

Early Parenting Mediates the Effect of Socioeconomic Status on Children's Externalizing Behavior and Parent School Involvement

Research has repeatedly shown that socioeconomic status (SES) is linked to parents' school involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004) and children's behavior in school (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). We brought these two lines of inquiry together in the current study to expand on research that has examined factors influencing parent school involvement and its development (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997). Our goals were to examine (1) the transaction between parent school involvement and children's externalizing behavior at school across the elementary years and (2) the mediation of the SES influence on parent involvement and children's school behavior by early parenting. We were interested to see the direction of links between early parent involvement and later externalizing behavior in children and between early acting out by children and later parent involvement. In addition, we expected aspects of early parenting—in the form of parents' behaviors and attitudes prior to their children's school entry—to mediate the link between SES and parent involvement in much the same way it has been found to mediate the relation between SES and child behavior (Corwyn & Bradley, 2005).

Data for the study came from a multi-site, longitudinal study of children's development. A total of 585 participants were originally recruited during the summer prior to children's entry into kindergarten. Early parenting data were gathered at that time during home-visit interviews. Among the parenting variables assessed through coding of parent interviews, parent questionnaire responses, and interviewers' post-visit ratings were inductive discipline, harsh discipline, proactive teaching, and positive involvement. These variables were then used as indicators of an early parenting construct. Teachers rated parents' school involvement on a multi-item scale once during the elementary school years (grade 3) and again at entry to middle school

(grade 6). Children's externalizing behavior was assessed yearly using the Teacher Report Form of the Achenbach scales; composite scores were computed for early (grades K-2) and later (grades 4-5) elementary years. Scores from the Hollingshead four-factor scale were used as a measure of SES. Structural equation modeling was used to examine (1) the transaction of parent involvement and children's externalizing behavior across the elementary years and the effect of SES on both of these constructs and (2) the mediation of SES effects on these constructs by early parenting.

As can be seen in Figure 1, parent school involvement in Grade 3 significantly predicted decreased school behavior problems later in the elementary years. In addition, SES significantly predicted parent school involvement both early and later and significantly predicted children's externalizing behavior early in the elementary years. Figure 2 illustrates the mediation of these SES effects by the early parenting construct. Links between SES and early parent involvement and between SES and early externalizing behavior were both significantly reduced by inclusion of the early parenting construct.

Findings from this study provide additional understanding of the development of parent school involvement and possible intervention points.