate or become disorganized when dealing with stress, and has difficulty recouping after traumatic experiences (Block & Block, 2006). Supporting this notion, ER has been associated with diverse positive developmental outcomes such as social competence (Block & Block, 1980), low externalizing and internalizing symptoms (Chuang, Lamb, & Hwang, 2006; Hofer, Eisenberg, & Reiser, 2010), and cognitive functioning and attentiveness (Martel et al., 2007).

Consequently, examining how ER develops and is fostered in early childhood has important implications for later adjustment. Personality characteristics reflect cognitive structures and adaptive strategies that develop across time through socialization and further expression of temperamental characteristics (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Therefore, it is likely that ER is shaped by early-developing temperamental traits as well as by environmental influences

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such as parenting. However, relatively little is known about how ER develops from an early age or how it is linked across time with other developmental processes.

Effortful control (EC) is a characteristic that likely contributes to the early development of ER. EC includes the ability to voluntarily or willfully focus and shift attention and inhibit or initiate behaviors, to plan, and to detect errors (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). These abilities can be viewed as tools that help modulate emotion and behavior; consequently, individuals with high EC would be expected to have an advantage in regard to adapting effectively in stressful situations (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Although EC and ER have been positively linked in samples of preschoolers (Cumberland-Li, Eisenberg, & Reiser, 2004), elementary-school children (Eisenberg et al., 2003, 2004, 2010), and adolescents (Hofer, Eisenberg, & Reiser, 2010; Martel et al., 2007), these relations have not been examined in toddlerhood.

The social environment also is likely to affect the development of children's personality and regulatory traits. Exposure to intrusive parenting during early childhood may be particularly detrimental because this is a period when many important developmental changes, such as increased regulation and individual differences in personality, are emerging (Edwards & Liu, 2002; Sturge-Apple et al., 2012). Intrusive, insensitive, or controlling parents likely undermine the development of independent coping skills and discourage children's independent behaviors, whereas sensitive parents may model effective coping, provide appropriate support when children are overwhelmed, and expose children to manageable, age-appropriate stressors (Power, 2004). Furthermore, when mothers are unresponsive, punitive, or insensitive, children may experience heightened arousal that disrupts their ability to self-regulate, whereas mothers who are supportive and sensitive likely model constructive ways to manage stress and relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Although researchers have not specifically examined the relations between intrusive parenting and ER, lower levels of ER have been found in toddlers who display contradictory attachment behaviors when under stress (Smeekens, Riksen-Walraven, & Van-Bakel, 2009) and in maltreated school-age children (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Conversely, supportive parenting has been found to foster children's ER (Block & Block, 1980; Stams et al., 2001). Similarly, insensitive, punitive parenting is inversely related to children's EC whereas reversed findings have been found for warm parenting (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Graziano, Keane, & Calkins, 2010). However, punitive versus warm parenting is not identical to intrusive parenting—for example, parents can be warm and intrusive--so one cannot assume that intrusive parenting undermines ER (Denissen, van Aken, & Dubas, 2009).

The present study investigated the longitudinal relations among intrusive parenting, ER, and EC. We expected negative relations between intrusive parenting and ER, and hypothesized that EC would mediate those relations across time. We expected that EC, because it is a fairly rudimentary temperamental capacity, to predict ER, which is viewed as an aspect of personality and expected to develop from temperament and experience dealing with stress. ER has seldom been examined in young children, especially in relation to EC and to intrusive parenting. Furthermore, unlike in prior studies involving one or two assessments (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2004), we extended prior research by examining the relations between ER and EC across three assessments, which is desirable for testing mediated relations (Maxwell & Cole, 2007), the stability of constructs, and bi-directional paths.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants were families in an urban area, assessed at approximately 18 (T1), 30 (T2), and 42 (T3) months of age (*ns* = 256, 230, and 210). Children at T1 (55% male; *M* age = 17.78,

SD = .52) were mostly Caucasian and not Hispanic (87%) or Hispanic (13%). Mean parental education was some college and mean annual family income was $45,000–$65,000. Mothers who attrited were younger at the child's birth (*M* = 27.16 years) than were mothers still participating at T3 (*M* = 29.70), $t(243) = 2.93$, $p < .01$. No other key variables were related to attrition. At each assessment, mothers and non-parental caregivers (e.g., babysitter, preschool teacher; *ns* = 176, 153, 151) were mailed questionnaires to mail back or to bring to the laboratory. Mothers and children participated in laboratory sessions lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

Measures

Children's ego-resiliency—Mothers and non-parental caregivers rated children's ER (1 = highly undescriptive, 9 = highly descriptive) at all time points using an 11-item adapted questionnaire version of Block and Block's (1980) Q-sort. This shortened scale was constructed by Eisenberg and colleagues (1996, 2003) in order to reflect a purer version of resiliency that did not overlap with other constructs, such as negative emotionality. One item was dropped ("Can talk about unpleasant things that have happened to him/her") as it was not asked at 18 and 30 months as it was inappropriate for the ages assessed. Items included "Can bounce back or recover after a stressful or bad experience."

Children's effortful control—Mothers and non-parental caregivers rated EC (1 = never, 7 = always) using three 12-item subscales (attention-focusing, attention-shifting, and inhibitory-control) of the Early Childhood Behavioral Questionnaire (ECBQ; Putnam, Gartstein, & Rothbart, 2006) at T1 and T2, and the Child Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Rothbart, Ahadi, Hershey, & Fisher, 2001) at T3, e.g., "When engaged in play with his/her favorite toy, how often did your child stay involved for 10 minutes or more?" Reporters were combined for each subscale (inhibitory-control αs = .86, .88, and .86; attention-focus αs = .79, .82, and .77; and attention-shifting αs = .75, .74, and .74). Indicators were significantly correlated at all time-points.

Observed intrusive parenting—Coders assessed mothers' behavior at T1, T2, and T3 from videotapes of mother-child interactions during a teaching task, a free-play task, and a cleanup task, all lasting three minutes. In the teaching task, mothers taught their child to complete a puzzle (T1, T2) or Lego model (T3) with whatever strategies they would use at home. During the free-play task, mothers were given a basket of toys and asked to play as they would at home. Mothers' behavior was rated for intrusive/overcontrolling behavior every 30 seconds (1 = no intrusive behavior, 4 = extreme intrusive behaviors). Intraclass correlation coefficients [ICCs], assessed for 23%–30% of the sample were .81, .71, and .83 for teaching and .81, .86, and .83 for free-play. During the clean-up task, mothers were asked to have their children pick up the toys as if they were at home. Controlling behavior was rated every 15 seconds (0 = absent, 1 = present; ICCs for 26% percent of the sample = .70, .82, and .85). Examples of intrusive behavior included offering a continuous barrage of toys or not allowing children to touch an object they were reaching for.

Control variables—Control variables included maternal education (1 = grade school to 7 = Ph.D. or M.D.); mothers' marital status (0 = two-parent family, 1 = single-parent family), child sex (0 = male, 1 = female), and household income (1 = less than 15K to 7 = over 100K). Controls were analyzed on all latent variables and retained if they were significant.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We examined zero-order correlations (Table 1) and then used structural equation modeling with full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation (Mplus, Version 6; Muthén & Muthén, 2007) to evaluate the model (Figure 1). Because two indicators exhibited non-normality in skew or kurtosis--intrusiveness during the puzzle task at 18 and 30 months, we used MLR estimation, a modified form of maximum likelihood estimation that is robust to non-normality. First, we fit a confirmatory factor model with latent and control variables freely correlated. Unique variances of the variables were allowed to covary within a construct when indicated by the modification indices. This measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit, χ^2 (340, N =256) = 497.53, $p < .01$; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .04; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .91; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .88. We next tested the invariance of the loadings for indicators across time to examine whether the relations of the latent variables to the manifest variables were constant. Because we used MLR estimation, we used the Satorra-Bentler (S-B) scaled (mean-adjusted) chi-squares, wherein the usual normal-theory chi-square statistic is divided by a scaling correction to better approximate chi-square under non-normality. Two constraints resulted in a deterioration of fit: the resilience B indicator, S-B χ^2 (2, N=256) = 10.58, $p < .01$, and control from intrusive parenting, S-B χ^2 (2, N=256) = 9.04, $p < .01$. However, the fit indices remained the same. Given the importance of maintaining continuity across the constructs, we retained all the loading constraints.

Structural Equation Analysis

We then specified a restricted structural model (Figure 1) and tested a series of paths. The paths from parenting to ER, as well as from EC to parenting, were nonsignificant and removed to reduce the complexity of the model. We left the path from ER to EC in the model in order to examine the direction of effects between EC and ER. To determine if there were differences in prediction from our constructs at different ages, we then placed a series of constraints on our model to test invariance among the paths in our model. Constraining stability path coefficients for each construct (e.g., T1 ER to T2 ER and T2 ER to T3 ER) as well as the concurrent correlation pathways between constructs (e.g., between EC and ER at T1 and again at T2), did not result in a significant change of fit, S-B χ^2 (6, N=256) = 3.98, $p = .68$, thus these constraints were retained. We then constrained cross-lagged paths. Lagged paths from parenting to EC and from ER to EC also did not result in a significant change of fit, S-B χ^2 (2, N=256) = 1.55, $p = .46$, and these constraints were retained. However, lagged paths from EC to ER resulted in a significant deterioration of fit, S-B χ^2 (1, N=256) = 6.56, $p < .01$, and these paths were left unconstrained. This final model demonstrated an adequate fit: χ^2 (402, N= 256) = 564.98, $p = .99$; RMSEA = .04; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.90. Factor loadings for the latent variables were all significant at the $p < .01$ (range = .40 to .88, Table 2).

Intrusive parenting, EC and ER were stable across all assessments (particularly EC and parenting). ER and EC were positively correlated within T1 and within T2, as were ER and parenting. EC and parenting were not correlated at any concurrent time point in the model, although they were correlated in the zero-order correlations at T2 and T3. Across time, intrusive parenting predicted EC at both time points. T1 EC did not predict T2 ER; however, there was a significant path from T2 EC to T3 ER. Both across-time paths from ER to EC were nonsignificant. Lastly, T2 EC mediated the relation between T1 intrusive parenting and T3 ER ($b = -.08$, $SE = .04$, $z = -2.00$, $p < .05$) using the model indirect test in Mplus.

Discussion

We tested a three-wave model with autoregressive and bidirectional cross-lagged paths to assess relations among young children's ego-resiliency, effortful control, and intrusive parenting. Despite significant stability in all three constructs and correlations among some of the constructs within T1 and within T2, we found that EC mediated the relation of intrusive parenting to ER. Mediation suggests the effects of the intrusive parenting on ego resiliency are due to its effects on the development of effort control, which in turn provides skills used to become more ego-resilient over time. Because the panel model included controlling for prior levels of the variables, the paths can be interpreted as predicting change over time. Consistent with research with older children (e.g. Cumberland-Li et al, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2010; Martel et al., 2009), we found concurrent associations between ER and EC. In addition, we found evidence that 30-month EC positively predicted 42-month ER, controlling for prior levels of ER and concurrent correlations between the two constructs. Given the stability for both variables, it is particularly compelling to find across-time prediction of ER from EC. These findings demonstrate that these constructs are interrelated at an earlier age than previously found.

However, 18-month EC did not predict 30-month ER. Because EC is just emerging at 18 months (Eisenberg et al., 2010), advances in EC might provide building blocks for emerging ER. ER has been linked to emotional flexibility, in that resilient adults are better able to shift their emotional and physiological reactions in response to changing environmental stimuli (Waugh, Thompson, & Gotlib, 2011). This type of flexibility may depend on the emerging cognitive structures evident in EC. Consistent with this assumption, the lagged paths from ER to EC were nonsignificant, suggesting that EC contributes to individual differences in ER over time rather than vice versa. However, the data are correlational so causal relations cannot be proved.

Parenting also seems to play a role in the emergence of EC and ER. Intrusive parenting was concurrently negatively related to ER at both 18 and 30 months. Moreover, although there were no significant direct paths across time from intrusive parenting to ER, a significant indirect effect in which EC mediated the relation of intrusive parenting to later ER was found. In contrast, although parenting was not related to EC concurrently in the model, both lagged paths to EC were significant. Thus, parenting might affect not only concrete capacities such as the abilities to control attention and inhibit behavior, but also, indirectly, the ability to use their skills in an adaptive manner in stressful contexts.

Also of interest, there was no evidence that less-regulated children elicited more intrusive parenting and thereby affected ER. However, our sample may not have had the power to provide a strong test of bi-directional across-time paths, especially for weaker paths. Zero-order correlations were nonsignificant between T1 EC and T2 intrusive parenting, but there was a significant correlation between T2 EC and T3 parenting, supporting a weak relation of EC to parenting over time.

The current study has limitations. The sample was not diverse in ethnicity so the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Also we used a single methodology to assess ER and EC (combined mother and non-parental caregiver reports). However, only about 35% the non-parental caregivers were the same from one assessment to the next, which helps reduce potential bias. Lastly, our model fit for the CFI and TLI were below the recommendations of .95 suggested by Hu & Bentler (1999). However, our findings provide evidence that individual differences in ER are evident in the preschool years and that EC and parenting might affect its development.

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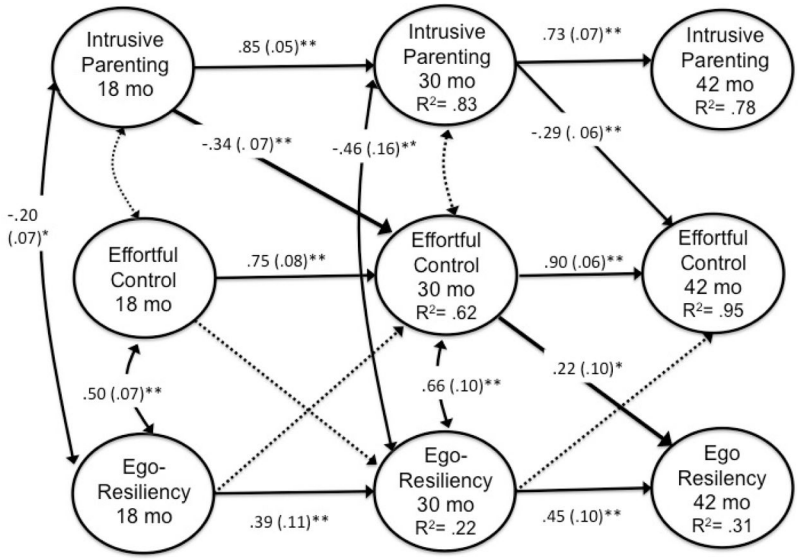

Figure 1.

Results, structural equation model

Note: χ^2 (402, N= 256) = 564.98, p = .99; RMSEA = .04; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.90. **p < .01 *p < .05 (two-tailed test). Results are standardized coefficients with standard errors shown in parentheses. Dotted lines are non-significant. 18 mo = Time 1; 30 mo = Time 2; 42 mo = Time 3. Significant control variables: Education on ego-resiliency T1 and T2, and parenting T1 and T3; Marital status on parenting T1, and ego-resiliency T2 and T3; Child sex on parenting T2.

Table 1

Zero-Order Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Resiliency T1	1.00												
2. Ef. Cont. T1	.30**	1.00											
3. Intr. Par. T1	−.18**	−.08	1.00										
4. Resiliency T2	.35**	.09	−.03	1.00									
5. Ef. Cont. T2	.19**	.57**	−.22**	.26**	1.00								
6. Intr. Par. T2	−.04	−.08	.57**	−.10	−.20**	1.00							
7. Resiliency T3	.31**	.13	−.12	.44**	.21**	−.15*	1.00						
8. Ef. Cont. T3	.15*	.39**	−.30**	.16*	.60**	−.33**	.31**	1.00					
9. Intr. Par. T3	−.08	−.14	.47**	−.13	−.19*	.55**	−.14	−.30**	1.00				
10. Mo. Ed. T1	.09	.08	−.36**	.16*	.08	−.29**	.09	.23**	−.36**	1.00			
11. Mar. status T1	.06	−.00	−.33**	.20**	.11	−.34**	.01	.10	−.39**	.32**	1.00		
12. Child Sex	−.01	−.08	.01	−.01	−.06	.20**	−.06	−.13	.07	.02	.01	1.00	
13. Income T1	.05	.05	−.23**	.12	.06	−.15*	−.08	.14	−.24	.50**	.38**	.12	1.00
Mean (*SD*)	6.76 (.72)	4.16 (.51)	.99 (.24)	6.88 (.85)	4.46 (.54)	.87 (.18)	6.89 (.89)	4.42 (.50)	1.01 (.19)	4.21 (1.05)	.84 (.36)	.56 (.50)	4.08 (1.74)

Note: Ef. Cont. = effortful control; Intr. Par. = intrusive parenting; Mo. Ed. = mother's education; Mar. status = marital status; T1 = 18 months; T2 = 30 months; T3 = 42 months; *SD* = standard deviation.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Latent Variables, Standardized

Latent Variables	**T1 (18 mo)**	**T2 (30 mo)**	**T3 (42 mo)**
	Est. (*SE*)	**Est. (*SE*)**	**Est (*SE*)**
Ego-Resiliency			
Resiliency A	.68 (.04)	.74 (.04)	.71 (.04)
Resiliency B	.72 (.06)	.79 (.03)	.89 (.04)
Resiliency C	.55 (.04)	.64 (.04)	.68 (.04)
Effortful Control			
Attention-focus	.55 (.06)	.59 (.05)	.59 (.06)
Attention-shifting	.61 (.05)	.63 (.05)	.58 (.04)
Inhibitory-control	.57 (.05)	.59 (.05)	.70 (.07)
Intrusive Parenting			
Intrusiveness, puzzle task	.45 (.05)	.48 (.05)	.40 (.04)
Intrusiveness, free play task	.58 (.05)	.60 (.07)	.44 (.07)
Control, clean-up task	.58 (.07)	.54 (.06)	.42 (.05)

* *Note:* All factor loadings are significant at $p < .01$.

Est. = estimate. *SE* = standard error.