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## Seesaw Discipline: The Interactive Effect of Harsh and Lax Discipline on Youth Psychological Adjustment

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### Abstract

Although extant research documents the negative consequences of harsh and lax discipline for youth, little empirical attention has been devoted to understanding the impact when parents utilize *both* strategies. As such, the current study was designed to explore the interaction of harsh and lax discipline on youth internalizing and externalizing symptoms in three developmental periods (early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence). Participants were 615 parents (55 % female) and one of their 3-to-17 year old children (45 % female). Parents provided reports of their harsh and lax parenting tactics as well as offspring internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Multiple linear regression analyses were utilized to examine the relations between the interaction of harsh and lax parenting on youth symptoms. The interaction between harsh and lax discipline was significantly related to youth internalizing, but not externalizing, problems in the both the young and middle childhood samples and marginally significant in the adolescence sample: Seesaw discipline – a novel construct indicative of high levels of both harsh and lax discipline – was associated with the highest levels of youth internalizing problems. Parents who engage in seesaw parenting have children and adolescents who are more likely to evidence internalizing symptoms. Such findings may inform prevention and intervention efforts that target dysfunctional discipline.

### Keywords

dysfunctional discipline; seesaw parenting; externalizing problems; internalizing problems

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Dysfunctional discipline has been consistently linked to heightened youth externalizing (e.g., Gershoff, 2002; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991) and internalizing (e.g., Bosmans, Braet, Beyers, Leeuwen, & Vlierberghe, 2011; Laskey & Cartwright-Hatton,

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2009; Leve, Kim, & Pears, 2005; Rodriguez, 2006) problems. The detrimental effect of dysfunctional discipline on youth internalizing and externalizing problems has been established across developmental periods from young childhood (e.g., Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, McBride-Chang, 2003; O'Leary & Vidair, 2005; Rhoades & O'Leary, 2007; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992), to middle childhood (e.g., Bayer, Ukoumunne, Lucas, Wake, Scalzo, & Nicholson, 2011; Luyckx et al., 2011) to adolescence (e.g., Bender et al., 2007; Hektner, August, Bloomquist, Lee, & Klimes-Dougan, 2014; Leve et al., 2005).

Although different researchers have conceptualized and assessed parenting in a variety of ways (i.e., fixed constellations or typologies versus distinct behavioral dimensions; see McKee, Jones, Forehand, & Cuellar, 2013, for a review), there has been relative consensus on two of the most important domains, namely, harshness and laxness (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993). Despite agreement on parenting practices, like harshness and laxness, that are relevant to youth outcomes, significant inconsistencies regarding terminology and operational definitions have resulted in a literature replete with labels used to describe various behavioral tendencies (McKee, Colletti, Rakow, Jones, & Forehand, 2008). Consequently, the following paragraphs will include careful consideration of the parenting behaviors of interest, how they have been defined historically, and how they are conceptualized in this project.

Harsh discipline, often characterized by physical or corporal punishment (e.g., spanking or hitting when angry or as a punishment for undesirable child behavior), has been identified as a key variable that accounts for variance in and predicts child externalizing outcomes (Bayer, et al., 2011; Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992; for a review see Gershoff, 2002). This disciplinary approach may reinforce oppositional behavior like aggression (Granic & Patterson, 2006) and provide a model of hostile interaction styles, resulting in heightened risk for externalizing problems (Pettit & Dodge, 1993). Alternatively, some research suggests that children exposed to harsh discipline may withdraw from parents in an attempt to avoid unpleasant interactions (Bender et al., 2007) and develop a negative attributional style, resulting in an increased risk for internalizing problems (e.g., Barber et al., 2011; MacPhee & Andrews, 2006).

In contrast to harsh discipline, lax discipline is typified by permissiveness and inconsistency (Arnold et al., 1993; Oyserman, Bybee, Mowbray, & Hart-Johnson, 2005). Permissive parents, who were originally described by Baumrind (1968) as tending to avoid behavioral control or failing to set limits and enforce rules, are also more likely to have children and adolescents with both externalizing (e.g., Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Hanisch, Hautmann, Pluck, Eichelberger, & Dopfner, 2014; Lansford et al., 2014; Parent, Forehand, Merchant, Long, & Jones, 2011) and internalizing (e.g., Akhter, Hanif, Tariq, & Atta, 2011; Williams et al., 2009) problems. The second component of lax discipline, inconsistency, has been operationalized as the lack of follow-through in maintaining and adhering to rules for children's behavior (Melby et al., 1998; Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996) or giving in to coercive child behavior (Arnold et al., 1993). Substantial research exists supporting the association between parents' inconsistent discipline and increased risk of youth externalizing behavior (e.g., Edens, Skopp, & Cahill, 2008; Halgunseth, Perkins, Lippold, & Nix, 2013; Loeber, Green, Keenan, & Lahey, 1995; Simons, Wu, Conger, &

Lorenz, 1994), and to a lesser extent, youth internalizing problems (e.g., Braet, Moens, & Vlierberghe, 2006; Lengua, 2008; Lengua & Kovacs, 2005).

In summary, when parents use either harsh or lax disciplinary tactics, youth are at increased risk for internalizing and externalizing problems. Because the research to date has primarily examined these parenting acts independently of one another, we know very little about the consequences for youth when parents use *both* tactics. The combination of harsh and lax discipline is conceptualized here as seesaw discipline, a broad construct that is distinct from other parenting approaches. Seesaw discipline is differentiated from inconsistent parenting in that it is typified by parenting that is both harsh (i.e., use of physical punishment) *and* lax (i.e., lack of rules; unreliable follow through with consequences). As a result, seesaw parents are not only inconsistent with the setting of limits and delivery of threatened consequences, but are also harsh, resorting to spanking, to control or punish the child. Such an approach to parenting is likely to produce an unpredictable and chaotic rearing environment; however, the current lack of empirical data precludes such conclusive statements. Related literatures, nonetheless, suggest the negative impact of instability and unpredictability of other family dimensions. For example, parental transitions, partner instability, and residential changes, have been associated with youth problem behavior (e.g., Baumer & South, 2001; Belsky, Schlomer, & Ellis, 2011; Capaldi, Crosby, & Stoolmiller, 1996; Crowder & Teachman, 2004; Osborne & McClanahan, 2007; Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2001). Furthermore, an unpredictable family context (e.g., disruption in or lack of mealtime rituals and instability regarding financial resources) has been studied extensively among samples of youth living with an alcoholic parent and found to relate to their psychosocial adjustment (see Ross & Hill, 2002 for a review). Finally, emerging theoretical models of parenting among caregivers diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder suggest that discipline “characterized by oscillations between overinvolvement and underinvolvement” and between “hostile control and coldness” may increase youth vulnerability to psychosocial problems (Stepp, Whalen, Pilkonis, Hipwell, & Levine, 2012, p. 82). However, empirical work bearing out this hypothesis is lacking. Despite this body of research that has examined the myriad of ways parents or families are unpredictable, the concept of seesaw discipline, defined as a combination of harsh and lax parenting tactics, has received little to no empirical attention.

The current model in which seesaw discipline is hypothesized to impact youth problem behavior is based on attachment and schema theories. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) postulates that children are influenced by the (un)predictability of caregivers' responsiveness. Infants whose mothers inconsistently respond to their needs develop an insecure-anxious attachment style; they are less willing to explore their environment and are more difficult to soothe during stressful situations (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In contrast, consistent nurturing caregiving fosters secure attachment, which allows children to believe their behavior affects their environment (Lewis & Goldberg, 1969). Thus, a sense of proximal environmental unpredictability or predictability is established at an early age.

One way of understanding how early experiences of unpredictability with an attachment figure impact youth pathology or wellness is schema theory. Schemas are working models,

consisting of beliefs, expectations, fears, assumptions, and rules that provide a roadmap for interpreting the world (Beck & Haigh, 2014). These cognitive structures store and organize environmental input and influence how novel information is processed via allocation of attention, memory, and attributions (Ross & Hill, 2002). As articulated in his original cognitive model and expanded recently in the General Cognitive Model, Beck (1967; Beck & Haigh, 2014) explains how a stimulus (i.e., internal or external event) activates a schema to make sense of data and triggers a cascade of physiological, affective, and behavioral responses. When the schemas are negatively-biased, they are thought to be causally related to pathology. Ross and Hill (2002) have applied schema theory to create a model of unpredictability, which explains how a child raised in an environment of family or neighborhood instability may create a certain belief system that guides her behavior. They suggest that a series of psychological constructs (e.g., locus of control, future orientation, helplessness, self-efficacy) are precursors to unpredictability schemas, which then influence a variety of youth problem problems.

The purpose of the current study was to provide an initial investigation of the association between seesaw discipline and youth internalizing and externalizing problems across three developmental stages. Namely, we were interested in determining whether a pattern of seesaw discipline (high levels of *both* harshness and laxness) would be related to the highest levels of youth internalizing and externalizing problems compared to the use of only one form of dysfunctional discipline. To test this question, the interaction between the two dimensions of dysfunctional discipline (i.e., harsh and lax) in relation to youth symptoms was undertaken with three community samples of parents with youth in young childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. We hypothesized that seesaw discipline would be related to the highest levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems. Lastly, we hypothesized that the interaction of harsh and lax discipline would be associated with youth problem behaviors across all developmental stages and apply equally for mothers and fathers; it is important to examine relations with these distinct groups to verify the universal impact of this constellation of parenting behaviors with youth of different ages.

## Method

### Participants

Parents were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) as part of a larger study on the assessment of parenting. MTurk is currently the dominant crowdsourcing application in the social sciences (Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2013) and prior research has convincingly demonstrated that data obtained via crowdsourcing methods are as reliable as those obtained via more traditional data collection methods (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Shapiro, Chandler, & Mueller, 2013). Parents responded to a study that was listed separately for three age groups to ensure roughly equal sample sizes in each group: young childhood (3 to 7 years old), middle childhood (8 to 12 years old), and adolescents (13 to 17 years old). The combined sample of 615 parents of children between the ages of three and seventeen was analyzed for the current study. Demographics by sample (young childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence samples) are presented in Table 1.

## Procedure

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Vermont. All parents were consented online before beginning the survey in accordance with the approved IBR procedures. Three different studies were listed on MTurk (one for each child age range) for \$2.00 in compensation. For families with multiple children in the target age range, one child was randomly selected through a computer algorithm while parents were taking the survey and measures were asked in reference to parenting specific to this child (chosen randomly). Participants were recruited from MTurk under the restriction that they were U.S. residents and had at least a 90% task approval rate for their previous tasks. Ten attention check items were placed throughout the online survey. These questions asked participants to enter a specific response such as “Please select the Almost Never response option” that changed throughout the survey appearing in random order within other survey items. Participants (N = 9) were not included in the study if they had more than one incorrect response to these ten check items to ensure that responses were not random or automated.

## Measures

**Demographic information**—Parents responded to demographic questions about themselves (e.g., parental age, education), their families (e.g., household income), and the target child’s demographic information (e.g., age).

**Discipline**—The harsh discipline and lax discipline subscales of the Multidimensional Assessment of Parenting Scale (MAPS; Parent & Forehand, 2014) were used for the current study. MAPS items were selected and adapted from several well-established parenting scales [e.g., The Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (APQ; Frick, 1991), the Parenting Practices Questionnaire (PPQ; Block, 1965; Robinson, Mandelco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995), the Parenting Scale (PS; Arnold, O’Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993), and the Parent Behavior Inventory (PBI; Lovejoy, Weis, O’Hare, & Rubin, 1999)]. The initial reliability and validity data for this measure is promising (Parent, McKee, Rough, & Forehand, in press).

The 6-item harsh discipline subscale includes items representing use of physical discipline (e.g., “I spank my child with my hand when he/she has done something wrong”) and corporal punishment (e.g., “When spanking my child, I have used other things besides my hand”). The 9-item lax discipline subscale includes items representing inconsistent discipline (e.g., “If my child whines or complains when I take away a privilege, I will give it back”) and permissive parenting (e.g., “I am afraid that disciplining my child for misbehavior will cause her/him to not like me”, “I am the kind of parent who lets my child do whatever he/she wants”). Averaged across the three samples, the reliability of the harsh ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and lax ( $\alpha = .86$ ) discipline subscales was excellent.

**Youth internalizing and externalizing problems**—The caregiver form of the 12-item Brief Problem Checklist (BPC; Chorpita, Reise, Weisz, Grubbs, Becker, & Krull, 2010) was used in the current study to measure youth internalizing and externalizing problems. The BPC was developed by applying item response theory and factor analysis to the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL;

Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Chorpita et al. (2010) found that the internal consistency and test–retest reliability of the BPC were excellent, and factor analyses yielded one internalizing and one externalizing factor. Furthermore, validity tests showed large correlations with corresponding scales of the CBCL and YSR as well as with diagnoses obtained from a structured diagnostic interview (Chorpita et al., 2010). The alpha coefficients for internalizing and externalizing problems averaged across the three samples for the current study were .80 and .84, respectively.

## Data Analytic Plan

**Preliminary Analysis**—All analyses were conducted separately by sample (i.e., young childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence). Prior to analyses, parental race was dichotomized to White (1) or Person of Color (2). The effect of categorical (e.g., youth gender) and continuous demographic variables (e.g., parent age) on the primary outcomes was examined using analysis of variance and bivariate correlations, respectively. If significant associations emerged between demographic variables and primary model variables, those demographic variables were controlled for in primary analyses.

**Primary Analyses**—In order to investigate the effects of the interaction of harsh and lax discipline on youth internalizing and externalizing problems, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in SPSS 22 using the computational tool PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). Harsh and lax discipline were mean-centered prior to calculating their product in order to facilitate interpretation of effects. Given that harsh and lax discipline were mean centered, their conditional effects on youth problem behavior should be interpreted as the effect of either form of discipline on youth problem behavior when the other form is at average levels (Hayes, 2013).

Harsh discipline, lax discipline, and their interaction were simultaneously entered into the regression model given that our primary hypothesis was concerned with the interaction rather than the conditional effects of either form of ineffective discipline. Harsh discipline was considered the independent variable and lax discipline was considered the moderator. The converse also could have also been utilized as the current study was primarily concerned with examining whether seesaw discipline (i.e., when parents use high levels of both harsh and lax disciplinary tactics) would be associated with the most youth problem behaviors. Lastly, three-way interactions were tested by including parent gender in order to ascertain whether the effects of seesaw discipline on youth internalizing or externalizing problems differed by parent gender. Results are presented first for internalizing and then externalizing problems.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

Means, standard deviations, ranges, and bivariate correlations for all study variables are included Table 2. Neither youth internalizing nor externalizing problems significantly differed by parent age, parent race, family income, marital status, parent education, or youth gender. Therefore these variables were not controlled for in the primary analyses.

## Primary Analyses

**Internalizing problems**—The conditional effect of harsh discipline on youth internalizing problems was significant for the middle childhood sample ( $b = .07$ , 95% CI  $.002 - .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), marginally significant for the young childhood sample ( $b = .05$ , 95% CI  $-.003 - .11$ ,  $p = .06$ ), and not significant in the adolescent sample ( $b = .06$ , 95% CI  $-.015 - .13$ ,  $p = .12$ ). Specifically, given average levels of lax discipline ( $M = 17.34$ ,  $S.D. = 5.69$ , possible range from 9 – 45), higher levels of harsh discipline were associated with higher levels of child, but not adolescent, internalizing problems. The conditional effect of lax discipline on youth internalizing problems was significant for the young childhood ( $b = .08$ , 95% CI  $.04 - .12$ ,  $p < .001$ ), middle childhood ( $b = .09$ , 95% CI  $.04 - .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and adolescence samples ( $b = .08$ , 95% CI  $.01 - .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ) such that, given average levels of harsh discipline ( $M = 9.55$ ,  $S.D. = 4.56$ , possible range from 6 – 30), higher levels of lax discipline were associated with higher levels of youth internalizing problems.

The interaction between harsh and lax discipline was significantly related to youth internalizing problems in the young childhood ( $b = .01$ , 95% CI  $.002 - .02$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and middle childhood samples ( $b = .01$ , 95% CI  $.001 - .02$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and was marginally significant in the adolescence sample ( $b = .01$ , 95% CI  $-.001 - .02$ ,  $R^2 = .014$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Figures 1 – 3 illustrate the form of the interaction for all three samples by depicting the regression lines of the relation between harsh discipline and youth internalizing problems at high and low (+1 SD, –1 SD) scores of lax discipline (Aiken & West, 1991). As is evident in Figures 1 – 3, the form of the interaction across all three developmental stages indicates that seesaw discipline – high levels of lax and harsh discipline – was associated with the most youth internalizing problems. Probing the interaction and testing simple slopes (Hayes, 2013) further supports this interpretation, with the conditional effect of harsh discipline on youth internalizing problems being significant at high, but not average or low levels, of lax discipline (95% CI  $.03 - .23$ ,  $p < .01$ , for all developmental stages). Lastly, we tested a three-way interaction of harsh discipline by lax discipline by parent gender pooling across all three samples to increase power. All two-way interactions involving parent gender were non-significant and the three-way interaction was also not significant, suggesting that the associations in the model were consistent for mothers and fathers.

**Externalizing problems**—The conditional effect of harsh discipline on youth externalizing problems was significant for the young childhood ( $b = .13$ , 95% CI  $.05 - .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and middle childhood samples ( $b = .18$ , 95% CI  $.09 - .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and was marginally significant in the adolescence sample ( $b = .07$ , 95% CI  $-.005 - .14$ ,  $p = .067$ ). Namely, given average levels of lax discipline, higher levels of harsh discipline were associated with higher levels of youth externalizing problems. The conditional effect of lax discipline on youth internalizing problems was significant for the young childhood ( $b = .10$ , 95% CI  $.04 - .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ), middle childhood ( $b = .06$ , 95% CI  $.01 - .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and adolescence samples ( $b = .15$ , 95% CI  $.08 - .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ) such that, given average levels of harsh discipline, higher levels of lax discipline were associated with higher levels of youth internalizing problems. The interaction of harsh and lax discipline was not significantly associated with youth externalizing problems regardless of child developmental stage.

Further, the three-way interaction and all two-way interactions involving parent gender were nonsignificant.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to provide an initial investigation of the association between the novel construct of seesaw discipline (i.e., discipline that is typified by high levels of both harshness and laxness) and youth internalizing and externalizing problems across three developmental stages. We hypothesized that seesaw discipline would be related to the highest levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems relative to elevated levels of only one or neither of these dimensions. We also proposed that this association would be universal (i.e., emerge across children at different developmental stages and similar for mothers and fathers discipline). Hypotheses were partially supported.

In support of our hypotheses, findings from the current study suggest that youth with parents who reported the combination of high levels of harsh and lax discipline showed the most internalizing problems relative to youth whose parents reported high level of just one dysfunctional discipline tactic. The pattern of effects was nearly identical across child developmental stages and was equivalent for maternal and paternal discipline, providing substantial support for and increased confidence in this association and the concept of seesaw discipline. We offer a few potential explanations for this effect while also acknowledging that future research should examine the mechanisms purported to explain the association between seesaw discipline and youth internalizing, but not externalizing, problems. We hypothesize that the process by which seesaw discipline fosters youth internalizing problems functions through two main mechanisms: the importance of predictability of the rearing environment and negative cognitive attributional styles.

First, regarding the importance of predictability of the rearing environment, we primarily draw from the theoretical and empirical foundations of attachment. As we have noted, attachment theory proposes that a sense of caregiver unpredictability or predictability is established at an early age. Seesaw discipline, characterized by high levels of both harsh and lax discipline, represents an early and potentially chronic rearing environment that may lead to youth developing internalizing problems due to the unmet need of proximal environment predictability. In fact, it is theorized that children with insecure attachment styles develop an internal working model or schema in which they see themselves as unworthy and ineffective in social relationships. Research has shown that such children are hyper-vigilant, less autonomous, and struggle with emotion regulation (see Colonna et al, 2011, for a review). Although rare, several mediation studies suggest that emotion regulation, competence, self-esteem and negative cognition explain the relation between attachment security and youth anxiety and depression (see Brumarui & Kerns, 2010, for review of relation between attachment and internalizing symptoms).

Cognitive models of depression suggest that youth with a negative cognitive style who are exposed to stressful events or circumstances are more vulnerable to the development of depression (e.g., Cole et al., 2011). Consistent with the attachment literature, it is quite possible that youth exposed to seesaw discipline develop cognitive schemas and styles, over



time, that include beliefs about helplessness, unworthiness, and efficacy (Margolese, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2005; Ross & Hill, 2002). In other words, a “child learns to construct reality through his or her early experiences with the environment, especially with significant others. Sometimes, these early experiences lead children to accept attitudes and beliefs that will later prove maladaptive” (Beck & Young, 1985, p. 207, as cited in Bruce et al., 2006). The links between negative parenting style and negative youth cognitive style are well supported (e.g., Garber & Flynn, 2001; McKee et al., 2014; Mezulis et al., 2011) as are the links between negative cognitive style and depression (e.g., Jacobs, Reinecke, Gollan, & Kane, 2008). One study that builds upon both attachment and cognitive models, for example, reported that negative attributions fully mediated the association between attachment security and depression (Margolese, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2005). Taken together, youth who are exposed to seesaw discipline may develop negative inference for their self-concept and their views of the world, which in turn may promote the development of internalizing problems.

Contrary to prediction, the interaction between harsh and lax discipline was not associated with externalizing problems for children or adolescents. Higher levels of either form of dysfunctional discipline were associated with higher levels of youth externalizing problems, but the effect of one form did not depend on varying levels of the other. These effects were equivalent for maternal and paternal discipline. The lack of a significant interaction for externalizing behaviors is consistent with the only previous study to examine the association between the interaction of harsh and lax discipline and child externalizing problems (Parent et al., 2011). For youth externalizing problems, a social interactional model (e.g., Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) proposes that parental discipline exerts influence over children’s externalizing behavior through the control of reinforcing contingencies (see Forehand et al., 2013; McKee et al., 2013, for recent reviews of the intervention and non-intervention literature on parenting and youth externalizing problems). Based on the current findings, externalizing behavior is associated with lax *or* permissive discipline, and these associations may best be understood by reinforcement contingencies explained by coercion theory (Granic & Patterson, 2006).

There are several limitations of the current study that should be noted. First, the data are cross-sectional, raising questions about the direction of effects and temporal precedence that are better addressed by longitudinal designs. Caution should be used when interpreting “causal” pathways in the current model, and future research examining the association between patterns of seesaw discipline and youth outcome should utilize longitudinal designs and assess directionality of effects given that substantial research (e.g., Bradley & Corwyn, 2013) and theory (e.g., social interaction model, Granic & Patterson, 2006) supports bidirectional effects of discipline and child behavior. Second, due to the crowdsourcing methodology, all data in the model were provided by a single reporter. As this is a potential issue of shared method variance, the use of multiple reporters/methods (e.g., parent report, youth report, and observations) assessing constructs of interest would strengthen confidence of findings in future work. Third, our measure of child psychosocial adjustment was a brief measure. Although the Brief Problem Checklist is highly correlated with more comprehensive measures (i.e., CBCL; Chorpita et al., 2010), different results may have

emerged if a more comprehensive measure were utilized with narrowband outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression). Fourth, our measure of harsh discipline was limited to physical discipline; however, given that some conceptualizations of harsh discipline also include verbal behavior (i.e., name-calling), future work may benefit from the inclusion of both or examination of specificity of the impact of different tactics. Lastly, community samples of children were used, and mean levels of youth psychopathology were well within normative ranges. Different associations between parenting behaviors and youth symptoms may have emerged with a clinical sample. Of particular interest may be examining the association between seesaw discipline and youth internalizing problems among children with parents who have a history of depression, given the substantial literature showing that depressed parents consistently demonstrate deficits in caregiving (for a review, see Dix & Meunier, 2009). These deficits include high levels of emotional over-involvement, intrusiveness, and criticism (e.g., Field, Healy, Goldstein, & Guthertz, 1990; Tompson et al., 2010), and high levels of disengagement, withdrawal, and inconsistent discipline (e.g., Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000). Nonetheless, findings from the current sample, given the relatively low levels of problem behaviors, should be generalized to more symptomatic youth and parents with caution.

The current study also had several notable strengths. First, we utilized three separate samples of parents with youth in three distinct developmental stages, and findings were replicated across samples. Furthermore, the sample was constituted by over 45% father participants, a group which is most often underrepresented in clinical child and adolescent research (Phares, 1992; Phares et al., 2005). Such a developmentally-informed approach with a large sample of mothers and fathers greatly enhances the confidence in our findings and extends their generalizability to broader family contexts and child developmental stages. Lastly, although associations between both forms of ineffective discipline and youth psychopathology had been documented in prior empirical investigations, this was the first to empirically establish relations between a seesaw pattern of dysfunctional discipline characterized by high levels of both harsh and lax discipline and youth symptoms.

Given the importance of continuing to refine empirically-supported interventions designed to prevent and treat youth psychopathology, the current findings may be drawn upon to inform aspects of parent education and training. For example, although parents are typically taught that harsh and permissive discipline styles are ineffective and detrimental to their children (e.g., Compas et al., 2009), it may be important to explain that seesaw discipline – high levels of *both* harsh and lax approaches – is particularly harmful when it comes to youth internalizing symptoms regardless of youth age. Parents suffering from psychopathology that tends to create a chaotic and unpredictable home environment (i.e., substance use disorders, mood disorders) may especially benefit from such psycho-education and training in more positive and consistent disciplinary strategies. Further, future investigations of seesaw discipline will benefit from understanding the contextual influences that promote this pattern of dysfunctional discipline (e.g., household chaos, parental mood or emotion dysregulation, and parental substance use).

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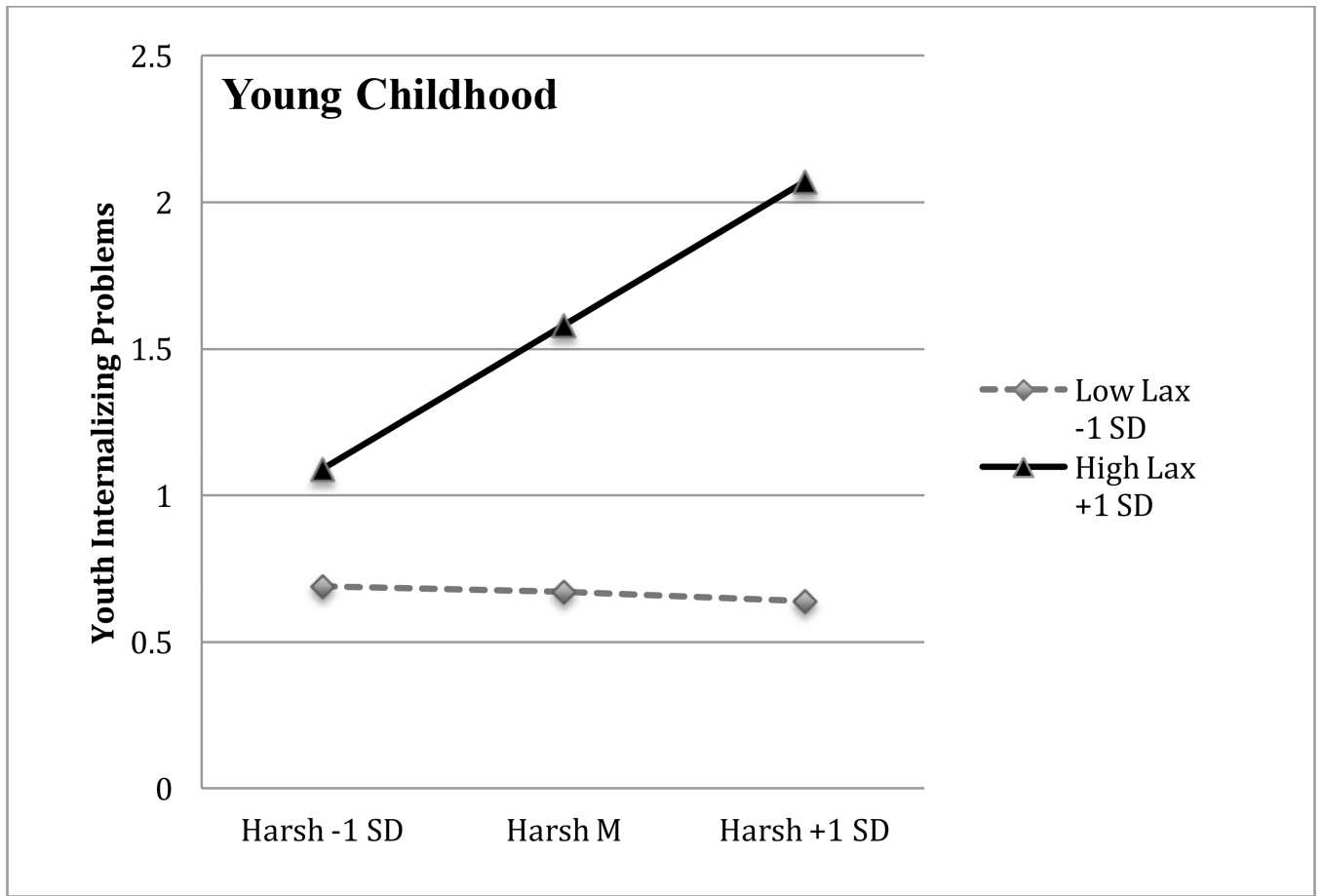
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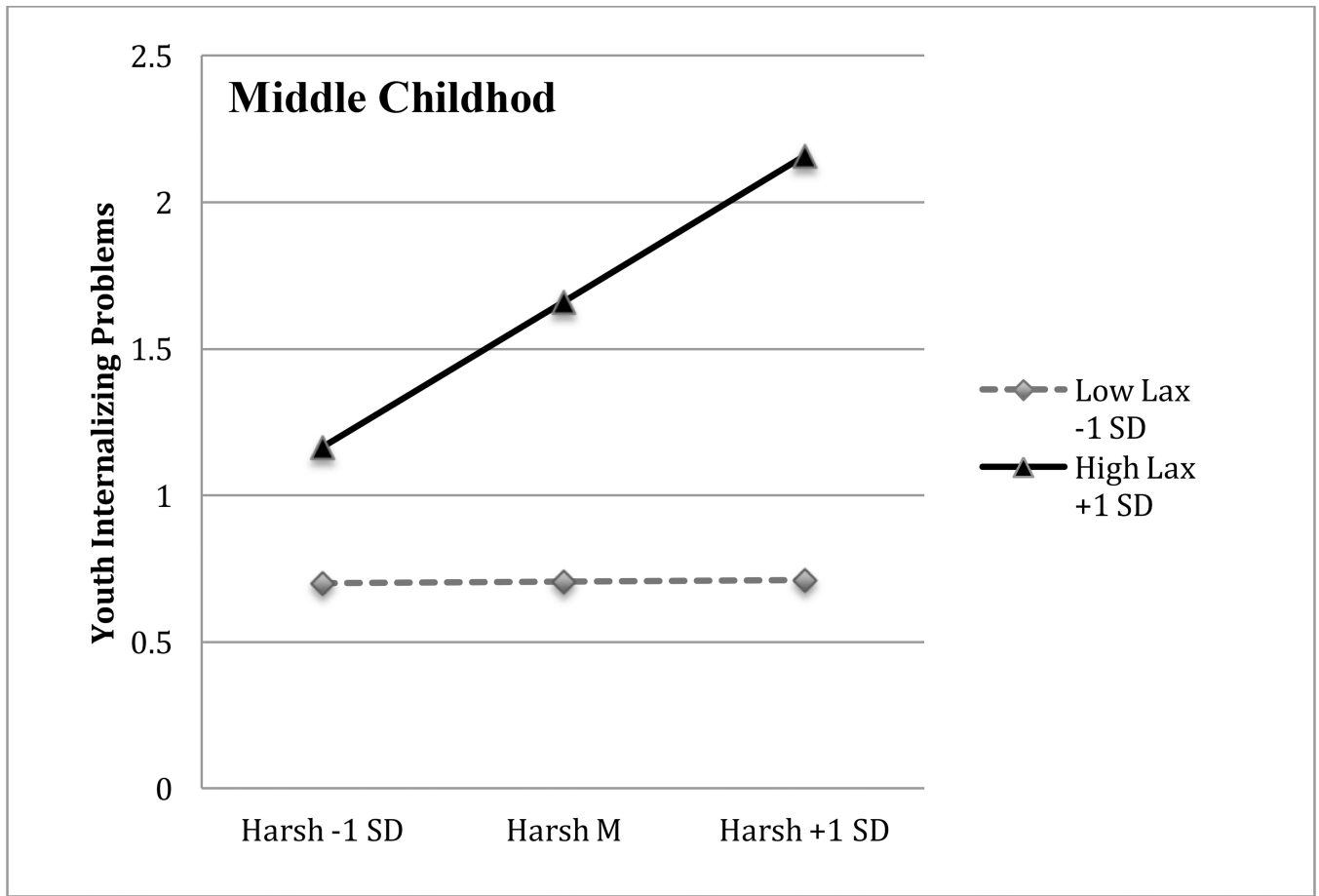
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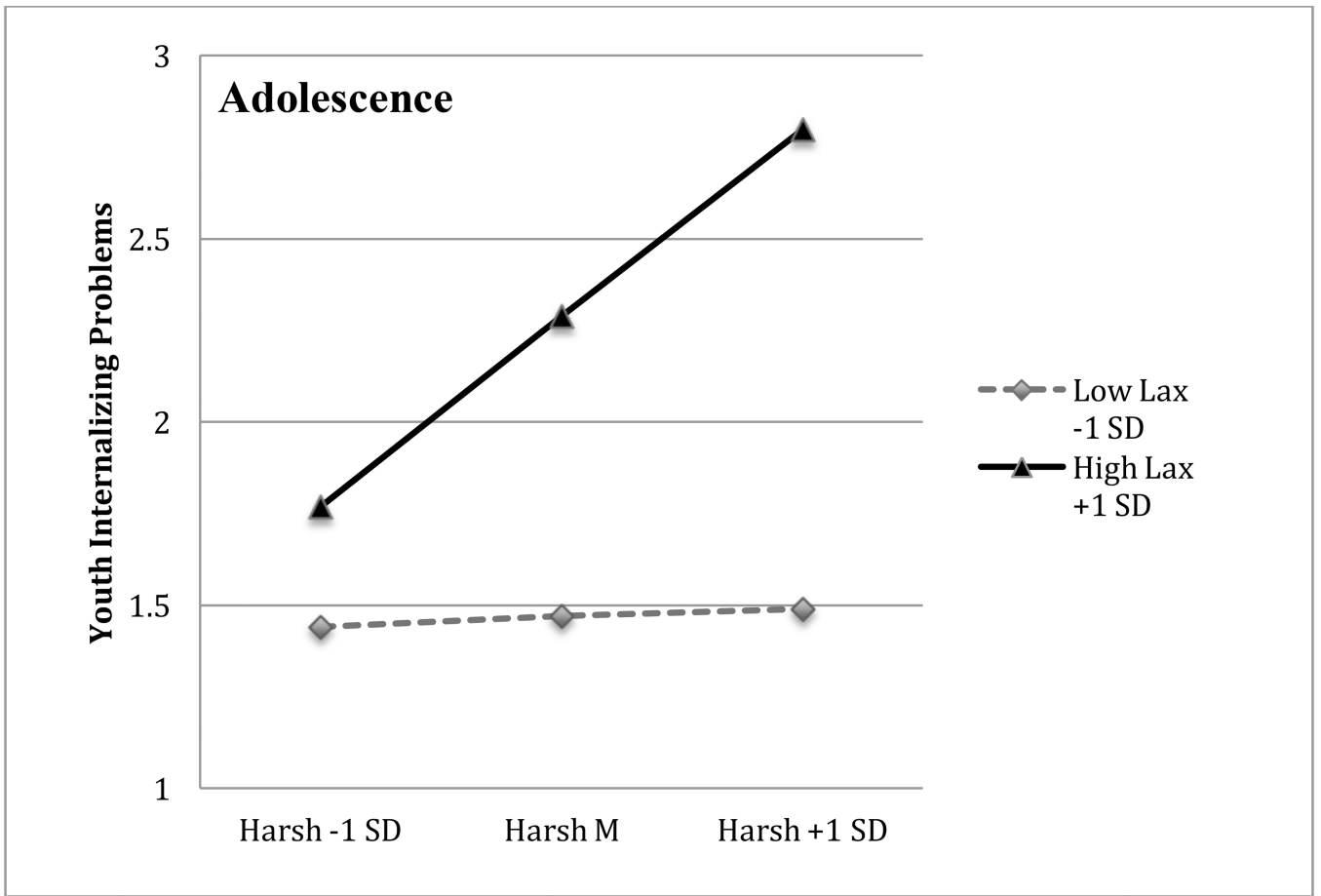


**Figure 1.** The relation between harsh discipline and youth internalizing problems at high and low scores of lax discipline for the young childhood sample.



**Figure 2.** The relation between harsh discipline and youth internalizing problems at high and low scores of lax discipline for the middle childhood sample.





**Figure 3.** The relation between harsh discipline and youth internalizing problems at high and low scores of lax discipline for the adolescence sample.

**Table 1**

Sample demographic characteristics by study

	<b>M (S.D.) or Percentage</b>		
	<b>Young n = 210</b>	<b>Middle n = 200</b>	<b>Adolescents n = 205</b>
Parent Age	32.61 (7.44)	34.43 (6.92)	40.54 (18.34)
Parent (% Mothers)	59.0%	51%	53.2%
Parent Race			
White	78.4%	72.7%	80.5%
Black	12.0%	17.3%	10.2%
Latino/a	4.3%	3.5%	5.4%
Asian	5.3%	4.5%	2.4%
Other	0%	2.0%	1.5%
Parent Marital Status			
Single	17%	21.1%	21.9%
Married	60.2%	58.3%	58.2%
Cohabiting	22.8%	20.6%	19.9%
Parent Education			
Did not complete H.S.	.5%	1.0%	1.5%
H.S. or GED	11.9%	14.0%	16.6%
Some College	35.2%	33.5%	28.8%
College Degree	36.2%	36.5%	41.5%
> College Degree	16.2%	15.0%	11.8%
Parent Employment Status			
Full-time	56.2%	59.0%	63.9%
Half-time	20.0%	20.5%	23.4%
Unemployed	23.8%	20.5%	12.7%
Family Income			
Under \$30,000	24.3%	27.0%	24.9%
\$30,000 – \$49,999	31.9%	15.5%	26.8%
\$50,000 – \$69,999	20.4%	20.0%	24.4%
\$70,000 – \$99,999	14.8%	15.5%	16.1%
\$100,000 or more	8.6%	12.0%	7.8%
Family Neighborhood			
Urban	27.6%	23.5%	28.3%
Suburban	51.0%	54.0%	53.7%
Rural	21.4%	22.5%	18.0%
Number of Children	1.75 (.92)	1.77 (.89)	1.83 (.90)
Youth Age	4.75 (1.34)	9.3 (1.22)	14.42 (1.38)
Child Birth Order			
First Born	27.1%	32.0%	43.4%
Middle Child	7.6%	10.0%	6.3%
Youngest Child	25.7%	19.5%	20.5%

	<b>M (S.D.) or Percentage</b>		
	<b>Young <i>n</i> = 210</b>	<b>Middle <i>n</i> = 200</b>	<b>Adolescents <i>n</i> = 205</b>
Only Child	39.5%	38.5%	29.8%
Youth Gender (% Girls)	47.1%	45%	37.1%

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**Table 2**

Means and correlations among main study variables across samples.

Young Childhood	M (SD)	Range	2	3	4
1. Harsh Discipline	10.31 (4.2)	6 – 25	.23**	.23**	.29**
2. Lax Discipline	18.16 (5.9)	9 – 40	--	.32**	.30**
3. Youth Internalizing	1.18 (1.8)	0 – 8	--	--	.52**
4. Youth Externalizing	1.96 (2.3)	0 – 11	--	--	--
<b>Middle Childhood</b>					
1. Harsh Discipline	7.43 (3.5)	4 – 16	.24**	.23**	.32**
2. Lax Discipline	16.39 (5.6)	9 – 34	--	.33**	.23**
3. Youth Internalizing	1.24 (1.8)	0 – 8	--	--	.45**
4. Youth Externalizing	1.63 (2.2)	0 – 12	--	--	--
<b>Adolescence</b>					
1. Harsh Discipline	10.83 (4.8)	7 – 25	.36**	.23**	.24**
2. Lax Discipline	17.42 (5.4)	9 – 39	--	.26**	.36**
3. Youth Internalizing	1.99 (2.3)	0 – 11	--	--	.55**
4. Youth Externalizing	1.77 (2.4)	0 – 12	--	--	--

Note: N = 615,

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*p* < .01