

Trajectories of Conduct Problems and Cumulative Risk from Early Childhood to Adolescence

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Abstract : Conduct problems (CP) represent a major dilemma, with wide-ranging and long-lasting individual and societal impacts. Children experience heterogeneous patterns of conduct problems; based on the age of onset, developmental course and related risk factors from around age 3. Early childhood represents a potential window for intervention efforts aimed at changing the trajectory of early starting conduct problems. Using the UK Millennium Cohort Study (n = 17,206 children), this study (a) identifies trajectories of conduct problems from ages 3 to 14 years and (b) assesses the cumulative and interactive effects of individual, family and socioeconomic risk factors from ages 9 months to 14 years. The same factors according to three domains were assessed, including child (i.e., low verbal ability, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, emotional problems), family (i.e., single families, parental poor physical and mental health, large family size) and socioeconomic (i.e., low family income, low parental education, unemployment, social housing). A cumulative risk score for the child, family, and socioeconomic domains at each age was calculated. It was then examined how the cumulative risk scores explain variation in the trajectories of conduct problems. Lastly, interactive effects among the different domains of cumulative risk were tested. Using group-based trajectory modeling, four distinct trajectories were found including a 'low' problem group and three groups showing childhood-onset conduct problems: 'school-age onset'; 'early-onset, desisting'; and 'early-onset, persisting'. The 'low' group (57% of the sample) showed a low probability of conducts problems, close to zero, from 3 to 14 years. The 'early-onset, desisting' group (23% of the sample) demonstrated a moderate probability of CP in early childhood, with a decline from 3 to 5 years and a low probability thereafter. The 'early-onset, persistent' group (8%) followed a high probability of conduct problems, which declined from 11 years but was close to 70% at 14 years. In the 'school-age onset' group, 12% of the sample showed a moderate probability of conduct problems from 3 and 5 years, with a sharp increase by 7 years, increasing to 50% at 14 years. In terms of individual risk, all factors increased the likelihood of being in the childhood-onset groups compared to the 'low' group. For cumulative risk, the socioeconomic domain at 9 months and 3 years, the family domain at all ages except 14 years and child domain at all ages were found to differentiate childhood-onset groups from the 'low' group. Cumulative risk at 9 months and 3 years did not differentiate between the 'school-onset' group and 'low' group. Significant interactions were found between the domains for the 'early-onset, desisting group' suggesting that low levels of risk in one domain may buffer the effects of high risk in another domain. The implications of these findings for preventive interventions will be highlighted.

Keywords : conduct problems, cumulative risk, developmental trajectories, early childhood, adolescence

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