

The Role of Parenting Style and Childhood Friendship in Predicting Risk of Adulthood Psychopathy

Xinyuan Gu^{1,a,*}

¹Shanghai United International School, 200123, China

a. graciia@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In this work, we investigated the role of parenting style and childhood friendship in predicting the risk of adulthood psychopathy. This paper concluded that negative parenting, parental psychopathic traits and antisocial friendship played a vital role in shaping the antisocial behaviour of their offspring. Additionally, there was an inconsistent relationship between parental psychopathic traits (mainly focusing on conduct problems and callous-unemotional traits), negative parenting and offspring's psychopathic traits, highlighting the importance of sensitive caring from parents before adolescence. However, children's empathy levels have a moderating effect on their perceptions of parenting which directly affected the development of psychopathic traits. Likewise, childhood friendship can either alleviate or induce children's antisocial behaviour, and opposite-sex friends were found to be positively correlated with disruptive behaviours. Unexpectedly, the quality of friendships, peer pressure, and positive parenting have a profound impact and they interrelate with one another in the formation of individual behaviours. By considering these factors collectively, this work gained the capacity to predict the probability of children developing psychopathy, and potentially utilize this knowledge for intervention purposes.

Keywords: Psychopathy, Psychopathic Traits, Parenting Style, Friendship, Children

1. Introduction

Psychopathy is one of the personality disorders highlighted by empathy deficit and hallmarked by its callous, manipulative, and disruptive characteristics [1]. They have difficulties with controlling behaviours, and this usually results in lawbreaking or even committing crimes [2]. Psychopathy is mostly prevalent among inmates, making up approximately 20% of the prison population in Spain and the US [3, 4].

However, psychopathy is an 'adult disorder', it cannot be diagnosed among children [5]. At the same time, researchers can still find some traces among those children who had the potential to develop psychopathy in adulthood, and these children are said to have psychopathic traits [6]. Children's psychopathic traits [5], often consist of low empathy levels, conduct problems (CP) and Callous-unemotional traits (CU) [7]. Additionally, previous research has found that adults who are diagnosed with psychopathy are more likely to be diagnosed with conduct disorder, disruptive behaviour disorder, and hyperactivity disorder in their childhood [6].

Adult Psychopathy and children's psychopathic traits have various similarities, allowing researchers to assess the risk of developing psychopathy in adulthood. For instance, psychopathy is

inaccurate in interpreting facial expressions, especially in identifying happiness, fear and anger that appear in facial emotions as well as presenting disruptive and antisocial behaviours [8-10].

Although there are various genetic or environmental factors contributing to the development of psychopathy [11], the current literature review will specifically focus on parenting style and childhood friendship. As shown by previous research, parenting style plays a fundamental role in shaping children's behaviour and characteristics, in both prosocial and antisocial pathways [12,13]. On the other side, friendship may affect the effect of parenting, whilst shaping children's personalities [14,15]. This will be further discussed in this literature review.

This review will explore the relationship between negative/positive parenting and the development of children's psychopathic traits, as well as the influence of prosocial/antisocial childhood friendships. Additionally, this review will demonstrate how parenting and childhood friendship affect each other in developing psychopathic traits.

The main hypothesis is that there is a positive correlation between negative parenting styles and antisocial friendships during childhood on the formation of children's psychopathic traits. The current review postulates the association will lead to higher levels of psychopathic traits, particularly callous-unemotional (CU) traits and conduct problems (CP). Furthermore, this combination of negative parenting and antisocial friendships is anticipated to increase the risk of developing psychopathy in adulthood.

It is vital to investigate those questions, as understanding the factors that contribute to the development of psychopathic traits would be crucial for early identification and intervention to prevent the risk of crimes and domestic tragedies in the future [5].

2. The Causal Relationship Between Parenting and Children's Psychopathic Traits

This subsection will focus on the causal relationship between parental psychopathic traits, inappropriate parenting styles, and the development of psychopathic traits in their children. Specifically, the following paragraphs will explore the impact of these factors on the emergence of conduct problems (CP) and callous-unemotional traits (CU) in children.

The development of psychopathy in adults was typically preceded by noticeable indications during their childhood, and these early signals were often attributed to hostile parenting [16], suggesting a causal relationship. For example, an observation test targeted mother-children love interactions and showed that children who avoid eye contact with their mothers might be a signal of the early development of the CU trait [17]. Similarly, hostile parenting could initiate a chain reaction, directly affecting children's empathetic abilities in adulthood [17]. Furthermore, Waller et al. concluded that the fearlessness of children was also a fundamental building block of developing CU traits in adolescents as a consequence of hostile parenting [18].

Meanwhile, research has supported the long-term impact of negative parenting on developing children's psychopathic traits. Some longitudinal studies stated the consequence of negative parenting started from children of 24 months would persist until 18 months later, which could then predict the further development of psychopathic traits (CU traits and CP) after 8 years, even persisting up to the age of 25 [18-20]. Additionally, a more recent study mentioned harsh parenting and punishment during toddlerhood would cause higher CP, but parental warmth would depress CU traits before adulthood [19]. Therefore, to prevent the development of psychopathic traits, it was vital to prioritize sensitive caregiving and positive parenting practices from an early age through adolescence [20].

When parents displayed psychopathic traits, the consequences extended beyond the effects of negative parenting. The psychopathic traits of parents would directly influence their children, leading them to develop similar characteristics, and shaping their personality and behaviour. Two studies targeted specifically children of lower socioeconomic status using self-report measurements and observation tests [18,21], stating that it was the parent's interpersonal affective traits (low empathy,

manipulative) rather than the antisocial traits that served as predictors of children's CU characteristics. These parents also engaged in harsher parenting and were stingier in parental warmth. This finding was further established in another experiment conducted by Dotterer and her colleagues on monozygotic siblings in the same study.

However, studies have been inconsistent with the relationship between positive/negative parenting and children's psychopathic traits (mainly CP and CU traits) due to other factors (individual differences, methodological differences and genetic factors). Unexpectedly, Goulter and his colleagues contradicted previous studies, claiming CU traits were only related to parental warmth instead of hostile parenting whereas CP only contributed to harsh parenting [19]. More specifically, hostile parenting was found not associated with children's CU traits but was identified to have a negative correlation with positive parenting in a clinical sample [22]. Nonetheless, Flom et al. argued that parental warmth is not robustly related to CU traits [23].

The inconsistency in the relationship between negative parenting and children's CP and CU traits can be attributed to the children themselves, who played as an independent variable due to different perceptions of parenting. The parenting children receive can be driven by themselves due to inherited empathy [23]. Supporting this idea, another study claimed that children who had a higher empathy quotient elevated their levels of antisocial behaviour under parental solicitation and monitoring after one year [24]. This then indicated that children with higher empathy levels might interpret parental solicitation and monitoring as privacy infringement [24]. Two studies attributed this kind of inconsistency using the multi-finality model, concluding that the development of psychopathic traits can be varied by children's understanding of parenting [18,22]. In the case of children who already developed psychopathic traits, CP and CU will allow children to exhibit less affection toward their mother physically and verbally. In the long term, this kind of phenomenon would possibly trigger their parents to express less love toward their children, forming a vicious cycle [17].

To summarise, negative parenting would affect children's psychopathic traits while parental psychopathic traits were more crucial in shaping the antisocial behaviour of their offspring. However, this kind of casual relationship was not always consistent, because the varying children's empathy levels led to different perceptions towards parenting. Conversely, it was novel that children's reactions towards their parents also affect their parent's parenting style.

3. Childhood Friendship and Its Role in Developing Psychopathic Traits

While parenting undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping children's psychopathic traits, it was important to recognize that childhood friendships also exerted a noteworthy influence. No matter whether it was the children themselves who initiated antisocial behaviour to establish friendships, or it was the antisocial friendship that shaped children's psychopathic traits.

Researchers started to seek psychopathic traces in toddlers as young as 4 years old by observing their engagement in role-playing games with their friends [25]. This study showed that toddlers who interact with their friends in a cooperative and caring manner demonstrated higher levels of cognitive empathy. On the other hand, toddlers who showed antisocial behaviour and engaged in violent or aggressive fantasies tended to lack cognitive empathy, as they had difficulties understanding and simulating the emotions of others. As a result, these toddlers may even misinterpret others' distress as a source of amusement.

The follow-up research conducted on the same sample at the age of six had shown that those presenting psychopathic traits, such as bullying and rule-breaking, were more likely to partake in violent and graphic scenarios during role-play with their friends. However, compared to their prosocial counterparts, they demonstrated less inclination to feign emotions. It is worth noting that these findings were also associated with relatively low levels of language expression skills [25]. In line with another study, poor communication and interaction abilities and getting acquainted with

abnormal friends together predict adolescents' antisocial behaviour to a large extent [26]. It was found to be related to early rejections of demand in relationships [26,27].

Diverse types of friendships and ways of interaction among friends could also be a predictor of the tendency to develop psychopathic traits. Adolescents who were involved in small clan friendships, typically consisting of no more than 10 individuals of the same gender and age, exhibited higher levels of group antisocial behaviour [28]. Similarly, boys' antisocial friendships were observed to have unpredictable patterns of interaction [26,27]. However, studies mentioned it was possible that as adolescents become more sophisticated, antisocial behaviours would gradually fade. Additionally, interacting with friends who display physically aggressive and coercive behaviour could create a negative environment, leading to higher levels of rule-breaking behaviour in individuals who struggle with impulse control [29].

Moreover, establishing a friendship with same-sex or opposite-sex friends was correlated with elevated antisocial behaviour. The number of opposite-sex friendships established between 6th and 7th grade was most numerous and was found to link with the highest levels of antisocial tendency. On the contrary, pro-social adolescents had more same-sex friends [30]. Likewise, boys and girls who had opposite-sex best friends reported higher rates of antisocial behaviour, especially for girls [31].

Girls were more influenced by opposite-sex friends possibly because they were easier to construct a friendship that had a close reciprocal bond with others, but this was also a risk factor that the adolescents would mimic each other's behaviour and interests. [28, 32, 33]. In line with the previous studies, the emergence of adolescents' aggressive behaviour was supposed to be a result of establishing shared values and perceptions [15]. During late adolescence, children might combine and regulate antisocial and prosocial behaviour to strive for friendship [30]. They also had lower well-being than purely prosocial adolescents [30].

Surprisingly, the development of antisocial behaviour during early adolescence was influenced more by children's ability to self-control rather than their friends' antisocial behaviour [33]. Out of expectations, having a high level of self-control as a teenager did not necessarily prevent them from being influenced by peer pressure [33].

Out of expectations, establishing normative friendships could help alleviate antisocial tendencies. Researchers found that the way that adolescents perceive their best friend's and group's antisocial behaviour was positively correlated with their future antisocial behaviour but could be balanced by an optimistic friendship (high security, less conflict, helpful etc.) [27,28]. The alleviation effect did not always exist across genders. Girls were more careful in assessing their dyadic friendship qualities (helpfulness, companionship, security etc.) whereas more antisocial behaviours were found among boys [28]. Similarly, girls' friendships, which often involved sharing thoughts and feelings, led to greater closeness, positive self-perception, greater success expectations, and reduced feelings of alienation [15].

Contradict, a high-quality friendship cannot always serve as a protection against antisocial behaviour [15]. If boys who have high-quality friendships interact frequently in abnormal conversations, the possibility of developing psychopathy was high [26,27]. Younger adolescents were less likely to have high-quality friendships, while older adolescents may have a shift from high to low-quality friendships [15].

Overall, friendships played a fundamental role in shaping psychopathic traits and could either worsen or alleviate antisocial behaviour. From toddlerhood, aggressive and violent fantasies in interaction with their friends were linked to a lack of cognitive empathy, which played an important role in initiating antisocial behaviours. As children grow older, their friendships and interactions with peers could predict psychopathic traits like bullying and rule-breaking. Also, the sex of their friends helped develop psychopathic traits as well, especially having opposite-sex best friends in early adolescence.

4. Mutual Influence of Parenting and Childhood Friendship

To our knowledge, parenting style and childhood friendship were both involved in developing children's psychopathic traits. As illustrated by Dishion et al., young adolescents spending time with delinquent peers and a lack of family involvement was strongly linked to the development of antisocial behaviour in adulthood [26].

The two kinds of interpersonal relationships affect each other's affinity to the children while shaping the effect in developing children's psychopathic traits. Research has discovered a limited positive effect in avoiding antisocial friends but an increase in impulsivity corresponding to communicative parenting and parental control [14]. This might be explained by the high-quality friendships that were often established when adolescents felt more negative emotions from the family which could serve as emotional comfort. However, the compensation from friendship only persisted during low family conflicts and was linked to defiance of parental solicitation [15]. Nevertheless, children's standard for choosing friends was navigated by the values they learned from their parents [14]. Thus, inappropriate friendships might vary the result of parental control, signifying the important role of peer pressure in constructing behaviours.

However, antisocial boys experienced a decline in family management as they grew older [27]. This suggested that adolescent deviance serves a larger societal purpose by creating a connection with peers while creating distance between the youth and their family, thereby reducing parental influence. Other than that, it has been inconsistent to determine whether children who exhibited early or late psychopathic traits would persist with their psychopathic behaviours into adulthood.

5. Conclusion

Psychopathy is an adult disorder that should be aware of as it makes up much of the prison population. As research has identified early signs of psychopathic traits in children who were at risk of developing psychopathy later in life, we can consider these factors collectively and utilise them to predict the risk of psychopathy in adulthood.

There were many factors role in developing children's psychopathic traits, but this review only considered parenting style and childhood friendships. Negative parenting styles, such as harsh parenting and punishment, have been found to predict higher levels of CP and lower levels of CU traits. On the other hand, positive parenting practices, for example, warmth and sensitivity, could help prevent the development of psychopathic traits.

In the meanwhile, childhood friendships also contributed to the development of psychopathic traits to a large extent. Children who engaged in aggressive and violent fantasies showed a lack of cognitive empathy. Additionally, the quality and nature of friendships, such as small clan friendships or opposite-sex friendships, can influence the development of psychopathic traits as well.

The relationship between parenting style, childhood friendships, and psychopathic traits could be complex and variable depending on the children themselves. While negative parenting styles and antisocial friendships could increase the risk of developing psychopathic traits, positive parenting practices and healthier friendships could mitigate these traits. It is important to understand these factors to identify and intervene early to prevent the development of psychopathy and reduce the risk of criminal behaviour and domestic tragedies in the future.

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